

**Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth
Denver, Colorado
September 11, 1987**

COMMUNIQUE NO. 11

Statement reflecting the position of the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders, and delivered on their behalf by Chief Oren Lyons to the 4th World Wilderness Congress, Denver, Colorado, September 11, 1987.

Neyawenhha Scano (Thank you for being well).

Greetings to the conveners of the 4th World Wilderness Congress; greetings to the esteemed delegates to this conference; greetings to the traditional elders, Magqubu Ntombela from Zululand, South Africa, and to my traditional Native American elders from North America; and greetings to those assembled here in common cause to preserve and conserve the natural world for future generations.

Greetings from the Traditional Elders Circle, the Chiefs, Clan Mothers, Faithkeepers, men, women, and children, even those on the cradle boards. We send greetings to you.

My relations:

We have been asked for our perspective on the theme of this conference, the worldwide conservation of wilderness. I shall do my best to do this. I am sure that there will be many things left unsaid and not presented. I apologize for this and admit my ignorance of the cultures and wisdoms of the indigenous people and nations unknown to me throughout this hemisphere and the world. One thing I have been finding out is that among the indigenous nations throughout the world, we do understand the natural law, and have fashioned our societies and nations to support and adhere to this great spiritual law.

I have often been asked to speak on behalf of native peoples in North America because I am educated in my brothers' culture and society. I understand his language better than I understand my own. Because of that I am able to communicate with you our collective thoughts. I have been instructed on what to say, and it stays with me.

It is important for you to understand that our societies often choose speakers to convey the thoughts of the people. The words that I speak may be the collective position of the people of the Onondaga Nation, the Onondaga Council of Chiefs, the Grand Council of Chiefs of the Haudenosaunee, or the Traditional Elders Circle of North America, the good minds.

It is not my thoughts nor my wisdom that you are hearing, but the collective thoughts and wisdoms of the indigenous peoples who have always been here in these lands from time immemorial.

Their knowledge is profound and comes from living in one place for untold generations. It comes from watching the sun rise in the East and set in the West from the same place over great sections of time. We are as familiar with the lands, rivers, and great seas that surround us as we are with the faces of our mothers. Indeed, we call the earth ETENOHA, our mother from whence all life springs.

My relations, so then let us begin.

We will start with the word "wilderness," derived from the word "wild." For us there is no word for wild, it is not in our vocabulary. The closest we come to that is "free," so then we speak of freedom in the natural order of things with the inherent rules and obligations of freedom: respect and recognition of the

sovereignty of the individuals whether they be human beings, the animal nations, or the living forests.

For us our lands did not become wild until our brothers from across the great eastern sea arrived upon our shores, and then our lands became wild and untamed, even called the Wild West. Previous to that, this continent we called the Great Turtle Island was a land of peace and plenty, so we do not perceive our habitat as wild, but as a place of great security and peace, full of life.

My relations, listen to what we say.

Our grandfathers spoke of the crystal clear waters of the springs, streams, rivers, and lakes, and the great inland seas. They spoke of the fresh, pure waters. The first law of life: water.

They spoke of ancient trees, grandfathers of another age, trees so huge it took six men to circle their trunks.

They spoke of forests so vast, leaves so thick that sunlight barely found its way to the forest floors, and a squirrel could travel from the great eastern sea to the Mississippi River without touching the ground.

They spoke of flowers and medicines that grew in profusion along with the fruits, nuts, and berries that fed not only the human families, but also the animal nations that abounded and prospered in these vast lands.

They spoke of fish so abundant that in spawning season the streams and rivers were so full you could run on their backs.

They spoke of the passenger pigeons so plentiful that their roosting places were stripped of limbs, their combined weight breaking those limbs. They were so plentiful that they darkened the sky for hours as they migrated north and south.

They spoke of vast herds of game: deer, elk, and massive herds of buffalo that roamed the entire continent, powerful and endless.

But they did end, and so we received our first lesson.

My relations, listen as we continue:

The lesson we learned was that man wanted to dominate, and what he couldn't dominate he destroyed. We learned that mankind was capable of destroying life - the natural world life and his own. Our people were so closely aligned and intertwined with the order of the natural world that we suffered the same fate as the trees and the wolves, our spiritual relatives.

It taught us that mankind could be motivated to exploit the natural resources and the environments that these resources provided, to a point of total depletion and extinction of the animal and fish life.

It illustrated to us that there were people who were ignorant of the natural law, or who chose to deliberately ignore it. It caused our people to gather together in alarm, and to hold to our bosoms the principles of the great natural law, and to protect our ceremonies that celebrated these principles and insured the existence of the generations to come.

My relations:

The natural law as we understand it is the ultimate authority upon these lands and waters. It is the prevailing law of life and the order of life upon this earth we call our Mother.

It is the law the Creator put here, set down here deliberately, firmly, and with finality to govern all life in this creation.

This is the way we understand it. The Great Creator planted life upon this earth. He planted all of the nations of life from the grasses to the trees, from the insects to the elephants, from the tiniest life in the waters to the great whales in the seas.

And he planted the families of mankind in the four great sacred colors of black, white, red, and yellow.

He gave instructions to these great nations of life from the grasses to the whales, and they continue to follow these original instructions up to this very moment. To the best of their abilities they carry out their duties; they live in a state of grace. They do no wrong.

For us, the human beings, he gave additional responsibilities. He gave us hands to work with; he gave us intellect and the power of reason; he gave us options to choose our paths to do what is right or to do what is wrong. He gave us the foreknowledge of death and he gave us the insight into life after death. These are responsibilities more than gifts, and he gave each of us a mission in this life that is ours alone. These are responsibilities to be cherished and shared for the benefit of ALL life.

My relations, this is what we believe. Since you asked, we shall continue:

We are sharing this with you so that you may understand us better; these are our cosmologies. Your stories may be different, but we believe that we all received the same instructions in the beginning.

The natural law is a spiritual law. Its powers are both light and dark. We are blessed and we prosper if we live by the law. It is dark, terrible, and merciless if we transgress the law. There is no discussion with the law; there is only understanding and compliance. Its tenets are simple:

A respect for all life, for all life is equal.

Thanksgiving ceremonies for the special forces of nature.

A thanksgiving ceremony for the thundering Grandfathers who water the earth and the people, who freshen the springs, streams, lakes, and rivers.

A thanksgiving ceremony for the Four Winds who bring the seasons and sow the seeds of life.

A thanksgiving ceremony for the corn, beans, and squash that sustain our lives and give strength to our bodies.

A thanksgiving ceremony to our Grandmother, the moon, who raises and lowers the tides of the great salt seas, who gives us light at night, and who marks the cycles of the female life and season.

A thanksgiving ceremony for our mighty Uncle, the sun, who unites with our Mother the earth to bring forth life in all our seasons, who brings us light each day as we wait in the morning to greet him.

A thanksgiving to the stars who give us direction at night in their infinite wisdom, most of which we have forgotten. We give thanks for their beauty and for the dew they bring in the night.

A thanksgiving to those spiritual beings assigned to help the human beings carry out our duties.

A thanksgiving ceremony to the Great Creator, the master of all life, for the creation and all that we have been given to enjoy and to protect so that seven generations from this day our children will enjoy the same things that we have now.

Listen to the howl of our spiritual brother the wolf, for how it goes with him, so it goes for the natural world.

My relations, so now we will continue:

So we have gathered here from the four directions of the Earth to report on how it is where we come from. The news is heavy and there seems to be a determined effort to destroy life on the planet. How did this come about, and what are some of the problems facing us and the natural world?

What is the relationship between a fast food hamburger and rainforests in Central and South America? We, as consumers, should know, but we do not, and more to the point, even if we did know these connections and understand them, it is very questionable whether we would give up the convenience of these fast foods for the long-term process of conserving the wilderness and saving our environment.

The discussion then revolves around the values of the societies responsible for the attitudes of its people. What are these societies teaching their children?

Rainforests are cut down for timber and to clear the lands for farming and ranching. Ranching lands are seeded for cattle grazing, a cash crop. The local people do not eat the meat. It is often shipped north to become the hamburgers we talked about earlier. The people give up subsistence farming for wages, and the land use is changed. Cheap labor is on one end, more profit on the other end. At the same time, the manufacture of Styrofoam releases chemicals into the earth that affect the ozone layer, the thin, lifesaving protection of life on the earth.

The rainforests are the lungs of the earth. Trees recycle carbon monoxide back into oxygen, clean air that all life breathes in common, thus continuing the life-giving elements and maintaining the constant atmospheres and temperatures around the earth. If we continue to cut these trees at the present rate, we will have cleared a space as large as India within 30 years. The natural law is simple in this case: we will suffer in exact ratio to our transgressions. The damage done may be permanent in mankind's existence.

My relations, we shall continue:

The scenario is the same in Central and South America - first the timber companies come to clear the great forests, and the lands are used for cash crops. These crops need help to grow because the cleared lands are fragile, so fertilizers are introduced. These chemicals cost money, so soon the farmer is paying more for chemicals than his cash crops can be sold for, and he finds himself working for the chemical companies. Soon he gives up and abandons the land as it turns to dust, and as the timber companies march into virgin rainforests, he follows to continue the cycles. This process is called "progress," and sometimes "economic development."

The natural law is clear in this case: if you destroy the process of the life cycles of the rainforests, the climate around the world is affected. Then you will affect life as we now know it. The balance is delicate.

The Mayans farmed these lands for untold centuries by working with this balance, and so they prospered. They are called People of the Corn, and they lived in the jungles of these huge rainforests in harmony. They lived with the law in respect and understanding, and so they prospered.

There are great dams being built in these same areas, and they have caused the rivers to cease their annual overflowing to bring silt and fertility to the lands that they overflowed. The lands lose their fertility and life suffers. We understand that the World Bank, who most often financially supported these projects, is now rethinking its policies, and I, for one, am grateful. The natural law is clear in this case. Damage done quickly takes a long time to repair or renew. Thus, we may cut a tree with a chainsaw in 10 minutes, but it will take a hundred years for that tree to grow back. So who suffers? Our children do. We are profiting at their expense. We are deliberately changing life in the future, and we must question our motivations.

The great seas are the same as the earth.

Man has lived off the abundance of the sea from time immemorial. Its great resources have sustained life, and songs of joy and contentment have lifted our hearts up to this time. The energy it produces has galvanized civilizations and cultures throughout the world. But we, even now, endanger our lives by imprudent exploitation without regard for the laws of nature, and again, we will suffer the consequences.

My relations, you have asked us what we think, and so we will continue:

The herring is gone from the North Sea; it is gone from the diet of the people, the result of over-fishing. How did this happen? It happened because we either did not understand the natural law, or we deliberately chose to ignore it. We could say that technology caused the demise of the great schools of herring, but technology is a tool. Technology doesn't think, ponder, or reason. That is the province of mankind. So we must agree that the destruction of the herring was a conscious decision of mankind.

What, then, is the motivation? The answer is simple: profit. Profit at our expense, for we are all deprived, including the fish life that also sustained itself on this once great natural resource. Technology unleashed our greed. There were many nations involved in this great kill; they fished in competition and rivalry. They developed fishing nets that allowed larger and larger catches. The great seine nets were the final blow to the herring, and coupled with the giant trawlers now prowling the seas, they were able to catch in one day what previously took a month of fishing. So it is not technology to blame, it is the attitude of the fisherman. The results are the same: we have lost a great resource. It is the law that we suffer.

Brothers: There are many more examples of mankind's folly, and I use the word "man" advisedly because Western thinking as we see it has exploited the women as well. Men have excluded women from decision making, and thus flawed the partnership that is the natural law. Male and female is fundamental to life, partners in work to be done. By excluding the female, mankind has again denied a resource of compassion and understanding that balances the competitive nature of the males. We, as men, should not fear our mates: we should listen to their counsel. They may be the last reservoir of life. They are just now beginning to fight for life. Mankind should stop and listen to their song. As we plunge ahead to build empires and race for supremacy, we should stop and listen to their song of life. For without the female, there is no life.

My relations, we come to the close of this short discussion.

Do not take offense as we present the examples of what we consider flawed thinking. The examples abound:

Acid rain has already killed half the forests of Germany. Acid rain is killing life in the rivers, streams, and

lakes of northeastern America. It is killing the chief of the trees, the maple, as our prophecies foretold.

Great famines are sweeping the earth, particularly in Africa where the natural law is exacting the price of transgressions against it, and life suffers without relief.

Water is contaminated at the expense of our children. Toxic waste dumps are time bombs of death as they slowly work their way into the fresh water veins of our lands.

The Indian nations of North America have been particular victims of uranium mining. Toxic piles of waste tailings have contaminated the people, aborting life in pregnant mothers and causing defects upon our children who are born in these areas.

How can we meet here to discuss the economic problems of wilderness and life without talking about the monster most responsible for the problems of the earth today, and that is the gigantic military complexes of the two most powerful nation states in the world? Soldiers outnumber teachers and doctors by wide margins. And row upon row of deadly bombs, weapons, and aircraft wait for the moment of global war.

It is hypocritical for countries to profess the cause of peace when their economies are based upon the sales of military hardware. Something is wrong when arms to developing nations outnumber economic aid three-to-one.

We are seeing our prophecies come to be, one by one. Our gardens in the Mohawk Nation territories are stunted and refusing to grow from the dark cloud of pollution that daily rains down upon us. We were told that this would happen, and so it has.

Ninety years ago there were 13 cities with a population of over 1 million. Today there are 200 cities over 1 million, with Mexico City in the forefront with 18 million, and we know the problems of that city.

Respect should be given to those indigenous nations who still carry on their ceremonies, still following the ancient laws of nature with songs and ceremonies.

We cannot give up. We must follow the spiritual law set down for us so long ago. We are not defeated if we do not allow ourselves to be manipulated like yo-yos on a string by cosmetic politicians whose interests are not for the natural world or the people.

I heard today that economic growth is a necessity and conservation is a consideration of importance. We disagree. Conservation is life, and economic growth is a matter of interpretation.

So, my friends and colleagues, here we are at this time in history with a task that we cannot leave to our children.

With a choice that takes courage, fortitude, and a will inspired by an understanding of the great spiritual law of our Mother Earth; take heed to the words of our Grandfathers who instructed us to "take care how you place your moccasins upon the earth, step with care, for the faces of the future generations are looking up from the earth waiting their turn for life." So the decision is simple. Obey the natural law, or perish.

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