

An Open Letter

Native Culture and the Environment

Par l'entremise d'une lettre, une autochtone de la tribu Mohawk explique comment, dans la tradition de ses ancêtres, les membres de sa tribu vivaient en harmonie avec la nature. Depuis la colonisation par les européens, explique-t-elle, la relation des autochtones à l'environnement a changé.

Greetings,

In response to your 'call for papers' I would like to submit a brief observation from the perspective of a Native North American Woman and a Mohawk National.

Should we attempt to go back 500 years to chronicle events which have systematically undermined the 'matriarchal society' established by the Five Nations Confederacy, now commonly known as the Six Nations Confederacy? As I am not a professional historian, I can only provide general observations beginning with the disease which was brought from across the seas along with many bad habits. The rights of Indian women were taken away from them almost as soon as the non-Native observed that women had such a high place in Native culture.

Respect for women was part of "Indian" culture long before the feminist movement had breath. The way the Iroquois Confederacy government operated was the first true 'democratic' form of government in North American history. Although we are very rarely credited with this, it is still how true traditional governments operate. The women, in particular the clan mothers, have a very big role to play to ensure the peaceful existence of our people and yours.

We didn't have a dominant male society, and it wasn't necessary to have a 'class' system within our culture. Women had their duties and the men had their duties; it was understood that in order for balance to exist within our communal society, everyone had



Tamara Thieboux

to tend to their particular tasks. This was the only way our people were guaranteed survival; there was no room for chauvinism of any sort. Children were also given specific duties in their training to become responsible adults.

We are a people who have a disciplined 'religious' belief. It is not the same sort of discipline as non-Natives in which people worship on a scheduled weekly basis. Our 'worship' was and still is structured by the seasons; we have ceremonies and feasts to commemorate each aspect of the different seasons. Our ceremonies are scheduled according to the cycle of the moon, and our feasts are 'thanksgiving' feasts for all that our Creator has given us. Our feasts give thanks for what we have today, what was given to us yesterday, and what we must work for tomorrow.

Mother Earth is automatically thanked for what is provided to us. We dance in thanksgiving to our Creator and all other elements

of the bird life, fish, animal, and plant life. Everything has to be put into perspective; no one organism is more important or has more place in our society than another.

Traditional 'worship' doesn't call for idols, religious symbolism, once-a-week repentance and forgiveness of transgressions. This is where we differ: no human is given the power to 'absolve' us if we stray from our 'original instructions' to care for the earth and each other. We have to look inward to find an answer and forgiveness. Only in very extreme cases would clan mothers or other persons who hold titles intervene; but, if help is asked of us, we do not have the power to say no. It is one of our 'original instructions' that we have to extend help where it is needed. This holds true for domestic disputes, childcare needs or any other element in today's society.

Violence against Mother Earth and violence against women in North America were unheard of before the migration of non-

Call for Papers

Alternatives Magazine

CELEBRATING WOMEN: FEMINISM, ENVIRONMENTALISM AND ACTION

The environmental movement has been subject to frequent criticism for being a predominantly white, male, middle-class movement. In addition, within Western society women's work and experiences are often unrecognized and devalued. Yet within the environmental movement women play a crucial, though frequently neglected role. This issue will acclaim and validate women's contributions to environmentalism and explore the gender implications of environmental issues.

For this exciting issue, *Alternatives* welcomes submissions that address the following suggested topics:

- Towards a Feminist Sensibility in the Environmental Movement
- Learning from the Women's Movement
 - Celebrating Women's Experience
- Canadian Women and International Politics
 - The Spirit in Nature: Witches and Neo-Paganism in Canada
- Women's Actions for Equitable Development

In addition to full length feature articles, we invite readers to share their views and experiences by submitting briefs, letters, case studies or essays on this topic. *Alternatives* is a refereed journal. Feature articles should be no more than 4,000 words, typed, double-spaced and submitted in three copies. Authors should request a copy of our "Guidelines for Contributors" for details on format.

All articles should be submitted by February 1994.

Information requests and submissions:

Tzporah Berman, Faculty of Environmental Studies,
York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York,
Ontario M3J 1P3.

International Indigenous Women's Caucus

As indigenous people our lives are intertwined with the natural world. Our creation stories tell of our emergence in traditional homelands, which continue to nurture and give meaning to our lives. We are inseparable from the lands in which we as peoples were created.

We view our responsibilities to care for the Earth as our mother. As indigenous peoples, we are witnessing the destruction of our sacred Mother Earth. She is being raped as the forests are clear-cut, gouged in the search for minerals, poisoned by radioactive and chemical waste, and we as her children are being destroyed in the ruthless search to seize her precious gifts for human consumption. The suffering and pain of Mother Earth is felt by us as if it were our own. She is being destroyed, as we are being destroyed, at a rate in which it is impossible for healing and renewal.

As indigenous peoples, we have lived in our traditional homelands for tens of thousands of years in harmony and balance with all of the natural world. We believe that all living things were given life by the Creator, and as such we are all co-equal beings sharing the gifts of our sacred Mother Earth. We are dependent upon her for our sustenance, interdependent on one another for the fulfillment of our lives, and interconnected with each other spiritually and physically. The Creator gave us natural laws to instruct us in the way in which we must live in harmony and balance with all of life, taking only what is required for our survival and acknowledging these many gifts of life which were given so that we might live.

Today we face the destruction of the human spirit and the consequent destruction of the natural world. In order to cease this destruction, it is incumbent upon all human beings to:

- Recognize that all human actions, laws, and policies must be informed by an ethic based upon adherence to the laws of the natural world that govern creation and which are embodied in the spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples;
- Include a long-range perspective in our ethic that insures a positive impact on the next generations of all living things;
- Recognize that honoring and protecting the diversity of life must include not only the plant and animal world but also the diversity of peoples and the spirituality, cultures, and ways of life inherent within;
- Recognize that all of life is sacred, co-equal, and entitled to existence apart from any relationship to human beings;
- Protect the rights of indigenous peoples to our homelands and ways of life to insure our continuation as peoples living in the manner in which we were instructed by the Creator;
- Reflect the love of the Creator in our lives, be mindful of our impact upon all living things and make clear choices that support life rather than destroy it.

The true challenge of human beings is to place our full attention upon ways in which we can live upon Mother Earth in a manner consistent with natural law and in peace, harmony, and a balance with all things.

Excerpted from Women's Action Agenda 21.

Natives to our homelands. We are now called various names such as non-productive and unambitious because we don't have the same 'goals' and aspirations as the majority of non-Native society. Mind you, some of our people (especially those who were adopted and educated by outsiders or who were torn away from their families and children) think a lot like big business people. They have been indoctrinated into the industrialized society and put more effort into making more money than they need and less effort into caring for their environment and people.

It was unheard of in our ancient ways to do anything which would endanger and jeopardize our well-being. Our Clan system ensured that we maintained a well-balanced lifestyle. Our Clan Mothers, Chiefs, Men's and Women's Societies all had their duties. Our system was foolproof; our Constitution (the Great Law) guided us in every aspect of our lives. Those who have been made to stray from this Constitution have done so unknowingly; it was so systematic that people didn't know what hit them.

In fact, it has taken some 500 years to almost destroy North America and Native North Americans, but, somehow, we survived. But, our language and culture is barely surviving—this too was a long, strategic endeavour to prohibit us from speaking our languages and practising our beliefs. Even today, the well planned genocide is being carried out; it is very low key in some areas but very apparent in others. In fact, some of our own people chastise those of us who still believe in our traditional ways. These oppressors are called 'apples' (red on the outside, white on the inside). They believe themselves to be the most holy and righteous people; this is what they have been taught by the Jesuits and other foreign religious fanatics.

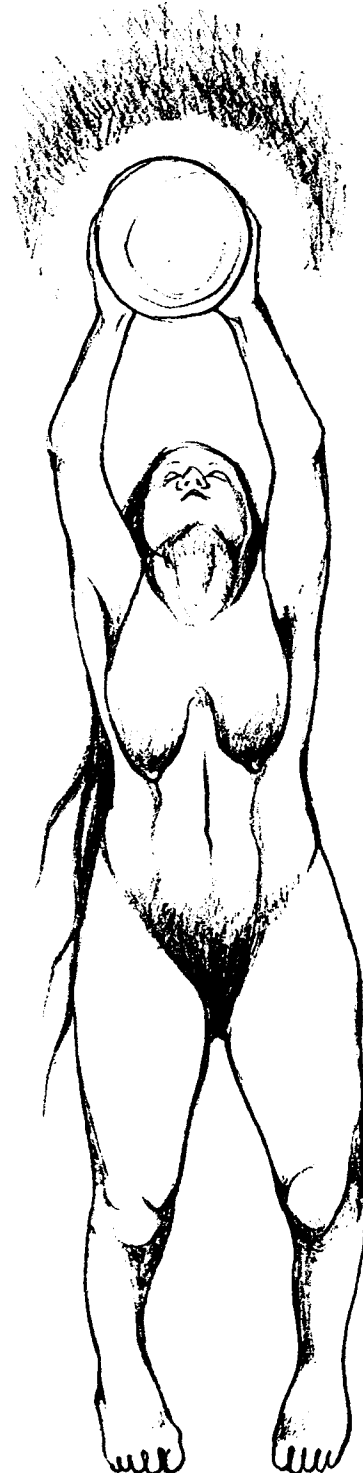
Those of us who are fighting desperately to hold onto the very small portion of land which hasn't been totally desecrated by industry are called militants and other fashionable names. Besides having to work very hard against outside aggression, we also have to overcome internalized oppression. This is an enormous task and it is what keeps violence in our communities. Both Native and non-Native populations can see the aggression of governments—governments have become big business and overpower the average, every day person. They keep hard feelings alive and perpetuate hatred by dividing us into classes; we have the oppressed (poor people) and the oppressors (well-to-do people), although this analogy is not totally true any more as some people are beginning to realize that this system is what almost destroyed our nations in the first place.

As men became dominant in North America and began the process of putting women 'in their place', they also brainwashed our men and women into believing that this arrangement is natural. Some of our women still believe the Indian Act's rhetoric which gave Indian men the power of marrying a non-Indian and turning her into an instant Indian, giving her the rights to own our land. This same destructive legislation stripped the Indian women of their ancestry if they happened to marry a non-Native. This process managed to replace Indian women with non-Indian women and was the beginning of the end for our languages and cultures.

The governments knew exactly what they were doing when they began to legislate over the Indian peoples; their plan was so intricate that we never knew what hit us. All of a sudden there was a big shift in our society. The esteem which our men had held for

women for centuries began to diminish. We suddenly became second-class citizens in our own homes, and the process of extinguishing us was set in motion. Every element of our existence was modified to fit the model of the more dominant, westernized society. It is no wonder that we're living a lifestyle which is detrimental to our environment, your environment, our people and your people.

**Eva Johnson, Bear Clan
Kahnawake Mohawk Nation**



Tamara Thiebaut, 1992