

Indigenous Leaders Awarded Goldman Environmental Prize

On April 18, 1994, Luis Macas president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and Mathew Coon Come, grand chief of the Cree were awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in San Francisco, California.

The prize includes a no-strings attached \$60,000 grant. Macas was recognized for his role in the 1990 Levantamiento Indigena (Indigenous uprising) in Ecuador which forced the government to seriously negotiate the conditions for oil drilling in the Ecuadorian Amazon. He was also praised for his role in the negotiations between CONAIE and the Ecuadorian government which resulted in a sweeping settlement giving Indigenous nations title to three million hectares of rainforest in the Amazon.

Coon Come has worked for decades to oppose the Quebec government's monumental plans for hydroelectric dam building in James Bay. Both these struggles put Indigenous and environmental organizations against some of the world's most powerful forces. With these awards, the Goldman foundation has helped give world attention and stature to these leader's struggles. Following is Luis Macas' statement at the ceremonies.

...With the arrival of western civilization the plundering of natural resources was initiated as was the takeover and destruction of our mother earth and the exploitation of our people. This intensive and irrational exploitation of natural resources caused not only impoverishment of the earth but has generated poverty and the violation of human rights among our people in the South. The culture of capitalism and avarice has forced itself on nature to achieve its goals no matter what the sacrifice. As a result, we are now experiencing an accelerated process of true global collapse.

As inhabitants of this planet, it is vital and urgent to stop these crimes against nature and life and work to re integrate ourselves with the natural world so as to redirect our path toward a more respectful and harmonious relationship with it. These beliefs motivate us to defend our mother earth and resist her destruction with her. Therefore it is important that we gain title to territories which will guarantee their protection, not only for us, but for the benefit of all life... We have to oppose destruction and death with justice, sustainable development and life.

Indigenous Groups in Argentina Push for Rights Under New Constitution

The fifteen Indigenous nations in Argentina are carrying out a country-wide mobilization in response to the opening of a process for constitutional revision. Indigenous groups are pressuring the national congress to finally include an article stating their rights under the constitution. Indigenous organizations held two assemblies regarding the issue of constitutional reform and have drafted a proposal for rights to be included in the new constitution.

The proposal's most important points were recognition that Indigenous peoples existed before the creation of the National state and birth of the provinces; the recognition of the Argentinian Republic as a pluri-ethnic and pluri-cultural state; the inclusion of rights to communal land ownership as well as control of all natural resources found in these lands; the right to educate their children in their own language and culture; and finally, the deletion of part 15 of article 67 of the current constitution which states that the government should "maintain a peaceful relationship with the Indians and promote their conversion to Catholicism".

After drafting these proposals, representatives of all the Indigenous communities presented a declaration to the national congress to urge inclusion of these changes in the new constitution.

Innu Activists Blockade Hydro-Quebec Roads

Innu from the Coalition for Nitassinan (their traditional lands) supported by observers set up camp on May 29, blocking the access road which Hydro-Quebec intends to use for construction of the massive Sainte-Marguerite III (SM III) hydroelectric project. Hydro-Quebec officials have reportedly sought an official injunction against the blockade in order to remove the protesters.

The SM III project would be built in Innu territory along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec. It would flood over 450 square km. and, possibly contaminate this area with the toxin methyl mercury. Innu fear this contamination will render the region's fish, one of their main food sources,

unsafe to eat. In addition, the construction would divert tributaries from the Moisle river, reducing flows by up to 42% of one of the world's most important salmon rivers. This could further endanger the Atlantic salmon. Reportedly, one million cubic meters of forest would also be clearcut for the reservoir and access roads. Quebec hopes to sell power generated by the projects to utilities in the northeastern US.

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Mapuche Exert Rights over Cultural Heritage

On February 20, remains of human skeletons, pieces of Valdivian style ceramics, and a stone pipe were discovered at a construction site in the city of San Martin de Los Andes, Argentina. Representatives of the three Mapuche communities in the region, the Curruhuinca, Vera, and Cayun, demanded immediate return of the artifacts, stating, "We cannot accept any manipulation of these remains be it for scientific or other reasons. There is no doubt that these remains were found on ancestral Mapuche territory where our ancestors rest and this is sacred to us."

The three communities, members of the Mapuche Organization of Tain Kine Getuam held a series of public demonstrations and meetings with municipal authorities, from which they obtained a promise that the artifacts would be returned to their "rightful heirs". The Mapuche remain concerned that this commitment will be kept. The discovery, also brought to light the lack of legislation for protection of such artifacts. The Mapuche representatives noted that protection of their cultural heritage was the "most fundamental human right" of their people.

First Restitution of Indigenous Remains in Argentina

One hundred and six years after his death, the remains of the 19th century hero of Indian resistance, Cacique Inacayal, will be moved from the Museum of La Plata in the province of Buenos Aires, to the community of Tecka in Chubut. This is the first such restitution in Argentina, which recognizes that

the rights of the Indigenous communities precede scientific interest in these remains. Inacayal lived his last days in the capital city, where he was brought with his family by the researcher Francisco Moreno to live on his estate of "Paseo del Bosque". On September 24, 1888 the chief died of sadness.

Continental Indigenous Foundation Formed

Indigenous leaders from throughout the continent came to Oakland, California on April 16 for the founding meeting of the first foundation formed and led by Indigenous people from South and Central America. SAIC hosted this meeting for the Abya Yala Fund during which the various leaders decided the foundation's strategies and goals.

The foundation aims to fund projects developed by Indigenous communities in South and Central America and Mexico. Areas of interest will be territory, environment, training, self-development, women's issues, health, education, organizing, scholarships, and exchanges between Indigenous peoples. Another of the foundation's goals will be to support training in international communication, for example the improvement of communities' access to other foundations. The Abya Yala Fund also plans administrative training and assistance in elaboration of grant proposals.

The meeting participants noted that it is time that the Indigenous communities have direct access to foundations and other forms of financial and technical support for their development efforts aimed at improving living conditions. In addition they observed that hundreds of non-indigenous intermediary groups have been receiving funds to work with indigenous people or in the name of indigenous people, and that many of these funds have been wasted in administration. Intermediaries have at times also imposed their political conditions on Indigenous communities, or have not been responsive to the communities' own interests.

The Abya Yala Fund currently has an office in Oakland, California, and aims to form regional offices in Central and South America. The fund is sponsored by the Tides Foundation until it obtains legal status. Donations are tax deductible, and computers, fax machines, printers and other office equipment are greatly needed.

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