Sovereignty: its Meaning to People and the Land

What is "sovereignty"?

Does it mean the right to decide for yourself?

Does it mean the freedom to make choices for your community?

Sovereignty:

How does it relate to entire groups of people, to nations and to their governments?

The western hemisphere
is the original homeland to hundreds
of different cultures and people.

They lived and thrived
here long before
European
settlers arrived…

And each group made its own laws, used the lands, and protected the environment for future generations…

Each group (whether we call them “tribes” or “nations”) were self-governing. They were “sovereign” over their own lands and communities.

Over the many years, interactions with new settlers led to conflicts over the use of land and over the right of indigenous (native) peoples to rule themselves.

Let’s hear what sovereignty means to indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere…

These are words from the leaders of the First Nations of Canada:

“We Are the First Nations.”

“We are the Indigenous Peoples… We possess inherent rights to self-determination.”

"Our right to self-determination means we have jurisdiction (the right, power and authority) to operate our own political, legal, economic, and cultural systems…"

“The land is the source of our identity. Great responsibilities to protect and preserve the land have been bestowed upon us by the Creator… “

"Therefore, our consent is required before any development or decisions are made which may impact our land."

"As sovereign Nations we have never surrendered our rights…"

"Prior to contact with the European settlers, our Nations and Peoples have thrived since time immemorial…

Our Nations possess distinct laws, language, culture, territories, economic systems, and history…"

"As distinct and independent Nations, we possess inherent rights to self-determination."

"These inherent rights were not endowed (given) by any other nation, but are passed on from the connection to the Creator and our lands. They cannot be taken away."

"Self-determination means we freely and independently determine our own livelihood…"

“Through treaty our Nations agreed to share the land.”

“Treaties were negotiated on the basis of mutual respect and the principles of peace and friendship; treaties determine how lands and resources are to be shared…”

“Treaties are international agreements which remain valid today and continue to affirm our sovereign relationships…”

"This is why development or use of lands requires our consent, or when decisions are made which may impact our inherent (natural) rights."

“We Are the First Nations.”

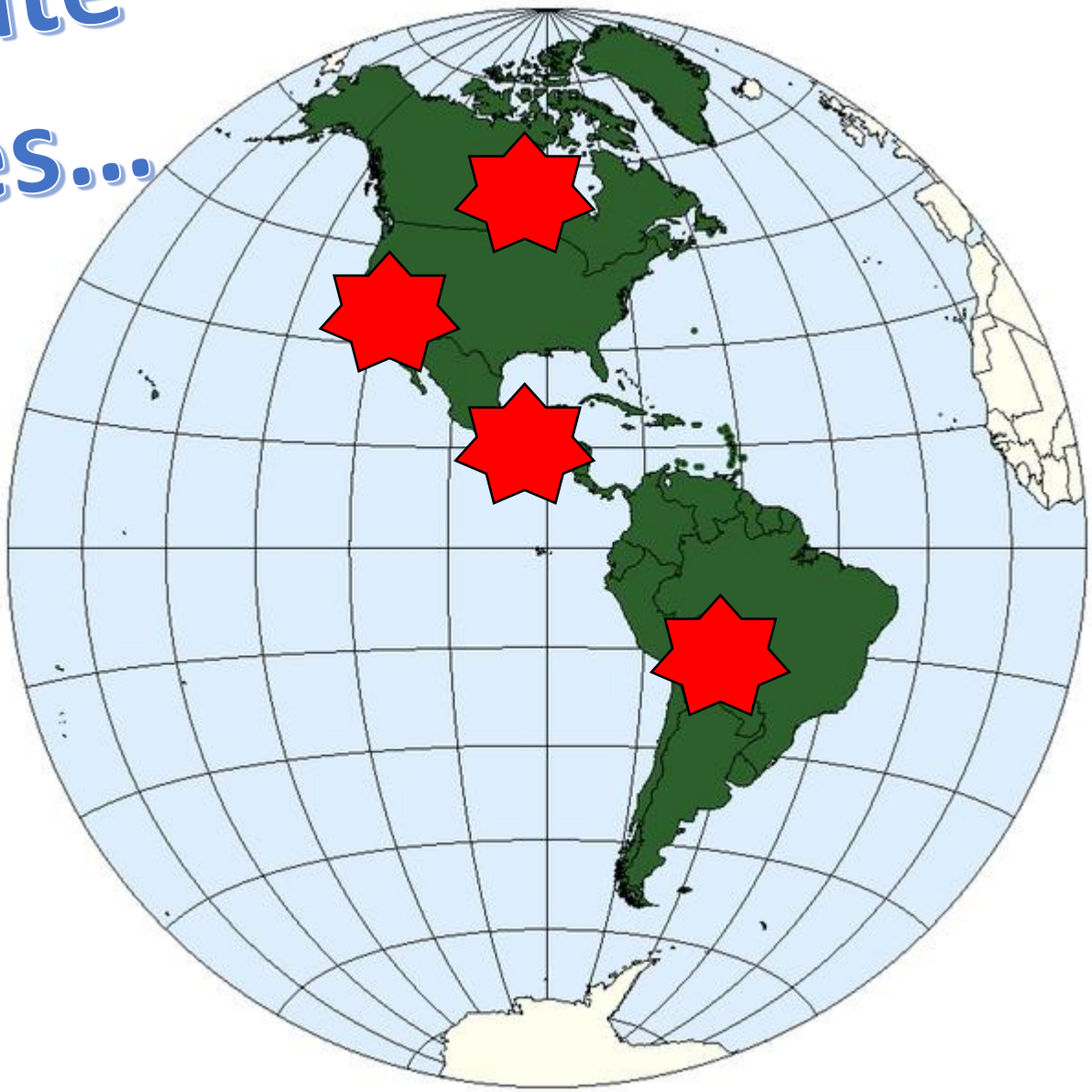
Today, indigenous people still struggle to protect their "sovereignty" in many ways and many places.

What are modern-day issues of sovereignty?

Major Issues:

* Recognition as independent people
* Control over natural resources on tribal lands
* Authority to choose own leaders and make own laws
* Preservation of culture and way of life

Investigate examples…



Canada's Pipeline

Canada's Pipeline: Issues of American Sovereignty Over Land Use

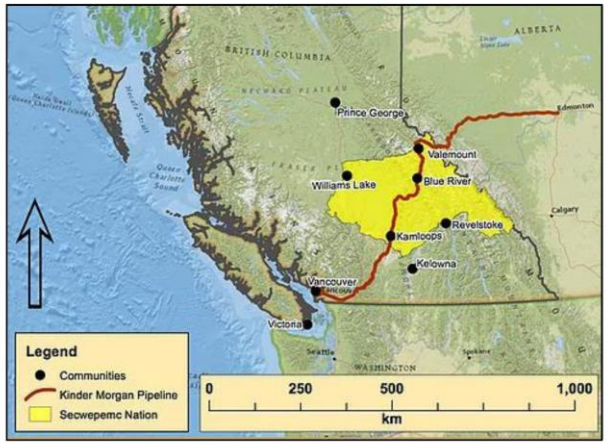
Source: Alicia Kroemer, *Minority and Indigenous Trends 2018*, Minority Rights Group International

In Canada, indigenous communities are facing an uphill battle against the construction of an oil pipeline on their homelands. The pipeline would carry crude and refined oil from Alberta to the west coast for export to global markets. Despite court challenges from many indigenous nations, the project has been approved by Canada's government. Tribal representatives claim the government has not properly advised the communities who would be most affected by the pipeline. They claim that these actions violate the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The pipeline will go directly over Secwepemc land, which is home to over 10,000 people. The Secwepemc (pronounced suh-Wep-muhc) people occupy a vast territory of the interior of British Columbia. This traditional territory stretches from the Columbia River valley along the Rocky Mountains, west to the Fraser River. Most Secwepemc people live in the river valleys. The traditional Secwepemc lived as a self-governing nation grouped into bands.

The Kinder Morgan Pipeline Project is being built without the consent from the Secwepemc people. Critics accuse the Canadian government for stating its commitment to indigenous peoples, but behind closed doors are not true to their word. In addition to conflict over land use, tribal leaders are concerned about risks to the environment such as potential oil leaks and spills.

The struggle for tribal rights and recognition of tribal sovereignty is similar to other indigenous peoples in North America. Canadian Indians were displaced from their native territories as European settlers moved into Canada. Tensions have continued in recent years as new developments have been constructed in territory traditionally belonging to tribal communities. For example, the controversial, multimillion-dollar Sun Peaks ski resort was built on Mount Morrissey, which is sacred land to the Secwepemc people. The Kinder Morgan Pipeline represents another chapter in a long history of tribal sovereignty conflicts.



Wintu Waters

Water in Wintu Territory: Issues of Sovereignty

Source: Alicia Kroemer, Minority and Indigenous Trends 2018, Minority Rights Group International

Chief Sisk of the Wintu tribe lives along the McCloud River watershed in Northern California. She is an activist on behalf of salmon restoration, water protection, and the right to clean drinking water for her tribe. She has been the leader of her nation's struggle to protect their precious natural resources from the attempts of Nestlé and other private corporations to bottle water on their tribal lands.

"We have had the problem of Nestlé coming into some of our small mountain communities," says Chief Sisk. "This impacts all people. When you tap into high mountain water sources, everything downstream is affected. This affects our fish and it affects our drinking water. These water-bottling companies contaminate half the water in the manufacturing process, then bottle the other half of the water and ship it to other parts of the world. This water will not go downstream."

The McCloud River watershed is an area already struggling with drought, a situation only worsened by the activities of water-bottling companies on Wintu land. If this issue goes unaddressed, the lack of adequate clean water could lead to the migration of the community. The tribe has found itself locked in a continuous battle with corporations misusing their water sources, resulting in severe environmental degradation to their sacred territories. While Chief Sisk launched a successful legal action against Nestlé, another water-bottling business has taken its place- Crystal Geyser.

Different communities of indigenous peoples across North America are similar to the Wintu. They are working to ensure that their land rights are protected. Today, the use of land, water, and forests by a wave of corporations, often with government support, creates a profound threat not only to the future survival of these American Indian nations and their way of life, but also the fragile natural environments on which they depend.

Indigenous Peoples of Mexico

Profile of Mexico's Indigenous Peoples

Source: Alicia Kroemer, Minority and Indigenous Trends 2018, Minority Rights Group International

Mexico has one of the largest and most diverse indigenous populations in Latin America. Mexico's indigenous population numbers 12 million people, which is 13 per cent of the total population, speaking 62 languages. The majority of the indigenous people is located in the southern regions of Mexico in states such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, Yucatán, and Guerrero.

Mexican government leaders have wanted to integrate indigenous people into Mexican society, but such programs have devalued indigenous languages, cultures and sovereignty. Officially, Mexico's indigenous communities are also protected by Mexican law, but many indigenous communities have even been discriminated against.

Many indigenous groups have arisen to fight for better living conditions, education, health services, fair wages, political representation, and the protection of local environments. They call for protection of communal land and self-rule. Several years ago, indigenous groups took over 38 towns in the state of Chiapas and held large demonstrations across Mexico.

Some indigenous organizations have demanded autonomous (self-governing) regions for indigenous populations. In effect, this would have established another level of government at a regional level. Autonomy would allow indigenous peoples greater control over their land and resources. The Mexican government signed the San Andres Accords, which guaranteed land rights and autonomy, but later refused to implement the agreement.

Today, an estimated two-thirds of the indigenous population live in poor, small communities in the least developed parts of the country. About half of indigenous people lack electricity and running water. Many indigenous communities regularly experience shortages of medicines and food. Child mortality is as high as 20 per cent!

Sovereignty in Bolivia

Bolivia's Indigenous Peoples Seek Stronger Sovereignty

Source: Alicia Kroemer, Minority and Indigenous Trends 2018, Minority Rights Group International

The Aymara and Quechua make up the majority of Bolivia's indigenous peoples, totaling 3.5 million in a recent census. They also make up the majority of the highland Bolivian population. Aymara and Quechua people share many cultural practices, living in rural areas and making their living as small farmers.

Aymara and Quechua peoples in Bolivia's highlands were greatly affected by the Bolivian government's decision to redistribute much of their lands in the last century. But now, Aymara and Quechua people have become active in local and national politics. They have also been involved in the mass protest marches against Bolivia's treatment of indigenous people.

Today, the Aymara and Quechua people have been recognized in the Bolivian Constitution which provides indigenous people parliamentary representation.
The current president himself, Evo Morales, was born in an Aymara-speaking home.

After nationalizing the country's oil and natural gas fields using the Bolivian army, President Morales used tax revenue for social programs that helped lift nearly a fifth of the population from poverty. Recent agrarian (agricultural) reform laws have helped to redistribute an increasing amount of land back to indigenous communities, although communities still feel that a great deal more could be done.

Once a hero to native peoples, Evo Morales faces growing opposition from the diverse ethnicities that made him Bolivia's first indigenous president. Protests are frequent, charging his government officials with corruption and demanding he step down from office.

Sovereignty:
its Meaning to People and the Land

Courtesy Oklahoma Council for Social Studies and OKAGE