

Who Owns the Earth? People versus Power

Part 2

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Theme: [Environment](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

"We are now living outside of the laws of nature where nature is now turning against man and becoming the enemy." The Kogi Mamas

Last week the latest efforts to head off climate change started in Lima, Peru. The aim of this latest conference (the twentieth, would you believe) is to produce a draft agreement on action, to be finalised in Paris next year. With time running out it doesn't look hopeful. The world is silent.

In 1990 Alan Ereira made a film for the BBC, [The Heart of the World: Elder Brother's Warning](#). In it the Kogi people of Columbia, having seen serious signs of climate change in their territory, issued a plea to the rest of us: stop living in our thoughtless, selfish way and wake up to what we were doing to the Earth. (After so many years of it being available online, in the last week this film has become unavailable due to "copyright issues". Had it suddenly been resurrected by climate campaigners, and has been taken off by the powers that be because of the Lima Climate Conference?)

Apart from a procession of New Age eco-tourists flying out to Columbia thinking, wrongly, that the Kogi would welcome them, few took any real notice and they were soon forgotten. Some years later Alan visited Glastonbury with an updated film. The Assembly Rooms were full; almost all were young people asking questions about the Kogi's sex lives. What? The Earth is being ruined and they wanted to know how the Kogi people screwed? I despaired.

I still despair at times, because the indigenous people of Central and South America are showing us the way ahead, if only we'd listen. Many of their countries have been paupered because of corporate-friendly interventions by the IMF and the World Bank. The result, to the annoyance of the US, is an increasing number of left-wing, socialist governments.

Indigenous people have died in their hundreds trying to protect rain forests from ranching, illegal logging, and mining, oil and gas companies, the latest death just days before [a planned protest](#) at the Lima talks. How convenient.

In 1994, in the Chiapas region of southern Mexico, the [Zapatista revolution](#) took place. These indigenous people objected to powerful outsiders taking control of their land via the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) - 'free trade' standing for corporate profit. They haven't yet won their battle. On the other hand the Mexican government has failed to control them. The Zapatistas govern by consultation. The decision to take up arms was a collective decision. They do not elect leaders; they select those who will best voice community views, something the government could not understand, as the film [A Place Called Chiapas](#) showed.

The US has tried to extend NAFTA into the Free Trade Area of the Americas ([FTAA](#)). There were massive demonstrations. Over 10 million Brazilians voted to withdraw from the negotiations. While governments negotiate, the people know that such deals will damage their lives and their beloved Earth. There are [current trade agreements](#) and almost all of them sideline the US and its corporate plans.

The [Campesinos](#) have created a worldwide movement of peasant farmers, indigenous peoples and fishermen from small beginnings in [Paraguay](#), where they 'illegally' took over land in order to grow their food. Workers in [Brazil](#), [Argentina](#) and elsewhere took over factories closed by absentee owners.

Many 'peoples movements' started in the Americas and right now members from across the world are attending the [Peoples' Summit on Climate Change](#), running parallel to the UN climate talks in Lima, parallel because their voices won't be heard at the 'big table'. Neither will [young people be heard](#) even though they will suffer more from climate change than those producing all the hot air. Other activists were [prevented](#) from attending but then, even the UK climate change Minister, Amber Rudd, [has been barred](#) from going.

And the talks themselves are almost invisible in the mainstream media. Apart from the environment-friendly Guardian, only the Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times featured articles about it in the first week. Obviously the 'economics' of climate change are more important than the future of the planet.

The LA Times limped in with a story about clashes between rich and poor nations slowing down the talks. But that was basically it. The UN News site had several items, it being a UN Conference. All other news came from activists' websites. The message? People care; power and politics don't. They will simply go on making money as long as they are able

To see how determined indigenous people can be in trying to protect their resources and the Earth, one should look at Bolivia.

In 2000 many Bolivians fought against a private water company taking control of their water. The [Water War](#) lasted for four months, at the end of which the company fled and later presented a large bill (compensation for lost profits) which remains unpaid. This was followed in 2003 by a [Gas War](#), when the Bolivians resisted the corporate interests that wanted their vast natural gas resources.

This conflict rumbled on until 2005, when the millionaire President, [known](#) for speaking Spanish with an American accent, resigned. An indigenous left-wing politician, active in the Water and Gas Wars, was becoming prominent – Evo Morales. He was elected President and a whole new agenda appeared. Suddenly people were demanding rights for Mother Earth.

In 2009 Morales, backed by other nations, addressed the UN General Assembly in a [heartfelt speech](#), pointing out that it is no use discussing the effects of the financial, energy, food or climate change crises, without ever looking at the cause:

"The origin of this crisis is the exaggerated accumulation of capital in far too few hands. It is the permanent removal of natural resources and the commercialization of Mother Earth... Mother Earth gives life, water, natural resources, oxygen and everything that supports the well being of our people. If we talk, work and fight for the well being of our people we first have to

guarantee the well being of Mother Earth; otherwise it will be impossible to guarantee the well being of our citizens. Mother Earth, Planet Earth, will exist without human life, but human life cannot exist without Mother Earth.”

He sought a UN treaty that gave legal rights to Mother Earth. He asked for three things: that developed countries pay the climate debt they owe; that there should be a Court of Climate Justice; and that nations must declare and expand the rights of Mother Earth’s natural regeneration. We’re still waiting on all that, but the UN did [designate](#) 22 April as International Mother Earth Day. So that’s okay then.

In April 2010 Bolivia hosted a [World Peoples Conference](#) in Cochabamba. 35,000 people came from all over the world. It produced a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth. This was followed by an international gathering in Ecuador at which the [Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature](#) was formed.

In 2011 Bolivia passed into law an act protecting the rights of Mother Earth. It then took a [draft treaty](#) to the UN, prompting outrage among all the right-wing corporate interests. Last year, during a [dialogue on harmony with nature](#), the General Assembly called yet again for real and rapid action that would protect the Earth and the future existence of humanity.

Also last year, a UN meeting on the rights of the indigenous peoples produced a [document](#) simply ‘inviting’, ‘requesting’ or ‘encouraging’ governments and corporations to listen to, engage with and recognise the knowledge that indigenous people have to offer. More hot air and no action. In June this year Morales hosted a [G77 Summit](#) which produced a Declaration titled “For a New World Order for Living Well”.

Unknown to the average person there have [many attempts](#), some successful, to bring our treatment of the Earth within the law. What Morales and his fellows have done is to keep pushing the Earth’s rights into the debates. But debates alone will not heal the Earth or guarantee our future.

And all this is looked upon with scorn by our governments and their corporate allies. Who cares about peoples’ movements or Bolivia? And Morales himself is the first full-blood indigenous leader, for God’s Sake! What does he know about running the world? Come to that, what does man’s world have to do with Mother Earth?

But indigenous people know how the Earth runs. Slowly we others are realising that we can’t own the Earth, or the water, the air, the forests and plains, or the fish in the sea. The Earth doesn’t belong to us. If anything, the reverse is true; we belong to it, a position the developed world spurns at its peril.

Will Lima produce anything other than another fudge? I doubt it. Corporate interests still dictate our future and we are deaf to the indigenous voices. And as Jared Diamond showed in [Collapse](#), civilisations have died out because of trashing their environments. We are now trashing the whole Earth.

Man’s drive to ‘develop’, his inventions that require yet more resources, his desire to own everything in sight, to put his interests before those of any other life forms – all this has led to an Earth stripped of its flora and fauna, and its mineral riches without which we cannot sustain our current way of life. Rivers run dry while the seas rise.

We will not kill life on the Earth; life is here and will evolve in strange and wonderful ways. But we are destroying everything that we have come to know and love. And while the Earth weeps and begs for our attention the world of men is silent in its selfishness.

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