



The last 150 years have seen a great holocaust. There have been more species lost in the past 150 years than since the Ice Age. During the same time, Indigenous peoples have been disappearing from the face of the earth. Over 2,000 nations of Indigenous peoples have gone extinct in the western hemisphere, and one nation disappears from the Amazon rainforest every year.

There is a direct relationship between the loss of cultural diversity and the loss of biodiversity. Wherever Indigenous peoples still remain, there is also a corresponding enclave of biodiversity. Trickle rivers still running in the Northwest are home to the salmon still being sung back by Native people. The last few Florida panthers remain in the presence of traditional Seminoles, hidden away in the great cypress swamps of the Everglades. Some of the largest patches of remaining prairie grasses sway on reservation lands. One half of all reservation lands in the United States is still forested, much of it old-growth. Remnant pristine forest ecosystems, from the northern boreal forests to the Everglades, largely overlap with Native territories.

In the Northwest, virtually every river is home to a people, each as distinct as a species of salmon. The Tillamook, Siletz, Yaquina, Alsea, Siuslaw, Umpqua, Hanis, Miluk, Colville, Tututni, Shasta, Costa, and Chetco are all peoples living at the mouths of salmon rivers. One hundred and seven stocks of salmon have already become extinct in the Pacific Northwest, and 89 are endangered. "Salmon were put here by the Creator, and it is our responsibility to harvest and protect the salmon so that the cycle of life continues," explains Pierson Mitchell of the Columbia River Intertribal Fishing Commission.<sup>1</sup> "Whenever we have a funeral, we mourn our loved one, yes, but we are also reminded of the loss of our salmon and other traditional foods," laments Bill Yallup Sr., the Yakama tribal chairman.<sup>2</sup>

The stories of the fish and the people are not so different. Environmental destruction threatens the existence of both. The Tygh band of the Lower Deschutes River in Oregon includes a scant five families, struggling to maintain their traditional way of life and relationship to the salmon. "I wanted to dance the salmon, know the salmon, say goodbye to the salmon," says Susana Santos, a Tygh artist, fisherwoman, and community organizer. "Now I am looking at the completion of destruction, from the Exxon Valdez to...those dams.... Seventeen fish came down the river last year. None this

year. The people are the salmon, and the salmon are the people. How do you quantify that?<sup>23</sup>

Native American teachings describe the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas. One from to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives are what bind our cultures together. The protection, teachings, and rituals offered in ceremony, song, story, and life that keep relations close—to salmon,urgeon, salmon, turtles, bears, wolves, and panthers. These are our relatives—the ones who came before and taught us how to live. Their cultures, their absence may mean that a people sing to a barren river, a barren bear, or buffalo far away. It is the struggle to preserve that which remains and the struggle to recover that characterizes much of Native environmentalism. It is these relationships that industrialism seeks to disrupt. Native communities will resist with great determination.

Salmon was presented to me and my family through our religion as our brother. The same with the deer. And our sisters are the roots and berries. And you would treat them as such. Their life to you is just as valuable as another person's would be.

—Margaret Salomon, Yelm<sup>24</sup>

### The Toxic Invasion of Native America

There are over 700 Native nations on the North American continent. Today, in the United States, Native America covers 4 percent of the land, with over 500 federally recognized tribes. Over 1,200 Native American reservations dot Canada. The Inuit homeland, Nunavut, formerly one-half of the Northwest Territories, is an area of land and water, including Baffin Island, five times the size of Texas, or the size of the entire Indian subcontinent. Eighty-five percent of the population is Native.

While Native peoples have been massacred and fought, cheated, and robbed of their historical lands, today their lands are subject to some of the most invasive industrial interventions imaginable. According to the Worldwatch Institute, 317 reservations in the United States are threatened by environmental hazards, ranging from toxic wastes to clearcuts.

Reservations have been targeted as sites for 16 proposed nuclear waste dumps. Over 100 proposals have been floated in recent years to dump toxic

waste in Indian communities.<sup>25</sup> Seventy-seven sacred sites have been disturbed or desecrated through resource extraction and development activities.<sup>26</sup> The federal government is proposing to use Yucca Mountain, sacred to the Shoshone government, as a repository for the nation's high-level nuclear waste. Over the last 43 years, there have been 1,000 atomic explosions on Western Shoshone land in Nevada, making the Western Shoshone the most bombarded community on earth.

Over 1,000 log piles and tailings from abandoned uranium mines sit on level land, leaching radioactivity into the air and water. Nearby is the largest coal strip mine in the world, and some groups of Blue Mountain have a water use of 17 times the national average. According to Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network,

Most indigenous governments are over 22 years behind the states in environmental infrastructure development. The EPA has consistently failed to fund tribes on an equitable basis compared with the states. The EPA has a statutory responsibility to allocate financial resources that will provide an equitable allocation between tribal governments and states.<sup>27</sup>

### The Descendants of Little Thunder

In our communities, Native environmentalists sing centuries-old songs to renew life, to give thanks for the strawberries, to call home fish, and to thank Mother Earth for her blessings. We are the descendants of Little Thunder, who smashed the resistance that cleared out the Great Plains to make way for the cowboy, cattle, and industrial farms. We have seen the great trees felled, the wolves taken for bounty, and the fish stacked rotting the creekbed. Those memories stung us, and the return of the descendants of these predators provide us to stand again, stronger, and hopefully with more allies. We are the ones who stand up to the land owners, the tree snappers, the destroyers and culture erasers.

We live off the beaten track, out of the mainstream in small villages, on a vast expanse of prairie, on dry desert lands, or in the forests. We often drive old cars, live in old houses and mobile homes. There are usually small children and relatives around, the kids carrying underwear. We seldom carry backpacks, and we rarely wear suits. You are more likely to find us meeting in a local community center, outside camping, or in someone's house than at a convention center or at a \$1,000-per-plate fundraiser.

We organize in small groups, close to 200 of them in North America, with names like *Sallye Apaches* for a Clean Environment, *Blue CARL* (Citizens Against Raining Our Environment), *AuntieMahe Nijipi*, and the

4. *Gwiltun Steering Committee*. We are underfunded at best, and more often by far, than at all working out of our homes with a few families or five or ten volunteers. We succeed in national or continental organizations such as Indigenous Environmental Network, a network of 2000-plus members, which through a diverse agenda of providing technical and political support to grassroots groups seeking to protect their land, preserve biodiversity, and sustain communities, seeks ultimately to secure environmental justice. Other such groups include the Southeast Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, Honor the Earth, Indigenous Women's Network, Seventh Generation Fund, and others. In addition are the regional organizations and those based on a shared ecosystem or cultural practice, such as the California Indian Basketweavers Association, Great Lakes Basketweavers, or Council of Elders.

*Despite our meager resources, we are winning, many hard-fought battles on the local level. We have faced down huge waste dumps and multinational mining, timber, and oil companies. And throughout the Nation, people continue to fight to protect Mother Earth for future generations. Some of the victories described in this book include a moratorium on mining in the sacred hills of Northern Cheyenne, Blackfoot, and Crow territories; an international campaign that stopped the building of mega-dams in southern Canada, the restoration of thousands of acres of White Earth land in Minnesota; and the rebuilding of a nation in Hawaii.*

*Grassroots and land-based struggles characterize most of Native environmentalism. We are nations of people with distinct land areas, and our leadership and direction emerge from the land up. Our commitment and tenacity spring from our deep connection to the land. This relationship to land and water is continuously reaffirmed through prayer, deed, and our way of being—*anishnaabewaziwin*, the “good life.” It is perhaps best remembered in phrases like *That is where my grandmother’s and children’s unclimbed couch sits* or *buried*. *That is where the great grand lay down to sleep*. *These are the four sacred Mountains between which the Creator instructed us to live*. *That is the last place our people walked in our migration here to this village*.*

**White Earth**

<sup>1</sup> I live on an Anishnaabeg reservation called White Earth in northern Minnesota, where I work on land, culture, and environmental issues locally through an organization called the White Earth Land Recovery Project and nationally through a Native foundation called Honor the Earth. We, the Anishnaabeg, are a fierce culture. Our creation stories, culture, and way of



We are entirely based on the forest, source of our medicinal plants and food, forest animals, and herb/ bark baskets.

Virtually my entire reservation was cleared at the turn of the century. In 1874, Assinibouite leader Wabankookst said, "I cried and prayed that our bones would not be taken from us, for they are as much ours as is this reservation."<sup>4</sup> Our trees provided the foundation for timber, lumber companies, pack-trail, Westchester, and their destruction continued for ten decades.

In 1889 and 1890 Minnesota led the country in lumber production, and the state's northwest region was the leading source of timber. Two decades later, 90 percent of White Earth land was controlled by non-Indians, and our people were riddled with diseases. Many became refugees in nearby cities. Today, three-fourths of all tribal members live off the reservation. Ninety percent of our land is still controlled by non-Indians.

There is a direct link in our community between the loss of biodiversity—the loss of animal and plant life—and the loss of the material and cultural wealth of the White Earth people. But we have resisted and are resisting. Today, we are in litigation against logging expansion, and the White Earth Land Recovery Project works to restore the forest, recover the land, and restore our traditional forest culture. Our experience of survival and resistance is shared with many others. But it is not only about Native people.

In the final analysis, the survival of Native America is fundamentally about the collective survival of all human beings. The question of who gets to determine the destiny of the land, and of the people who live on it—those with the money or those who pray on the land—is a question that is alive throughout society. The question is posed eloquently by Lal'wat grandmother Lorena Pascal:

This is my reason for standing up. To protect all around us, to control our way of life, our culture. I ask them, "Where did you get your right to destroy these forests? How does your right supersede my rights?" These are our forests, these are our ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

These are the questions posed in the chapters ahead. Through the voices and actions featured here, there are some answers as well. Along with the best of my prayers is a recognition of the depth of spirit and commitment to all our relations, and the work to protect and recover them. As Columbia River tribes activist Ted Strong tells us,

If this nation has a long way to go before all of our people are truly created equally without regard to race, religion, or national origin, it

has even further to go before achieving anything that remotely resembles equal treatment for other creatures who called this land home before humans ever set foot upon it. . . . While the species themselves—oh, fowl, game, and the habitat they live in—have given us unparalleled wealth, they live crippled in their ability to persist and in conditions of captive aquaria. . . . This enslavement and impoverishment of nature is no more tolerable or sensible than the enslavement and impoverishment of other human beings. . . . Perhaps it is because we see the messengers that not only our sovereignty as [Native] governments but our right to identify with a deity and a history, our right to hold as a set of natural laws are practiced for thousands of years is under assault. Now more than ever, tribal people must hold onto their timeless and precious customs and practices.<sup>6</sup>

"The ceremony will continue," Strong says. "This is a testament to the faith of the Indian people. No matter how badly the salmon have been mistreated, no matter how serious the decline, it has only made Native people deeper in their resolve. It has doubled their commitment. It has rekindled the hope that today is beginning to grow in many young people."<sup>7</sup>