

# "Nehuen Mapu" - Strength of the Land

## An Interview with Veronica Huilipan

(Argentina) Veronica Huilipan, a Mapuche Indian from Neuquen, Argentina, participated in the Continental Conference: 500 Years of Indian Resistance, in Quito, Ecuador. Veronica belongs to the organization Nehuen Mapu (Strength of the Land). She spoke to SAIIC about the work Nehuen Mapu is doing in Neuquen.

Our organization emerged as a result of concerns shared by Mapuches who had migrated to the city for work, health or educational reasons. These Mapuche families in Neuquen wanted to get together, to speak their own language and overcome their feelings of isolation. The first thing we did was to build a house, a place to shelter those brothers and sisters visiting from the countryside while taking care of personal matters in Neuquen. In the past, many Mapuches arriving in Neuquen from the country were obliged to sleep on chairs at hospitals or on benches in the plaza, due to a lack of resources.

After accomplishing our first goal, the building of the house, we began to notice that those of us living in Neuquen were having many problems. We were discriminated against by the white society, within the educational system and at work. For example, the white people would look at us disapprovingly when we spoke in our language. We realized that we had to work on the recovery and practices of our culture.

The Council of Elders forms an integral part of our organization. We call the elders "the old ones." The elders give us strength; they motivate us. After we complete a task, they point out our mistakes. The elders play an important role in our organization. They help us understand that if we want to defend and recover what is rightfully ours as Mapuches, we need to do it our way and not as the Western culture does it. For example, the elders are very much opposed to political parties. It hurts them to see a member of Nehuen Mapu endorsing a political party. The elders say: "the politicians come, they take our vote, they give us a few bags of flour and, after the elections are over they never come back. That is how they have used us in the past."

When we inaugurated our headquarters, our "ranch," the elders organized a ceremony to give thanks. In our community we had ceremonies only once a year, between February and May. These ceremonies are to thank *Ngenechen* for all the good we have received. We also thank *Ngenechen* for the bad, since according to our elders, *Ngenechen* does not bestow bad things upon us without reason. *Ngenechen* will make things better the next year. The Grandmothers coming from the

Mapuche communities in the countryside advise us to be careful about our behavior; never to forget that we are Mapuches. Mapuches must be respectful. This is an attribute of our people.

We want to teach our history to the rest of the people. It is very different from what they read in the books. For example, the so-called "Conquest of the Desert" was when the Argentine army, led by Roca, invaded the desert to kill all the Mapuches, to eliminate us and take our land, imposing Western culture onto our region. Today, in Argentina's schools the children are taught that,

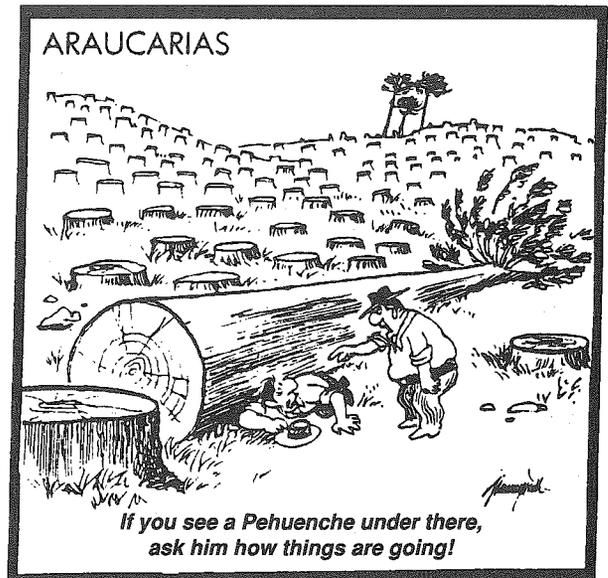
thanks to Europe, we are civilized; that thanks to Roca, there are no more Indians. For this reason we go to the schools making presentations which give our side of history. The students have no idea why the "Conquest of the Desert" occurred, nor who financed it. The conquest was not the result of a lone army acting independently. It was the result of an economic power dominating Argentina. The multinational corporations are guilty of creating our poverty. As a result, today in Argentina, we suffer from poverty and unemployment.

The English financed the invasion of the desert. They wanted Patagonia free of Indians because the land was good and fertile. They paid Roca's army to exterminate us. They were not successful. In hindsight they claim the invasion was done in the name of "civilization," "religion," or some other reason... We ask those who justify the invasion in these terms: if progress and civilization were the reasons for the invasion, why are those now in control of the lands of Patagonia, English, and not Argentinian? The same process is unfolding today.



In Neuquen, we are trying to inform the people in our 35 Mapuche communities about the 500 years campaign, We are in the process of making a video. We already have a radio program called "Quinte Folil" (Searching for our Roots) . We use the radio to share our culture, our customs, religion and language. We also use the media to denounce human rights violations against our communities and our people.

Participating in the *Continental Gathering: 500 Years of Indian Resistance* provided an opportunity for me to meet with my Indian sisters from North, Central and South America. I participated in the Women's Commission. Before the Continental Gathering, I knew women were organized and struggling for their rights, but I didn't know there were so many of them! It was very encouraging to meet all these women. This meeting has given me yet another issue to discuss with my brothers and sisters - the organizing of Mapuche women. The situation of Mapuche women has not really come to light in Argentina. I observed that Indian women spoke on a variety of subjects, yet they all shared the same perspective, the same feelings. I really enjoyed how the women spoke from their hearts. It seems like many times people struggle using only their intellect. Many errors are made that way. At some point in the future and I don't know when that might be, Indian women will be united into one huge organization extending from the national to the international level.



## 400 Pehuenche Families Refuse to be Driven Off Lands by Lumber Company

*In the harshest winters, when it's cold enough to kill our cows, our families depend on the Araucaria trees for survival. These trees are the only guarantee for our future. When they cut them, they are cutting off our future. The Araucaria are stronger than us... for thousands of years, it's been our source of life.*

- Don Meliñir of the Quinquén Valley

(Chile) The Pehuenche people of the Quinquén Valley have been struggling for years to obtain official land rights. The Chilean government, meanwhile, has sold their lands to the Galletue Lumber company. The lumber company won a court battle by arguing that the Pehuenche do not use their lands to their fullest potential by not harvesting the valuable and endangered Araucaria trees. These ancient and beautiful trees are central to the lives of the Pehuenche, who have a variety of uses for the nuts. The Pehuenche settled in the Quinquén Valley in 1880, after escaping the persecution of the Chilean Pacification Plan.

The 400 Pehuenche families in the Quinquén Valley were ordered off their lands by November 4, 1990. After this date, the lumber company has the legal right to call in the military to evict them. The lawyer for the Special Commission for Indigenous Peoples (CEPI), Eduardo Astorga, stated that the situation is becoming very dangerous because the Pehuenche have announced that they would only leave their lands in coffins. If there

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