

**Haida Gwaii
Queen Charlotte Islands
Skidegate - Massett
June 14, 1989**

COMMUNIQUE NO. 12

The Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth issued this communiqué following their Council at Haida Gwaii, land of the Haida Nation. As an introduction to the concepts that were discussed, we would like to present a statement from Haida Chief Skidegate (Lewis Collinson), made in March, 1966:

"People are like trees, and groups of people are like forests. While the forests are composed of many different kinds of trees, these trees intertwine their roots so strongly that it is impossible for the strongest winds which blow on our Islands to uproot the forest, for each tree strengthens its neighbor, and their roots are inextricably entwined.

"In the same way, the people of our Islands, composed of members of nations and races from all over the world, are beginning to intertwine their roots so strongly that no troubles will affect them.

"Just as one tree standing alone would soon be destroyed by the first strong wind which came along, so is it impossible for any person, any family, or any community to stand alone against the troubles of this world."

Sharing Native Philosophy

All peoples are part of the Creation, and have common rights and responsibilities toward Mother Earth. There are some important aspects of our ways which can be shared with those interested in understanding traditional knowledge and philosophy.

It is important to respect the fact that some ceremonial knowledge is sacred and private, meant only for the medicine societies that are responsible for those particular functions. All people are beneficiaries of these ceremonies. It is a great offense to exploit sacred knowledge. Proper performance and participation is the duty of designated traditional religious leaders. Many of these ceremonies are site-specific in their respective indigenous nations.

Aspects of Native philosophy that can be shared include principles of life and relationships to the natural world. We are one with the continual process of Creation. People are equal partners with the plants and animals, not their masters who exploit them.

Today the four colors of the family of people - red, white, black, and yellow - need to better understand our relationship to Mother Earth in order to assure the survival of people, plants and

animals. There are many commonalities inherent to our survival. By sharing our philosophy we can promote harmony and balance.

Family Lifestyle - A Shared Responsibility

Men and Women have an equal responsibility to restore the strength of the family, which is the foundation of all cultures. Parents become partners in nurturing the spiritual, cultural, and social health of the family. This partnership should be based upon mutual respect. Our cultures can teach parents how to work together in peaceful and constructive ways, how to deal with each other, and how to use good words to resolve problems. Through these ways our children will have a productive and caring life. This life will include cultural education, spiritual fulfillment, creative expression, and a positive self-image for all members of the family.

Parents must be role models for the children and for their nieces and nephews. Parents have to demonstrate the value of trust, respect, and honor. Parents also have to exhibit discipline, moderation, and fairness in their own actions. As time has proved, children will do as the parents do, not necessarily what parents tell them to do. These changes cannot happen without the individual's commitment to disciplining themselves in their daily lives. When personal comfort and immediate gratification become more important than our children, then we are headed for serious problems.

Each nation has Original Instructions on how to live. These traditions can give families strength and consistency to deal with the realities of modern life.

Grandparents and community Elders must have a significant role in the education of our youth. Their experience, concerns and perspectives are important. Children are part of a larger extended family clan which gives them a unique place in the world, and connects children to their culture.

Children need the security of a home, a connection to their community, and a relationship to their traditional environment. Children are the future of our nations, and must be taught their Native language, spirituality, and identity. In order for our children to survive in the world, they need a firm understanding and belief in the basic principles of sharing freedom and respect individually.

Food

One important aspect that our families need to address urgently is a change to a more healthy diet. Diseases such as diabetes and cancer are epidemic among our people. Poisons in many modern foods, from preservatives to pesticides, can cause great harm to the body, mind, and soul. We need to return to more wholesome traditional foods that are nutritious and economical. Families need to raise more of their own food, which if properly grown according to time-tested cultural patterns, will help to restore the health, strength, and happiness of our families.

Significance of Women

The Natural Law gives women the responsibility of bringing new life into the world. Everyone must be born from the womb. Mothers must protect the lives they have helped to bring into this world.

The Traditional Circle of Elders and Youth wishes to affirm women in their sacred responsibilities, and to express its gratitude and encouragement to women everywhere who struggle to nurture and protect life in the face of many obstacles.

In our traditional ways, the woman is the foundation of the family. It is the mother who provides spiritual direction and inspiration to the husband and children. The opportunities for women to help their families rise to higher levels of spiritual consciousness are unlimited. A man can become a powerful force for good in the world when he is spiritually supported by a discreet and loving mate.

In order for women to carry out their responsibilities, a home atmosphere of respect, security, and harmony is essential. A mother who is secure in the center of the family circle will be a course of strength to all. Abuse and repression have no place in a traditional family.

An Environmental Ethic Based Upon Tradition

Today we are faced with a serious challenge to restore world environmental harmony. We realize that the Earth is our Spiritual Mother, a living entity that maintains life, and that any threat to the environment endangers us all. We face a crisis of life for this living planet we call Mother Earth.

In our traditional ways we treat the Earth with the respect due the source of our spiritual and cultural well-being. We were warned of a time when people would ignore the fundamental Natural Law, and that they would choke in their own waste.

In our traditional ways we do not view the lands as a collection of resources that require development. Instead, we view these resources as living entities to be honored with ceremonies of thanksgiving. We are at a point where we must act to save the Earth for all cultures. Our prophecies have come true. The time of warning is past. We are now faced with a common issue of survival.

The consequences of defying the Natural Law will be borne by those who rely most upon these good laws. We have a responsibility to help the world understand how their political, economic, and recreational decisions impact the health and welfare of the environments in which indigenous nations live.

The Natural Law is absolute. It can be swift and cruel if not respected. People can make a difference. We must ensure that all cultures, all nations, all peoples begin immediately to protect the vanishing bounty of Mother Earth. We have to change greed into sharing; material wealth into spiritual well-being, and individual enterprise into collective will to assure that there will be a clean and safe home for future generations.

We need a coalition of indigenous nations and environmental groups to work more cooperatively to save our Mother Earth. Conciliation is the key to survival. Peace is the goal. Peace between humans and the environment. This peace will allow us to respect our different cultures as well as

respect the spiritual powers of the Earth and all living things.

We cannot separate ourselves from the Earth. We cannot continue to abuse our Mother. The future welfare of Mother Earth rests squarely in our hands. We must all become caretakers of the Earth.

To begin with, we need to save those Elders who cannot speak for themselves - the trees. The redwoods are under attack. The rainforests are being destroyed at an unbelievable rate. The maple dies from the top down from the killing effect of acid rain.

The very air we breathe can now hurt us. The oxygen we need is the breath of life from our Mother Earth. She produces this air from the trees and rainforests throughout the world. "Progress" now threatens those trees that help us live. A better understanding of our philosophy can create appreciation and a commitment for our responsibility to the life forces of Creation.

Our health is at risk. A safe supply of water - the essential blood of Mother Earth - must be protected. Good foods like the Three Sisters of Corn, Beans, and Squash must be grown free of toxic chemicals. Otherwise, we are committing a form of suicide. By eating food with the life taken out of it (commercially processed), we contaminate ourselves.

The Earth is alive and must be protected from further abuse by both individuals and multi-national corporations. They violate the Natural Law. It is a sacred trust that must be restored for the sake of future generations of all people. Selfishness and greed must be halted to end the plunder of the gifts of Creation. A unity of the principles of sharing and caring must exist in all people. The survival of all children of Mother Earth depends upon our united actions.

Together we can end the Holocaust against the environment. Mother Earth needs all of us to pay attention to the Natural Law. Indigenous people need help from all cultures, religions, and nations to restore the harmony of our home planet.

Indigenous Rights to the Land

Indigenous people around the world have a birthright and a responsibility to their ancestral lands. They have an identity that is based upon the land. They have a sovereign right to protect the natural world from exploitation. If the nations remain truthful to their traditional philosophy and values toward the land, their future is secure. People need to rediscover the Natural Law which in turn will allow them access to the land without destroying it.

Our cultures are based upon two important premises that involve land. First, we believe that the Earth is our Spiritual Mother, created to support us provided we live by the Original Instructions of our Creator. Second, our diverse cultures get their individual identities from the land. This creates an essential relationship to our ancestral lands that must be preserved.

Our cultural and spiritual identity is dependent upon a land base. The land provides us with sustenance, shelter, inspiration, and a responsibility to respect all elements of that land. The land is a sacred trust held in common for the benefit of the future of our nations.

Land is not an economic resource to be sold. We can no longer continue to base our economic future on the extraction and exportation of its natural resources. Access to resources is subject to the Natural Law. If we destroy the land we will have no sustenance, no home, and no future for the next generations. If we destroy the resources, we have broken our sacred trust. Our nations need to set parameters for land usage with spiritual laws guiding our decisions. We need a commonsense approach to help the people benefit from the resources of the land, while assuring the long-term health of those resources.

The people, the clans, and the Nations are entrusted with sovereignty over the land. It is a collective right that has spiritual consequences. Abuse of this responsibility will lead to the destruction of our nations, our cultures, and all of our resources. We have been led astray by the profit motives of the industrial age. We must remember why we were given the land in the first place. Each tribal culture has a land use ethic which must be restored.

The land has been inherited from a long line of our ancestors. They have passed on the trust to us. We hold the land, not for financial gain but the sake of future generations, so that they will have a home, a land base, a secure future. We have to instill in them a deep respect for all the gifts of Creation.

Religious Rights of Indigenous People

It appears that the canoe of the indigenous peoples' spirituality still sits in the shadows of the religious ships of the western world. We all rock gently on the sea of life, and share a common destiny in the protection of the well-being of Mother Earth.

Increasingly, the world is beginning to recognize the integrity of indigenous religions. Our spiritual visions are gaining equality and support in international affairs.

Yet, our religions suffer from exploiters that include scholars who attempt to refute our spiritual visions; individuals who appropriate our beliefs for their own gain; people who deal in the removal of human remains and sacred objects from our sacred places and medicine societies.

We must remind all people that the practice of our spiritual ways require certain elements. We need access to sacred sites, which must be protected. We need access to sacred animals, which must be kept from regulatory interference. We need the return of sacred objects, many of which are now in museums, historical societies, universities, and private collections.

Sacred objects are the national patrimony and the religious right of our nations. No one has the right to keep these objects from our people. To continue to do so is a violation of our human rights. Sacred items must be respected at international borders so that we can be allowed to practice our religion wherever we travel.

The remains of our ancestors must be returned to those nations that ask for their reburial. Associated grave goods should also be returned so that our dead can rest in peace. To continue to deny our nations the religious right to care properly for the dead is an uncivilized act.

The religious rights of indigenous people are being restricted by federal, state/provincial, and local governments. Policies of these agencies and cultural institutions must be changed to eliminate any discrimination toward our religions. Correctional institutions must recognize the religious right of Native inmates. The curative powers of our ceremonies and religious ways can be very important in human development. Native inmates must have access to our spiritual practices and sacred objects necessary to carry out the ceremonies. This is especially true for children in social service or youthful offender institutions.

It is time that the religious practices of the Native nations receive the same consideration and respect as the other established religions of the world, especially in our own lands.

In closing, the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth hopes that all people will make an effort to incorporate traditional values into their lives. We believe that there is an urgent need to change the destructive ways that are harmful to the peaceful and natural way of life. With this Communiqué the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth reaches out to the world for support and cooperation in restoring the balance and harmony of all life, and in protecting Mother Earth.

"Daalang gii giinahl sudaas naa gi dang gyust'aa sqawdaagii uu daalang gahl kil 'laa gaa. Howa. Gaa gang at t'aa ts'ii." (Thank you for listening to the words that have been spoken. Howa. Step carefully as you go.)