

Land Grab on a Global Scale

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Theme: [Environment](#), [Global Economy](#)

Global Research, April 11, 2008

Seattle Post-Intelligencer 2 April 2008

Among the English-speaking settler societies — U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand — an irrational but powerful myth still prevails. It drove “manifest destiny” and is still alive and well, if usually unconscious.

Divinely inspired colonists wrested lands occupied by native peoples and bestowed the mixed blessings of civilization on them. The rationalization for dispossession then — and now — was that these “primitive” peoples were not making productive use of their lands. What they did not know, and still do not, is that they took over lands that were largely shaped and maintained by indigenous peoples through extensive and intensive land care practices that enabled them to not only survive but also thrive.

Enter the 21st century. The work of indigenous dispossession is about to be completed. The last great global land grab and indigenous asset stripping is happening as I write. (I borrowed these phrases from Rebecca Adamson of First Peoples Worldwide and Andy White of Rights and Resources Initiative at a meeting of the World Bank that I participated in.)

We have a big problem. Some unintended outcomes of well-intentioned climate mitigation measures are below the media radar screen. Land values are dramatically increasing because of demand by northern multinational corporations for land to produce biofuels, plantation monocultures for carbon trading offsets and transfat substitutes such as palm oil in the developing south.

Indigenous peoples presently occupy 22 percent of the Earth’s land surface, are stewards of 80 percent of remaining biodiversity and comprise 90 percent of cultural diversity. As demand increases the value of indigenous lands — already poorly protected — the rate of loss of indigenous assets and livelihood options becomes more rapid. Adding to these losses are losses of homelands set aside by big environmental NGOs and third-world government elites for conservation reserves and parks through forced evictions. Also disappearing is global genetic diversity maintained by indigenous peoples, which is essential for maintaining the capacity of plants and animals to adapt to climate change.

Disappearing with land and resources are an incalculable wealth of stewardship experience and knowledge. But climate change is here. While the developed north (west) is scrambling for solutions, indigenous peoples are receiving the brunt of the effects of climate change caused by the north. Ignored in the global debate are indigenous cultures that have survived intact for millennia while “great” civilizations have repeatedly collapsed. Indigenous peoples are neither noble nor ignoble.

Some have made environmental mistakes in the past and did not survive. The cultures that survived have done so in proportion as they have learned to adapt. They are just people like

everyone else, but people with great practical know-how.

The current economic asymmetry is the result of the myth that wealth will eventually filter down to the poor through so-called free trade and speculative global markets. But as the wealth of a small number of privileged individuals has increased, world poverty has increased fivefold.

The Rio Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), Article 8 (j), and Agenda 21 affirmed that indigenous cultures protect biodiversity and should be compensated for their sustainable practices and products. But the U.S.-dominated Uruguay round of GATT in the same year effectively shut out indigenous peoples from any protection or compensation.

In the meantime the world is losing its best strategy for mitigating climate change — viable indigenous cultures who are the stewards of genetic diversity through traditional land practices. They will also lose the continuing contributions of native knowledge to medicine, sustainable agriculture, health products, lubricants, common foods, wildlife and fisheries management, and more.

The tobacco industry is now liable for costs to states for paying smokers' health bills. Why not hold the developed nations accountable for the damage to ecosystems and indigenous ecosystem peoples who are suffering from climate change that they didn't cause? Where is the accountability? Why not support existing national and international laws and treaties that are simply ignored?

We do not want victimhood. We want parity and compensation through recognition of our substantial contributions to your wealth. It is not an "ethnic" issue. Indigenous peoples are the miner's canary. It is about the survival of all humans and it is about the loss of the collective heritage of our species. It is all of our lands and all of our assets that are being stolen by economic criminals. They benefit and we pay.

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