

Decolonizing Pipeline Resistance: An Interview with Freda Huson

by Lee Veeraraghavan
Occupy.com, 2/25/2014

As the battle over the Keystone XL pipeline intensifies in the United States, the Canadian province of British Columbia faces similar battles of its own. Enbridge's Northern Gateway pipeline, if approved, would transport diluted bitumen from the Alberta tar sands to the Pacific Coast.



Setting out for a day on the traplines along Gosnell Creek in Unis'tot'en land.



Toghestiy prays over a pine marten taken in one of the traps.

Fracked gas from the northeast of the province is also slated to be piped: Chevron-Apache's Pacific Trails Pipeline, which some consider a "trail-blazer" for Northern Gateway, was slated to begin construction in 2013. After being delayed for a year, the construction on PTP has now begun – and the next phase of resistance is

gearing up in response. One of the key battlegrounds will likely be the land of the Unis'tot'en, Bird Clan of the Wet'suwet'en Nation.



Freda harvests medicinal plants.
Everything that is taken is received prayerfully,
and in the spirit that it was given: with good intent.

Multiple proposed pipelines, including Northern Gateway and Pacific Trails Pipeline, are slated to pass through the land of the Unis'tot'en - land that was never ceded to the Canadian state. The Unis'tot'en, however, have vowed to stop all pipelines, and built a cabin and pithouse on the right-of-way. They have also reinstated a traditional protocol to pass into their land, to keep surveyors for pipeline companies out. Performed on a bridge over Wedzin Kwah, the pristine Morice River, the protocol consists of five questions: Who are you, and where are you from? Why are you here? How long do you plan to stay? Do you work for government or industry that are destroying these lands? How will your visit benefit the Unis'tot'en people?

The protocol indexes an important shift in thinking on environmental issues: a shift that recognizes control is in the hands of indigenous communities. Mainstream environmental activism is often framed as an ethical imperative based on a bottom line determined by scientific discourse. An unfortunate effect is that this can pit environmental groups against the (often indigenous) communities most affected by environmental devastation.

And yet around the world indigenous peoples are leading movements that view ecology as a result of the adoption of local practices long suppressed by colonialism. The indigenous perspective is often silenced, though: their words passed over in favor of environmental scientists and activists. I recently had the opportunity to visit the [Unis'tot'en Camp](#) and interview Freda Huson, spokesperson for the Unis'tot'en.



Lee Veeraraghavan: The cabin, the camp, the blockade: these have been framed in the media and elsewhere as pipeline opposition, but the larger project is about much more. Could you talk about that?

Freda Huson: Well, we decided to develop a community, and the purpose of the community is to decolonize our people. Because via residential school, and even public school, they've been trying to get our people to forget our culture, forget about who we are, and become part of Canadian society. And that hasn't done justice to my people. You look at all the reservations: people are lost, young people don't know where they fit in, and they're getting into substance abuse. They game all night and sleep all day and they're basically dead - spiritually dead. They walk around like zombies trying to fit in.

LV: And the community that you're starting here is the first in a series of projects to return to the land?

FH: We don't categorize it as healing, but that's our ultimate goal. My niece is going to get her doctorate next year - she's a psychologist - and her plan is to develop a healing lodge to help our people get back to where we were before. We were really a strong people, and even though our culture is fully intact and still strong (our governing system), a lot of our young people aren't buying into it. You don't see them in our Feast hall. It's people of my generation that are in there. I myself didn't start going until fourteen years ago.

LV: What made you make that change?

FH: It was my dad telling me, "If you don't participate in the Feast system, and something happens to one of your kids, nobody's going to be there for you." You look at families that are not participating, and if they have a death, or somebody gets ill, nobody's there to lend them a helping hand, because they're not part of the system. He said, "You need to start going. You want somebody to help you, you need to start participating and helping other people, and then when you're in need, they're going to help you."

LV: On your website you talk about the protocol: what it is, and the history behind it. Could you talk about why you're bringing it back now?

FH: We're doing it to protect what's left of the land. When you drive in, you see a lot of areas that have been clear-cut and damaged. And because we only had ten percent left, we decided we were going to resurrect the protocol, and ask people these valid questions about why they're here. There's so much destruction all around

us: mining, logging, and even people feeling they have free rein because that's what the government says: this is "Crown land" [land belonging to the Canadian public, held in the name of the Crown]. They hunt the game, and they just take...even though the government tries to regulate it, nobody really comes out and ensures that these hunters aren't taking a female moose. Nobody checks. Our people don't take cow moose, because they're the ones that reproduce. People start taking everything and anything, and then they wonder why our numbers are low.

But if we feel that people have successfully answered the questions, and if we're in agreement that they don't want the pipelines, and they just want to come back here and try fishing in one of the lakes, or just come to relax and camp out, then we let these people in. But if people are disrespectful and give us a lot of attitude, we tell them, "Turn around. We don't need people like you in here."

You are passing into our land, and we're ensuring that we'll find out who you are, where you come from, why you're here, and how your visit will benefit my people. Because if it's not going to benefit my people, why should we let you in? Right now, everywhere around us, all the industries that are in there - they throw us crumbs. And you always hear the government saying "We're giving handouts to these indigenous people!" Bullshit! It's not handouts! They basically steal all our resources, they kicked us off our land, confined us in prison on these reservations and forbade us from coming to live off our lands - just so they could take all the resources! They owe us way more than those scraps of "handouts" they're giving us. They keep us impoverished so that our people won't be able to stand up and fight them.

LV: What does the land mean to you?

FH: It's actually...life. I get revitalized - my health has been better than it ever has been because I'm out here - and everything out here is alive. The water's alive: it's got all the mineral content in it when you drink it. When you go into the municipalities, in our community of Moricetown, they chlorinate the water, and it goes through a filtering system so that the water's basically dead. So you're just wetting your lips. Our people's belief is that we are part of the land. The land is not separate from us. The land sustains us. And if we don't take care of her, she won't be able to sustain us, and we as a generation of people will die.

We've started to restore this area via permaculture gardens, in order to grow our herbal plants and medicines and our berries. Eventually. But right now we're just growing conventional potatoes, things like that, just to restore the soil. Once the soil's restored, we're going to transplant some of our berry bushes. But back in the day our people used to stay fit and active on the land, and they'd live to be a hundred, they were so healthy! So we know, this land is life.

LV: Finally, what should I have asked? Is there something really important that I missed?

FH: Our people lived like this for a long, long time, and we're just trying to get back to who we are, to gain our spirit back, and feel that connection. A long time ago, animals used to talk to our people, and we'd understand them. Now it's been so long that our people have been away from the land, but I think the longer we're here, that'll come back. We respect the animals. For example, this is grizzly country, but they don't come into our space, and when we see they've marked their territory we respect it. We say, "OK. A grizzly has claimed this, let's go somewhere else," and we leave. That's their home as this is ours, and we're respectful of it. You respect them, and they respect you back.

Read this with more photos at:

occupy.com/article/decolonizing-pipeline-resistance-interview-freda-huson