



Commentary: The “Idle No More” Movement in Eastern Canada

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The Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and other Indigenous nations in Atlantic Canada were never idle; they have resisted colonial oppression for centuries. Prior to Confederation, they signed peace and friendship treaties. Post-Confederation, they petitioned the Crown to protect their treaty rights.² Throughout the 1980s, Grand Council members made appeals to the United Nations Human Rights Committee.³ Then, the explosive Supreme Court of Canada decision in *R v Marshall* affirmed Mi'kmaq treaty rights, a decision that sparked racist public outrage.⁴ In response, Indigenous peoples and allies across Canada marched and organized protest fisheries, but even now, fifteen years later, the struggles for sovereign resource management and appropriate accommodation are yet to be resolved.

Today, in a significant return to matriarchal roots that were largely marginalized by colonialism, Indigenous women and their allies are on the front lines of political and cultural activism, shining light on critical social justice issues through peaceful protest. This comment explores the advent and actions of Idle No More in Atlantic Canada and pays particular attention to the role of women.

Despite Supreme Court recognition of treaty rights, Indigenous nations of eastern Canada, in order to bring attention to the denial of hunting and fishing rights and, more generally, of self-determination, have had to organize protest moose hunts, create blockades to protect sacred territories against unethical development, and shut down highways.⁵

These actions represent only a small sampling of all those that constitute the Idle No More (INM) legacy of resistance to injustice. Idle No More activities protect

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² See William Wicken's award-winning analysis of Grand Chief Sylliboy's historic struggles in *The Colonization of Mi'kmaq Memory and History, 1794–1928: The King v. Gabriel Sylliboy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

³ The communiqués alleged that the Government of Canada violated article 25(a) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. See Sakej Henderson's impressive body of work examining the United Nations and Aboriginal Peoples, *Indigenous Diplomacy and the Rights of Peoples Achieving UN Recognition* (2008). Saskatoon: Purich.

⁴ *R v Marshall* (No. 1), [1999] 3 SCR 456 and *R v Marshall* (No. 2), [1999] 3 SCR 533.

⁵ The Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources is based in Eskasoni, Nova Scotia. Information regarding management plans and other natural resource activities can be found at <http://www.uinr.ca>.

and advance this legacy through their capacity for knowledge translation using social media and the customary practice of gathering nations. The great vision of Nina Wilson, Sheelah McLean, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon, the founders of INM, blossomed against the barren landscape of failed federal policies, sanitized Canadian history, and blatant rejection of Indigenous treaty rights. Through teach-ins, Facebook, and Twitter, they formed an Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliance and generated a grassroots movement to protest the Conservative government's failure to consult Aboriginal peoples on the *Jobs and Growth Act*, legislation that directly impacts Indigenous rights and title. The INM movement became a national call to action to stop such colonial practices, and it now serves as a platform for collective cultural resurgence and environmental protection activism.

The strength of the matriarchal movement spread quickly to eastern Canada. Outraged by the unilateral imposition of legislation in C-38 and C-45 that contravenes treaty and inherent rights, many like-minded people joined in the national movement to help protect Mother Earth. Inspired by the events in Ottawa, two university-educated young mothers, Molly Peters and Shelly Young, became the eastern INM coordinators. They started a solidarity campaign among youth, teaching them traditional Honour songs, educating them about the history of residential schools and their treaty rights, and encouraging them to become caretakers of the earth.

Idle No More work in the Maritimes, as elsewhere, is focused on empowering youth through treaty education. Peters and Young encourage youth to be "defenders of land," as land and its resources are the primary connection to their ancestors and cultural teachings. They also work with non-Indigenous organizations, building the critical alliances necessary to alter systemic discrimination and find common ground in environmental protection and cultural exchange. Rallies, traffic slow-downs, rail obstructions, flash mob round dances, traditional fasts, national events, benefit concerts, videoconferences, myth-busting exercises, and extensive community outreach successfully create spaces for talk and action. These activities instil in youth a sense of responsibility for carrying on the work of their ancestors as defenders of Indigenous rights and stewards of future sustainable resource management.

Through a set of sophisticated negotiations, the Idle No More group of eastern Canada worked with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to close off the MacDonald Bridge, a major thoroughfare leading into the city of Halifax, in order to facilitate a march to Citadel Hill. Held on a bright but very cold winter day, the peaceful event was attended by thousands and was an impressive collaborative success. Elsewhere, anti-fracking protests led by community members in Elsipogtog, New Brunswick offered a prime example of "Sovereignty Summer" alliances in the battle of environment versus industry, in which Indigenous nations are central stakeholders.⁶

⁶ Tobique Malisset Nation Band members were never consulted and never agreed to the 1950 construction of a New Brunswick Power hydroelectric dam on their reserve. Members asked for exemption from paying electricity bills for all community members as compensation for the loss of salmon and medicinal plants as well as riverbank erosion caused by the dam. They did not receive this exemption. Anger over NB Power's decision to deny electricity to elders galvanized the community into action. Organized by Tobique women, other members of the community, including men and children, took part in a 2008 blockade that prevented NB Power from accessing the dam. See Clare Fawcett, Alison Mathie & Jane McMillan, "A Case Study of the Social Impacts of Economic Development in Tobique Malisset Nation" in *Aboriginal Measures for Economic Development* (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 2012).

As their ancestors did before them, the Idle No More team is turning to international forums for support. Delegates recently attended the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and met with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Further, as part of their immediate plan of action, INM will work to implement the articles of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Canada is a signatory.

The eastern Idle No More coordinators see themselves as "facilitators and teachers" who negotiate the space between Indigenous leadership and grassroots community members. Shelly Young and Jean Sock, leaders in the eastern movement, held an eleven-day hunger strike in March 2013 to halt treaty negotiations until communities were educated on what exactly is at stake when their leadership and the state make agreements.⁷ People were concerned that their treaty rights were diluted through non-transparent economic development agreements. The hunger strike initially exacerbated political divisions, but at great personal risk, Young, Sock, and their supporters eventually persuaded the Chiefs to agree to improved communication strategies. The Chiefs now conduct more thorough and effective community outreach and consultation as part of the treaty negotiation process.

Where to go from here, with regard to Indigenous communities and settler society? By adopting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and using this as a framework for litigation, we can ensure that the interpretation of Canadian law is in line with the right to self-determination. As educators, we can teach the history of colonization from Indigenous perspectives, and together, we can protect the right to participate in decision-making so that free, prior, and informed consent is no longer denied to Indigenous peoples. In this way, we can foster legal and educative environments that acknowledge economic and social rights and the right to lands, territories, and resources of Indigenous peoples as integral to a just society. Idle No More is a dynamic vehicle for exploring and participating in challenges to colonial laws, policies, and institutions.

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⁷ Miles Howe, "Hunger Strike Ends on Day 11, Made in Nova Scotia Process Halted," *Halifax Media Co-op*, March 12, 2013, <http://halifax.mediacoop.ca/story/hunger-strike-ends-day-11-made-nova-scotia-process/16720>.