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The Forgotten People

“Some people say that Indians can survive without recognition, but in this day and age, they can’t” - Robert “Two Eagles” Green (Patawomeck Tribe). Since the late fifteenth century when Christopher Columbus and his fellow Europeans first set foot in the New World, people have been cruelly mistreating Native Americans. Look no further than the fact that Native Americans were enslaved for centuries and often horrifically killed by the pilgrims, or the fact that the Indian Removal Act forced Native Americans to abruptly abandon homelands just because the government wanted their “valuable” land. Unfortunately, crimes against the Native Americans have persisted even in the last half-century. While these crimes are not as horrific as the ones that colonial Americans inflicted on the Native Americans, these crimes are still deadly. Since the 1950s, the United States Government and large corporations have been disposing deadly toxic wastes (e.g. nuclear wastes, chemical wastes) onto or near Native American tribal reservations. This is a cruel example of environmental injustice and although this practice has decreased in the past decade, the repercussions of these actions will continue to be detrimental to Native American peoples for many years to come. Through a three-pronged approach of preventing future dumpsites near tribal lands, offering financial incentives to both the Indian Americans and large corporations, and creating sustainable cleanup processes, the Federal Government can begin to mitigate the damage of the environmental injustice and make headway towards a more sustainable, responsible, and fair future for the Native Americans.

Since the beginning of the industrial era, the United States has had a problem figuring out where to put toxic wastes produced as a result of wars, military testing, and civilian

manufacturing. With most parts of the nation now reasonably populated, the government and corporations alike must be cautious of where they dispose of waste in order to avoid negatively affecting surrounding people or communities. One issue that has arisen is that the majority of chemical test plants and toxic dumpsites are near or on Indian reservations. This is clearly an issue of environmental injustice, and the Native American people, who are the poorest ethnic group in the United States, suffer dire consequences as a result. Take, for example, the Goshute Indian Tribe who live on the Skull Valley Indian Reservation in Utah. This tribe and their reservation have been subject to much controversy due to the fact that they are surrounded by some of the most toxic waste zones in the country. A few miles to the south is the Dugway Proving Grounds, which is used by the government to conduct chemical tests, most of which involve toxic chemicals (LaDuke). Additionally, just fifteen miles to the east is the Desert Chemical Depot that contains nearly forty percent of all U.S. chemical weapons, and roughly thirty miles north is the Envirocare Low Level Radioactive Disposal Site (LaDuke). What this shows is that the government and corporations alike have set up extremely hazardous waste sites near a community of people without putting measures in place to protect the safety of the Goshute members. It is very difficult to trap or contain gasses, so the chemicals released into the air from these waste sites often flow freely and are inhaled by members of the Goshute Tribe.

The problems for the Goshutes are further exacerbated by the fact that 1,600 animals once killed by the radiation from the toxic sites have been buried under their land and the slow decomposition of these corpses will release radioactive gas for the next 250,000 years (LaDuke). Additionally, the government is averse to paying the \$35 billion cleanup price tag, and other companies such as Private Fuel Storage (PFS) want to establish dumpsites in the Skull Valley Reservation (LaDuke). This horrific crime is a case of environmental injustice. Most Indian

reservations are near vast expanses of land and the government and corporations often decide to use this land for depositing waste, often without consulting with the local tribes. When they do consult with tribes, the government pays them a paltry sum of money that the often extremely poor Indian Americans feel compelled to take. Additionally, being the poorest ethnic group in America, most tribes don't have the resources to hire attorneys or gain representation in government to protect their land. Of the over five hundred current members of the United States Congress, only one member, Mr. Tom Cole, is a registered member of an Indian tribe. Native Americans account for between 1-2% of the total United States population, but their current representation in congress is less than 0.2%. As such, it is difficult for Native Americans to have a political voice, and issues that affect them most, such as those of environmental justice, often go unheard.

The story of the Goshute Indian Tribe is not an anomaly but rather just a snippet of a large chain of similar events. Take for example, the events revolving around the infamous Kerr-McGee Corporation. On January 4, 1986, the Sequoyah Falls Corporation Plant (owned by Kerr-McGee) experienced a rupture in a holding cylinder that contained over 29,000 pounds of uranium hexafluoride UF₆. This UF₆ was released into the air of the surrounding Oklahoma community and health care providers examined, and hospitalized, at least 100 people (Brugge). The surrounding area also happened to be 10%-30% Native American, according to the 1980 census (Brugge). The community where the Sequoyah Falls incident took place was about 10-15 times more Native American than the country was at the time. Furthermore, unlike the famous Three Mile Island incident, this incident had very little media coverage, likely due to the David vs. Goliath mentality of a large US corporation overpowering the will of the few poor Native Americans (Brugge). However, this just makes this issue more environmentally unjust than

before. Not only did it occur near the poor Native American communities, causing immeasurable harm, it got almost no media coverage. Pat Costner, who is a scientist at the National Water Center said in 1986 that “Native Americans are the people most affected by hazardous waste disposal sites.” Costner, who was speaking at the 14th Annual Symposium on the American Indian described how in Native American reservations that are near toxic waste sites, such as that in Gore, OK, the rate of cancer in people can be as much as thirty times as high as the national average (Hazardous). He went on to describe how companies such as Kerr-McGee are allowed to dump as much as eleven thousand pounds of uranium waste into rivers and water supplies each year (Hazardous). Because cities will not allow for this high amount of waste deposited within their limits, companies are forced to deposit toxic waste in rural areas such as parts of the Midwest, where many Indian reservations are located (Hazardous).

Native American tribal land continues to be valuable and sought out for use by the federal government as well as major corporations. “Some 75 percent of the country's uranium reserves lie under native lands -- lands once considered so worthless that the authorities did not mind designating them as reservations” (Lehtinen). This complicates things because all of a sudden large corporations and the US government want to kick Indians out again (think back to the Indian Removal Act) to gain access to the precious elements (Lehtinen). Additionally, the Department of Energy has proposed 21 new dumpsites for toxic and chemical wastes. Eighteen of those 21 proposed sites are on Native land (Lehtinen). Corbin Harney, an elder in the Shoshone Tribe, sums up the issue in the following manner, “This nuclear power is always taken to native Lands. First it's mined from there and now the native lands are turned into dumpsites. They take our water, then the poison is hurting all living things there. I don't really appreciate what the government is doing.” What Mr. Harney expresses in this quote is a representation of

the feelings of many of the Native Americans. They often feel used and taken advantage of, as they have been in the past, and are subject to some of the worst environmental injustice in the United States.

The response to decades of environmental injustice to Native American peoples needs to be both complex and swift. To solve such a problem is complex for many reasons, namely the fact that many of these issues are intertwined with one another. While no price will completely make up for the death and hardship, certain steps can be taken to help partially make up for the injustice. The first issue that should be addressed in responding to the environmental injustice is preventing its continuation. The amount of toxic waste produced in the United States is not decreasing, however, people should not have to suffer as a result. There are areas in the country that are not near Native American land that can also be permanently set aside as waste dumpsites. The first step is to introduce and successfully pass legislation in the Federal Government to forbid future toxic waste or dumpsites from being created within a twenty-mile radius of federally recognized Indian Reservations. Many of the chemical wastes dumped near Indian land will be there for thousands of years to come, and it would be very costly to change that fact, so as a society, the best we can do is to agree not to exacerbate the problem. By creating a federal law that prohibits the creation of future dumpsites within twenty miles of Indian reservations, that area can begin to recover. An interesting case study lies in that of Chernobyl. Twenty-five years after the devastating disaster that wiped out all life in the area, a chemical disaster much larger than any seen in America, plant life has begun to grow again. This is an example of the Earth's ability to recover from degradation, showing that if land is protected, as Chernobyl now is, it can begin to recover. On a much smaller scale, we can extrapolate this to the Native American communities. The best thing for the land and therefore

for the people will be to prevent any more waste within twenty miles of reservations so that the problems do not grow worse, and the plants and water can begin to be naturally cleansed.

The response does not end with a law passed in the congress, that is only the beginning; the government must work to make amends for the past. The Federal Government owes a lot to the Native American peoples on some reservations, and without cleanup efforts toxic chemicals will continue to affect the food, water, and general health of the Indian people for centuries to come. One issue stems from the fact that we, as a nation, do not know exactly what impacts we have caused for the future. With the majority of these toxic waste sites set up near Indian reservations in the last half-century, it is difficult to trace how these chemicals are affecting the overall health of the people. We must wait generations to see how trends in life expectancy and cancer rates change in the Native American population. However, scientists know that many of these chemicals, if ingested, are deadly, and the government should begin a cleanup process that attempts to mitigate these problems. In the Skull Valley Indian Reserve, cleanup of the reserve itself and the surrounding area will cost an estimated \$35 billion dollars (LaDuke). While this may seem like a lot, it is time for someone else to pay the price rather than just the Indian Americans, who have paid the price with their health and land for so long. The money should be the least of our concerns. With more emphasis and funding focused on cleanup efforts of nuclear and chemical wastes around the country, these toxic gases can be safely stored in large facilities where they can radioactively decay without harming the surrounding environment. This helps to keep the rivers clean that help feed people on the reservations.

The response to a problem as large as toxic waste will certainly be slow-moving and decades long however it is inevitable that one day we, as a nation, will have to clean up our mess and we owe it to those on tribal lands to begin cleaning up the mess we forced upon them.

America has the research, facilities, and technology to store toxic nuclear waste, there just needs to be a higher emphasis on funding such projects. Delaying the inevitable hurts everyone in the end. With legislation created to prevent future toxic deposits near active Indian tribal lands, and cleanup efforts in progress to mitigate the current problems as much as possible, we will be well on our way to preserving and restoring the land to what it was two hundred years ago.

The last step in the three-pronged approach relies on government incentives for both corporations and for the Indian Americans. The government must provide fiscal incentive, often in the form of tax breaks, in order to both incent companies to dispose of their chemical waste in a responsible and safe fashion, and to make up Native Americans for the gross mistreatment and injustice. Additionally, many of the people living on tribal reservations have been breathing in chemically contaminated air for decades, and their cancer rates are much higher. The federally funded Indian Health Service (IHS) as well as Medicare/Medicaid, do not do enough to fully subsidize treatment costs for Native Americans. As such, the government needs to expand this service to make sure that the Indian Americans can get extremely cheap healthcare services such as cancer treatments, routine check-ups, and surgical services. However, as long as Native Americans are far poorer than other American ethnic groups are, they will continue to be taken advantage of. As such, the government needs to provide tax breaks and incentives to Native Americans for higher education such as college or medical school. While it will take generations for change to be noticed, incentives like this can serve to save an entire American ethnic group from being taken advantage of in the future. The fact that there is currently only one Native American congressperson shows that there is an issue. However, providing access for increased educational opportunities at a low cost will slowly help the Native American peoples to create stronger, more successful tribes. Additionally, by providing tax breaks to those corporations that

make an effort to cleanup and store their chemical waste in an environmentally responsible way, there will be fewer toxic dumpsites that infringe on communities such as the Native American tribal lands.

No country, no corporation, and no entity can pay a price to make up for a death. When a Creek child asks his mother why he never got to see his grandfather, or when a little Goshute Tribe girl grows up without a father, we begin to understand just how horrific this environmental injustice is. However, while there is no easy or cheap solution to this problem, small changes over time can create a healthier community and can alleviate some of the damage inflicted upon the Native American peoples. Given our current nation's current status, the issue of toxic waste disposal will be around for many decades. However, it is unacceptable to neglect an entire group of people and subject them to chemical poisons, some of which we still don't know the full negative effects. To finally alleviate this environmental injustice, the Federal Government will need to create legislation making it illegal to dump toxic waste in certain areas, pay restitution to those tribes affected while simultaneously offering financial incentives to responsible companies, and provide cleanup efforts on and near reservations.

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