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Society of Indian Psychologists' Response to Pipeline Protest

Society of Indian Psychologists • October 30, 2016

As clinicians, educators and scholars, we find the treatment of the Standing Rock protesters in North Dakota to be reprehensible, and the continuing construction of a pipeline without their consent, under, near, around their waterways, a retraumatization of the people already suffering on the reservation. We support the Federal Government's Department of the Army, Department of Justice and the Department of the Interior's decision to withdraw approval for the pipeline construction and urging of consideration of nationwide reform to consider tribal views when doing these types of infrastructure projects.

For 500 years, Indigenous lands and waterways have been usurped for governmental and corporate advantage. American Indians have borne the brunt of contamination and destruction of their traditional lands (or complete removal). Furthermore, they have not received a concomitant level of benefit or support to overcome the negative impact. The damming of this same waterway in the '50's permanently removed prime fertile land and historic Indian communities of the Three Affiliated Tribes just upstream. This was a desecration and treaty violation that no reparation can make right.

Previous transgressions include uranium contamination and toxic chemical contamination of multiple reservations. The continued lack of clean-up of land and waters, to this day, constitutes a greater disaster than Chernobyl. Compounding that is the continued underfunding of Indian Health Services and lack of health or mental health treatment to address the negative health impacts of the trauma caused by destruction of the people, land and water. American Indian and Alaska Native communities have some of the highest rates of depression, alcoholism, suicide and "premature death" in the United States. Yet despite these hardships the American Indian protestors embody the qualities that have enabled us to survive: bravery, hardiness, resilience, determination and connection to the land and water.

Psychological scholarship has demonstrated the importance of land and water to American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Psychological and spiritual well-being are inextricably linked to traditional lands sacred to Native people. In the instance of the events at Standing Rock, the proposed pipeline is designed to violate sacred space that includes a traditional burial ground. For American Indian and Alaska Native people, threats to the natural environment are a continuation of historical trauma contributing to current health disparities. The proposed project

threatens the well-being of our relatives directly affected and indeed all U.S. citizens. The specter of genocide is continued in the pipeline yet to be built.

Finally, the treatment of the Indigenous people in this protest is a chilling repeat of a pattern of dismissal, disrespect and dehumanization. The pipeline was not placed near Bismarck, North Dakota, because of danger to the citizens there. Yet, contaminating Indian Country was considered acceptable. For American Indigenous Nations, the energy and spirits of water, earth, air, the standing ones (trees), winged ones, crawling ones, four leggeds, and life in all expressions, are composed of the same root spirit – hence, all are related. Yet in Western society, few speak for these relatives. The Standing Rock People steadfastly remain our principal spokespersons. The Standing Rock Dakota and Lakota have withstood degradation of their water, lands and their own bodies with resilience and strength over many generations, with the most recent being the unprovoked use of attack dogs and mace on peaceful protesters. Health equity for all citizens can never be achieved without first acknowledging and respecting basic human rights and dignity, including that due to the land and water on which life depends. Water is life, and without respect for water, its source in the land, or the human need for water, not only are Indigenous rights violated, so are the rights to humanness and human life. Land is a part of our people's psychological wellbeing. When our land and water are threatened, it is an unimaginable spiritual, physical and mental burden not just for Native people but for all residents of the United States and the world. This protest is essentially in support of humanity. Native people leave no one out. All are welcome to the well.