

Mililani Trask: Indigenous Views on Climate Change

Interview by Sottolin Weng

Mililani B. Trask is a native Hawaiian attorney and expert in international human rights law. She is a founding member of the Indigenous Womens Network and has been a guest lecturer at the University of Hawaii and the International Training Center for Indigenous Peoples, in Greenland. She is one of the primary drafters of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which passed the UN General Assembly in 2007, and served as the Pacific Indigenous Representative to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. She served two four-year terms as Kia Aina (Prime Minister) of Ka Lahui Hawaii, the Sovereign Hawaiian Nation.

How do you see climate change impacting indigenous island peoples' subsistence and health?

Indigenous peoples' livelihoods and their cultural survival are being directly threatened. For example, the Pacific island states are experiencing significant increases in the frequency of cyclones and storm surges, which destroy housing, roads, hospitals, and telecommunications systems. They are causing countless deaths and people go missing and are never found. In the past two years, Samoa, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, [and the Philippines] have all declared national disasters. In Fiji, the total sugarcane crop was lost and major damage done to schools and hospitals. The vast majority of people in the Pacific basin live within 1.5 kilometers of the ocean.

We've also seen a corresponding increase in problems of drought. For instance, when we go back to the last significant El Niño event, the drought in Fiji wiped out two-thirds of their crops. Lower rainfall is also one of the problems that occur when you have a severe El Niño. In 1997 and 1998, 40 of the atolls in the Federated States of Micronesia had no drinking water, and the government had to introduce water rationing, requesting that the United States government bring in desalination equipment.

We must also look at the significant impact on the Pacific island fisheries. We know that tuna, a major fish for protein as well as trade in the Pacific, is a

pelagic fish that moves based on water temperature. If the temperature becomes warmer, the migration patterns and the migration timing change. Consequently, during the peak migration period, the Samoans are not able to catch tuna for months. This impacts the people's ability to survive from day to day in the Pacific Islands because, as the Pacific people say, "The ocean is our refrigerator." And because 70 percent of the world's tuna catch comes from the Pacific, representing 2.5 billion New Zealand and Australian dollars, it negatively affects the global economy, as well as our health.

Maintaining the fish population requires healthy coral. Coral bleaching was, at one time, limited to a very small area in the Pacific. It is now evident in the Hawaiian archipelago, in Tahiti, French Polynesia, in Palau, and in parts of Melanesia. The corals depend upon a certain algae for survival. When the temperature rises, the algae is prematurely released. And if the temperature remains at a high level, the corals will die. This threatens the lowest rung on the food chain, not just for pelagic fish, but for all of the other edibles that the indigenous peoples of the Pacific rely upon.

With the increase in temperature there has been a major increase in mosquito-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever. Hawaii has seen its only instances of dengue fever in the last few years. How

significant is it? It's life threatening. In the case of Papua New Guinea, in their Western Highland province, the number of malaria cases reported in the year 2000 was 638. Five years later, there was an 800 percent increase in the number of malaria cases.

We are also seeing some efforts to adapt. Right now in Fiji, there is a major plan underway to try to protect the water resources along the shorelines. The indigenous people are trying to build walls to relocate populations from the coastline areas to the highlands. This is occurring in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia.

Indigenous peoples of the Pacific are trying to do what they can to change their reliance on traditional food crops. In Fiji, there is an effort to look for and cultivate salt-resistant staple crops because of the tidal surges and their impact on soil quality. They are trying to plant mangroves and looking for grasses that can halt erosion and tolerate salt water. But the truth is, their efforts have not been as successful as they had hoped simply because they do not have the financing, or the availability of land. When we talk about moving populations so we can plant mangrove, we are actually taking away land that is badly needed for subsistence agriculture. Even as you move to mitigate the damage, you are losing the ability to be self-sustaining in other ways.

What do you see as the most positive possible outcome of the climate convention in Copenhagen?

Twenty-two percent of the governments in the world that have signed onto the UN Climate Change Convention are actually small island states, including 14 independent Pacific states. They are very strong in holding the line for more responsible emissions standards to be met. However, 22 percent is a minority. I'm concerned that when the votes are called on the final language, they may not have the numbers. However, the wheel is still in spin and many things can happen before the December Copenhagen meeting.

I have to confess that I have a great deal of concern about how positive an impact we can expect. We have already reviewed the report of the G-7 countries for 2009. It's very clear that they have no



interest in taking an aggressive approach to climate change. It's very clear that they do not want to set strong and enforceable caps for emissions.

We will have some very strong voices of indigenous leadership there, but I'm concerned that those voices may be drowned out by voices of other indigenous leaders who are being selected to participate, by such organizations as the United Nations Program for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN REDD).

We see evidence of it when we look at what occurred in Anchorage, Alaska,* where every effort was made to prevent the real Pacific voices from participating. Instead, the steering committee brought in employees of the United States. The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency in Honolulu sent their entire office as Pacific representatives, but did not provide funding for the real indigenous leaders of the Pacific who have tracked this issue for years to attend. This tells us that a real effort is being made to subvert the true voices of the Pacific.

You referred to the UN REDD. Could you explain briefly what that is and what it does?

The UN REDD was a directional initiative that came out of the Climate Change Convention. The initiative was supposed to provide an incentive to polluting states, mostly the industrialized states of the North, to cut down on their emissions. They were allowed to set targets and balance their continuing practices of pollution by purchasing and trading carbon credits. Another facet of the REDD initiative

Photo: Demonstration outside of the UNFCCC climate negotiations in Bali, Indonesia. Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) allows polluting nations to purchase carbon credits from countries in the Global South. It's opposed by many indigenous peoples.

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was that polluting states could reforest areas in the South in an attempt to boost the planet's ability to cope with the carbon emissions with replanted forests.

The REDD initiative has not really been positive because its definition of “forest” is not really about natural forest. Their definition of forest is, “a collection of trees.” This means that all over the world, especially in places like Indonesia, what you are seeing is not the replanting of endemic forest, which indigenous peoples need for cultural survival, but thousands of acres of biofuel cultivation and monocropping. The oil palm plantation phenomenon has resulted in massive human rights violations: indigenous peoples being evicted from their traditional lands so that millions of oil palms can be planted—plants that are foreign to the indigenous cultures, that will not feed them, nor heal them, but will result in their eviction from traditional lands.

One of the things that upsets me the most is the built-in bias: north versus south. Rich versus poor. The developed countries versus the underdeveloped countries. This kind of categorization simply doesn't work when you talk about climate change because the Earth is an integrated system. The native forests in the United States, which were primarily on American Indian land, have all been decimated by industrialization. The companies responsible for that overdevelopment in America should be able to rebuild, to work with indigenous native Americans to put back those endemic forests. But under the carbon trading plan, the American companies have to go through Guatemala or Africa to invest in reforestation in order to have the benefit.

What are the climate change implications of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was passed in 2007?

From the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People [UNDRIP], it is clear that indigenous peoples' human rights are somewhat different in that they have a right to the integrity of the environment, to live in a cultural way, to access their tradi-



tional food staples, to gather their traditional medicines, and to participate freely and in an informed way in the decision-making that is going to impact their lives. All of these rights are clearly defined. So, when we look at the negative impacts of climate change on indigenous peoples, we have to frame climate issues in terms of human rights violations.

The G-7 states, the larger industrialized states, even some in the Global South, like India and China, are saying that the requirement that they leave fossil fuels and develop renewable energy violates their right to economic development. Well, the truth is that states don't have a human right to economic development. Human rights are for humans, not for political institutions. With the passage of this Declaration we can now clearly define the human rights violations against indigenous peoples.

I am concerned when I see the outcome document of what was billed as the Anchorage Global Summit because it presents two options that are diametrically opposed. You cannot say that anyone has an absolute right of economic development because it is balanced against the rights of others. You may have a human right to pursue economic development, but you cannot pursue it to the extent that it tramples upon and violates the human rights of others. That can no longer be tolerated with the passage of the Declaration. I believe that we will see claims filed with the UN human rights treaty bodies. It's going to change the complexion of the debate. ■

* The deliberations of the Anchorage Summit concluded with a resolution proposing two options: 1. The phase-out of fossil fuel development and a moratorium on new fossil fuel developments on or near Indigenous lands and territories. 2. A process that works towards the eventual phase out of fossil fuels, without infringing on the right to development of Indigenous nations.

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



Photos: (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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