

"Indigenous peoples are the frontline of the environmental movement. It is imperative that we start recognizing this."

JOHN AHNI SCHERTOW, EDITOR OF INTERCONTINENTAL CRY MAGAZINE

A spotlight on indigenous resistance

BY STEPHEN QUIRKE
STAFF WRITER

On June 30, Carol Linnitt of the online news magazine DeSmog Canada reported that a controversial crude oil pipeline had just been defeated in

British Columbia, writing "Enbridge Northern Gateway: 'First Nations Save Us Again.'"

Linnitt's observations on First Nations apply with equal force south of the border:

"That these unique traditional cultures and ways of life have survived the onslaught of Western, industrial, imperial and racist governments and policies in this province is extraordinary.

"That these communities, these individuals, have preserved a cherished, land-based way of life that seems in part the antidote to the poisonous, destructive and extractive impulse of modernity — all while fighting precedent-setting court cases to maintain their right to that life — is extraordinary."

And the victories of these land-based communities do not end with the Northern Gateway pipeline.

A proposal for the largest coal export terminal in the U.S. was soundly defeated by the Lummi Nation in May. The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission stopped another proposed coal export terminal in Boardman, Ore., in 2014. In 2013, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla stopped massive tar sands "megaloader" trucks from crossing their territory en route to mine the Alberta tar sands — the most destructive industrial project on Earth. And since June, the Yakama Nation has led a local response to the fiery oil train derailment in Mosier, Ore.; in a June 9 news conference, Chairman JoDe Goudy called for a moratorium on all fossil fuel shipments in the Columbia River Gorge.

Combine all that with their decades-long fight to protect and restore salmon habitat, and it quickly becomes clear that the original peoples of the Northwest have always fought hard to protect it. This same dynamic holds true across the globe: indigenous nations everywhere are on the front lines of struggles to protect the environment, constantly facing down threats to their food and water, even when their lives are being threatened.

Many of these struggles go unseen by urban populations in the First World. But some are working tirelessly to change that.

John Ahni Schertow is a Two-Spirit of Haudenosaunee and European descent. Two

Spirit is the term used to describe mix-gender members of indigenous North American communities. Twelve years ago, Schertow founded Intercontinental Cry, or IC, as a website to share information on indigenous struggles across the globe.

Today, the independent, investigative news magazine boasts almost 30,000 regular online followers, a print magazine edition, and a sponsorship from the Center for World Indigenous Studies.

In 2012, IC published a piece by Kahnawake-based Mohawk writer Russell Diabo that helped launch the Idle No More movement. Its recent coverage has included logging blockades in

southern Oregon's Klamath territory and indigenous women fighting fracking in Argentina. Altogether, the network covers the frontline struggles of more than 630 indigenous nations worldwide.

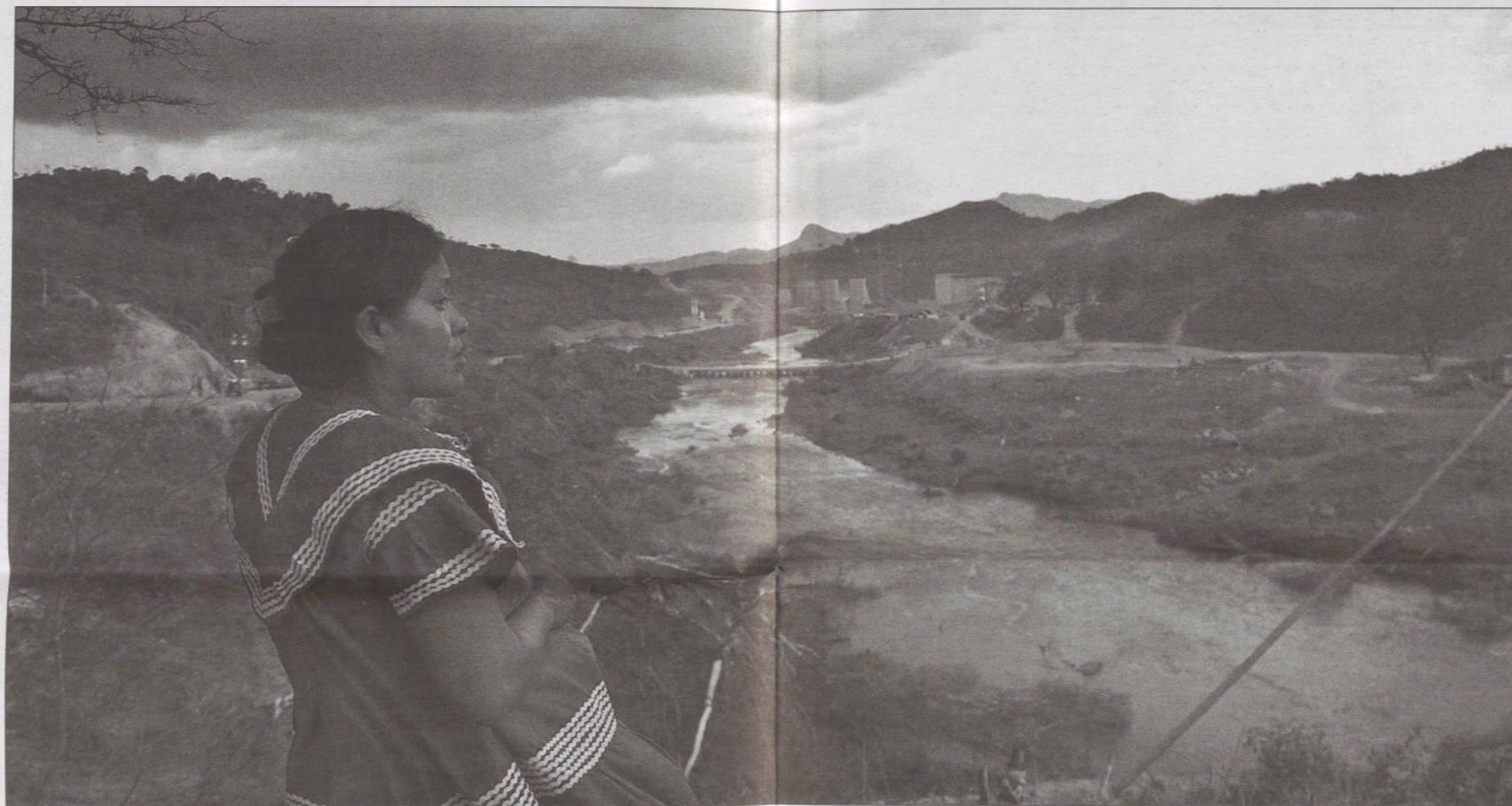
Street Roots contacted chief editor Schertow to learn about the future of IC, what stories need to be covered, and how news organizations can better serve indigenous nations — now numbering more than 5,000.

Stephen Quirke: *Your journalists often seem to cover conflict situations. Is this dangerous work?*

John Schertow: It's life and death. When a journalist enters a conflict zone, they instantly become a target, and so they have to be extremely careful on the ground and on the internet. It's even more risky for our contributors because we don't have the funds to support them. Earlier this year, one of our writers was raped while out in the field, and we couldn't do a thing to support her.

S.Q.: *You're currently collaborating with the Indigenous Environmental Network on a project called Keep It in the Ground. What's the goal of this project? How do you approach this kind of collaboration?*

J.S.: Keep It in the Ground is a pretty decentralized movement that's open to anyone who supports the idea that when the cost of extraction outweighs the supposed benefits, the resources need to be left alone. Our collaboration with IEN focuses on making sure that the needs, rights and voices of indigenous peoples who are taking a stand against extraction aren't being completely drowned out by narratives that non-indigenous groups are pushing forward. Neither of us have collaborated on a project like this before, so we're pretty much making it up as we go along, telling stories



A Ngabe woman overlooks the Barro Blanco Dam on the Tabasara River in Panama. The hydropower project will submerge the indigenous Ngabe-Bugle Peoples' land under a reservoir.

that need to be told, filling in holes that other media outlets don't notice, and making videos so we can ensure that the public gets the full picture.

S.Q.: *How would you evaluate global efforts to address climate change? Are we making headway?*

J.S.: It really depends on what you mean by "we." REDD, (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) the carbon market mechanism that the U.N. is pushing forward, is completely useless. In point of fact, it's a Ponzi scheme that states, corporations, investment banks and U.N.-recognized nonprofits are using to make some serious coin at the expense of indigenous rights and the environment. In Panama, for example, the Honduran company Genisa is being awarded a bunch of "carbon credits" for constructing a new hydro-dam on the Tabasara River, within the traditional territory of the Ngabe-Bugle Peoples. The Ngabe are literally being drowned out of their land; they're losing everything so that some other company can "spend" those carbon credits. And for what? It's well known that hydro-dams drive

climate change and cause excessive levels of methylmercury to collect in the flood area, which is a huge threat to the entire region. In other words, they're making climate change worse. There's a good documentary called "The Carbon Rush" that looks closer at this.

Global civil society is doing what it can to mitigate this abusive exploitation of climate change — and locally, there are a lot of fantastic projects led by eco-villages and by indigenous communities that aim to be carbon neutral and carbon negative. Some states like Germany are also making great strides to get away from the fossil fuel industry, the single greatest climate change driver, but it's one step forward, five steps back at this point, especially now that so many big NGOs are compromising themselves to collaborate with states and corporations.

S.Q.: *How do you see the role of indigenous nations in stabilizing the climate and winding down resource extraction?*

J.S.: Indigenous nations are primary stakeholders in every sense. Even though they contribute the least to climate change,

they are being hit the hardest by it. Many coastal communities are already being displaced because of rising ocean levels. More inland rivers and lakes are disappearing, fish populations are dying off, and weather patterns are gradually becoming more extreme. It's the same thing with resource extraction. Indigenous lands, cultures and economies are being obliterated. And what do they get out of it? A few short-term jobs, a new sportsplex, and 10,000 years of pollution.

But beyond these impacts lies the fact that indigenous peoples are a political powerhouse that states and corporations can't conquer, even at the point of a gun. Former Peruvian President Alan Garcia learned that the hard way in 2009 when he tried to push through legislation that would open up legally protected indigenous lands to industry. More than 2,000 indigenous communities organized a "minga," a permanent collective mobilization for a greater good. When all was said and done, the offending laws were tossed out and Garcia retired in disgrace. That's just one among thousands of other environmental wins that were only possible because

indigenous peoples were front and center. Indigenous peoples are the frontline of the environmental movement. It is imperative that we start recognizing this.

S.Q.: *Have states been willing to take leadership from indigenous nations? Are there any success stories here?*

J.S.: Not on the international level. Indigenous nations are being completely ignored, unless, like many NGOs, they're willing to go along with the interests of states and corporations. But on the state level, there are some positive moves. The U.S. government, for example, worked with the Lower Elwha Klallam Nation to remove hydro-dams on their ancestral territory, and there are a lot of new tribal parks popping up in Canada and Australia. It's a good start, but we really need more moves like this.

S.Q.: *This past June, you published a story from Elizabeth Walsh titled "To Combat Climate Change, Restore Land Ownership to Indigenous Peoples." Can you briefly summarize her argument for our readers?*

J.S.: Elizabeth's central point was that indigenous peoples are, by and large, better

environmental stewards than states and corporations, a point that's made evident by the fact that indigenous peoples are currently protecting 95 percent of the world's most threatened biodiversity. She also argued — and rightly so — that indigenous rights are more effective at protecting the environment than any environmental policies and laws that states push forward. On top of that, indigenous peoples are much stronger politically than non-governmental organizations. They can protect their rights far better than any NGO, even if that nation's land rights aren't officially recognized.

S.Q.: *Walsh also mentions the concept of bio-cultural rights, which IC covered last September. Do you think this framework can help civil society to appreciate and safeguard indigenous rights?*

J.S.: Without question. And that's why the concept of bio-cultural rights is finally starting to get some serious attention. Right now we tend to look at indigenous rights as lesser-human rights. They're individual objects in a controlled political landscape that, like human rights, states can push, pull, erase, ignore, and turn inside out to suit their agendas. However, bio-cultural rights are an ecosystem of rights that ties indigenous cultures, identities, languages and subsistence economies — indigenous rights — to the very lands that all indigenous nations depend on. In this framework, you can't remove or erase any one right because it would have a cascade effect that could even cause that ecosystem to collapse. This is why so many indigenous nations oppose resource extraction. As the old saying goes, without the land there is no people; when the people suffer, that land also suffers; and when the people thrive, the land thrives with them. Incidentally, this is also why so many mining companies are forced to call off their government-sanctioned resource raids. The ecosystem collapse we're talking about here is tantamount to genocide.

S.Q.: *You've recently called on media outlets to use "triage" in choosing stories so that our most vulnerable populations are not ignored while editors pursue entertainment stories. Why is this important? How does IC engage in this process?*

J.S.: Great question. When we get right down to it, a lot of us take journalism for granted. For many journalists, for example, it's just a job or a weekend hobby. And we don't really have any guidelines or any regard for priorities when it comes to the stories we choose to take on. We're driven by passions and paychecks. And for a variety of different reasons, that driving force never seems to include indigenous peoples like

the Ngabe, who are struggling for their lives. Editors don't usually care either. They would rather cover Trump or anything else that's trending so they can build their readership or generate more ad revenue.

It's embarrassing and shameful to me. Hobby or no, journalists are public servants who have a direct impact on the places, the events and the people they cover in their stories. For that reason, I believe we have an ethical responsibility to tell the stories that need to be told, regardless of our opinions and preferences. IC operates on this principle. Before we take something on, we consider how many times the story has been covered and what the quality of that coverage is. We investigate

whether or not there is a threat — and if there is, we explore the depth of that threat and how we might be able to support the best possible outcome. We break it all down, and if in the end we find a space to contribute something meaningful and authentic, we get to work.

S.Q.: *Are indigenous peoples harmed by a lack of fair media coverage?*

J.S.: To be blunt, yes. As the old saying goes, "Silence equals consent." By failing to cover the abuses that indigenous peoples face, the media is lending support to the perpetrators behind those abuses. They're also preventing indigenous peoples from developing a capacity to effectively organize around threats, and they're obstructing our right to know about those threats. If that's not bad enough, the media's negligence perpetuates prevailing stereotypes surrounding indigenous peoples, especially given the amount of racism that editors push out online and in print.

S.Q.: *What can be done to resolve this?*

J.S.: There's no easy solution to this unfortunately. I mean, we could physically occupy the media — including alternative media — until they agree to a set of terms that could include, for example, a "minimum coverage standard," but beyond that, we really just have to start demanding better of our favorite news outlets. We also need to start leading by example, which is exactly what we're trying to do through IC Magazine.

S.Q.: *According to Global Witness, 2015 was the deadliest year on record for environmental defenders. How does IC bring attention to this violence? What is driving it?*

J.S.: You might say that we're in the middle of a psychotic fire sale. Everything

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John Ahni Schertow

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