



OPINION

Indigenous leaders unite to protect international watersheds

It is time that government start protecting our land and genuinely protecting our way of life. It is time that the government honour their commitment to implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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First Nations are the indigenous people of the land now known as North America. We are not special interest groups. We love our land immeasurably: we are of the land and we are the land. We have lived a sustainable way of life on our land since time immemorial. We know the oceans, the rivers, the creeks, the tides, the mountains, the trees, the animals, and we know the air. We have always sought and continue to seek balance in all things related to the land.

We are a diverse group of indigenous peoples known as tribes, First Nations, bands, clans, and so on. Our people have always traded with each other, intermarried, and, yes, even fought. We acknowledge the Inuit, the Métis, and all indigenous peoples. Respect and history have taught us to give each other space. We honor our agreements. We leave each other alone to prosper in our own territories. Now we unite for our very survival.

Together, we ask for federal involvement in protecting our Taku, Stikine, and Unuk River international watersheds because Alaska does not formally recognize Tribes or Indigenous peoples, and British Columbia shows itself incapable of enforcing its own laws or utilizing best practices. We simply want to keep living in harmony with the environment for millennia to come. Long term protections of our traditional ways of life and stewardship of our lands and waters is essential.

It is all about that place, our place. Our place is an entire interrelated system of

symbiotic relationships within which we live: all things are connected. We understand that to abuse to any one part will upset the balance of the rest. We understand the delicateness of nature. We seek to live with nature rather than to subdue it.

We warn of the end-the end of business as usual or the end of us as a people. We choose to protect our natural environment for what else can we do? It is part of us and in us. Our duty is to protect it.

We do not oppose jobs, nor are we opposed to economic development, yet, when vocal in our opposition to various projects, we are subjected to PR spin citing our so-called opposition to jobs. Who are these people? They are bought and paid for and they operate in a world they've created that revolves solely around profits and money. Their projects will benefit dozens of people for at best a few decades. They will leave behind time bombs with the potential to harm millions of people indefinitely. Taxpayers will continue to pay to clean up their billion dollar messes, but no amount of money will bring back a destroyed way of life.

We want to preserve our unique place: this fragile, intricate temperate rainforest as vital as the Amazon to the rest of our shared planet—the lungs of the Earth. From Yakutat to Victoria, this land is our land, and this land is your land.

We do not oppose all mining, but we do stand opposed to projects with the potential to disrupt the unique and fragile places that give us all life.

Earth has finite resources: we need to focus and speed the transition to renewable and sustainable ways of doing things or we will run out of resources.

The Earth is wearing out. Our people are getting diseases at an accelerated rate. We have different cultures but we are also human. When will you listen to us?

It is time that government start protecting our land and genuinely protecting our way of life. It is time that the government honour their commitment to implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We may be idle no more in our concerns but we are not the enemy. We stand together, hands clasped across these imposed borders, asking for your help. Help us help you. The opinion of biased corporate interests trying to cynically sell off our resources does not change reality. We have always been in this together. The time is now for the Federal governments of the U.S.A. and Canada agree to work with us instead of with those whose actions will destroy us all.

We have always been in this together.

Shane Gottfriedson, former chief of Tkemlups the Secwepemc, is the elected regional chief of the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, a provincial territorial organization representing the 203 First Nations in British Columbia. He is based in Kamloops, B.C., Secwepemc Territory. K'yuuhlgaansii Frederick Olsen, Jr., Haida from Kasaan, Alaska, is the chairman of the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group, a consortium of 15 southeast Alaska tribes. He is based in Kasaan, Alaska.