

Troubled Waters

The unwitting weapon against tribal peoples

'The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights.'

Comment from the UN International covenant on economic, social and cultural rights

All tribal peoples rely upon the water in their land to sustain them. It is crucial to their health, to their independence, to their very existence. And it is disappearing.

The traditional water sources of tribal peoples are being polluted, diverted, or sometimes simply removed, by industry and governments in pursuit of their own interests. Water, which once brought communities to life, has been hijacked by self-interested organisations whilst tribal peoples are left to sicken, and die, on the sidelines.

March 22 is World Water day, and brings us three years into the United Nations Decade for action on water. But for tribal peoples, as these stories show, water is becoming harder and harder to rely upon.

Around the world, the tale is depressingly predictable. Routinely, tribal peoples are not properly consulted about activities affecting their land and lives. Their rights to water are overshadowed by the demands of industry, and in return tribal peoples suffer disease, dependency, and death.

Enawene Nawe, Brazil

'People come down the rivers in boats throwing out the rubbish and taking the fish. But I don't take things that belong to the whites. We need our land and rivers for our life and traditions. This is very important to us.'

Kawari Enawene Nawe

The Rio Preto River is central to the lives of the remote Enawene Nawe tribe. Their elaborate and unique fishing ritual, Yankwa, involves men spending around two months at the river, catching and smoking fish to be sent back to the village. But the Rio Preto is under threat. Cattle ranchers have been illegally destroying the forest along the river's banks, allowing pesticides to leach into the water. Not only have the fish stocks been damaged, but so has the life of the Enawene Nawe community.

Fish, and the rivers they swim in, are central to the Indians' very understanding of the world. As the Enawene Nawe do not eat red meat, fish are also their primary source of protein. The Juruena River, which flows through the Enawene Nawe territory, is about to be hijacked. A consortium of soya businesses and the state government plans to build a series of hydroelectric dams along the river. They will have a direct and devastating impact upon the lives of the Indians. The dams will disrupt the breeding cycle of the fish, and threaten not only the very fabric of Enawene Nawe culture, but also the base of Enawene Nawe health. In fact, if the Juruena River is dammed, the effect will be felt amongst six distinct tribes in the area. None have been properly consulted about the project.

Dongria Kond of Niyamgiri Hills, India

'The rice we eat is making us sick, killing our animals. Even (the police) have warned us not to drink the water.'

Nakul Nayek, Bansadhara village

The Dongria Kond have farmed the Niyamgiri Hills for centuries, it is their only home. About thirty rivers have their springs in the Niyamgiri Hills, which supply hundreds of thousands of people, including the Dongria Kond, with drinking water and irrigation. This precious water, and the people it sustains, is under threat from a British company with aspirations to mine the hills for bauxite. The company, Vedanta, has already built an aluminium refinement plant at the base of the hills. Already, 25,000 people living around the refinery have been affected by water and air pollution. When the plant is fully operational, the problems will intensify. The refinery will extract and consume vast volumes of water from the nearby rivers. Heavy metals and chemicals will seep into the groundwater and devastate the water quality across huge areas, threatening the health, and the harvest, of the Dongria Kond.

The Indian government has not issued a mining licence for Vedanta to operate in the Niyamgiri hills, and so activity has slowed for now. But Vedanta's subsidiary company, Sterlite Industries, has been invited to apply. If it is granted a licence and work begins, the water quality in the Niyamgiri Hills will plummet. The Dongria Kond, who have no other supply, will be forced to bathe in pollution, and to drink contaminated water.

Bushmen of the Central Kalahari, Botswana

Everyone is thirsty. It's hard. You have to sit in the shade inside the hut where it is cooler, because if you get more thirsty you're stuck between death and life.

Bushman woman

In the arid environment of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR), where the Bushmen live, water is a scarce and precious resource. When diamonds were discovered in the CKGR, the Botswana government decided to remove the Bushmen from the region. Government officials 'encouraged' the Bushmen to move by emptying their water supplies into the sand, and dismantling the borehole which had been the Bushmen's main source of water. Relatives were forbidden from bringing water to family members who refused to leave the reserve. In 2005 Xoroxoo Duxee died of dehydration. Her relative had tried to bring her water, but was arrested before they could reach her.

In 2006, the Bushmen won the right to return to the CKGR. But the Botswana government will still not allow them to operate the borehole that would sustain them in one of the most arid parts of the country. Water is being used to hold the Bushmen to ransom so that they are faced with a stark choice: stay away from their homes and have enough to drink, or return to their ancestral land but risk death.

Just a drop in the ocean

Sadly, these stories are not unusual. Hundreds of tribes around the world face similar challenges on a daily basis. Here are just a few of their names.

Kamoro of Western Papua

The Ajkwa River is central to the lives of the Kamoro. When the joint American and British Grasberg mine was built, the Ajkwa quickly became massively polluted. The

levels of suspended solids in the river shot up. In part of the Lower Ajkwa River, levels were up to 100 times the legal limit. Tailings from the mine smothered riverside vegetation. Swathes of sago palms, the Kamoro's staple food, died. Once, the Kamoro used the Ajkwa River for drinking water, fishing, and washing without concern. Today, these activities bring with them great dangers.

Penan of Sarawak Province, Malaysia

The Penan are the only nomadic tribe in Sarawak, a region which boasts dozens of tribal peoples. Loggers have long plundered the province's rich forest, and timber is the local government's single largest source of export revenue. The rivers of Sarawak have become heavily silted and contaminated with chemicals, thanks to this unsustainable level of industry. The fish, a mainstay of the Penan diet, are dying. Levels of malnutrition amongst the Penan have soared, and once rare water-borne diseases are spreading.

Kayapó of the Xingu River, Brazil

Eighteen tribes, about 10,000 people, depend on the Xingu River's tributaries for fish and drinking water. The Kayapó are one of these tribes, and have been campaigning hard to halt plans for a series of large hydroelectric dams to be built along the river. If these dams go ahead, great swathes of indigenous territories will be flooded, and the Kayapó will lose valuable hunting and cultivation grounds. Sedimentation and a general decline in water quality will disrupt fish populations, an integral part of the Kayapó diet. The creation of stagnant bodies of water would likely lead to an increase in malaria.

Xingu park tribes, Brazil

The Kuluene River is an important source of food for many of the fishing peoples who live in the Xingu park. The park is home to 15 tribes, and the Ikpeng and the Mehinaku in particular are strongly opposed to proposals to dam the Kuluene River. Although they would be seriously affected by any project on the river, they have not been properly consulted about it.

Akimel O'odham Indians, Arizona

The Akimel O'odham developed a complex system of irrigated agriculture over 2,000 years, but in the late 1800s white settlers diverted the stream that had fed their irrigation system. As a result, many of the Akimel O'odham starved. Others were forced to depend on handouts of sugar, lard and flour, a diet that has devastated the long term inter-generational health of these Indians. Today, about half of all Akimel O'odham Indians over 35 are diabetic.

Various tribal communities, Mexico

Mexico City has grown and expanded to the point where its underground aquifers are drying up and its adjacent water basins are depleting. Mexico City is actually sinking, and pipelines, dams and canals are now being built, stretching deep into the countryside to take water from Indigenous lands. This is done, of course, without the permission of the tribal peoples who have relied on that water since time immemorial.

