

OPINION

Stand for Indigenous Land Justice: Stop STAMP

Why you can trust us

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5 MIN READ

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"STAMP has been referred to as "land development," but the more accurate term is "habitat destruction"—in one of the last unbroken landscapes in western New York." ILLUSTRATION BY MARCEL ADOLBE STOCK

New Yorkers owe an unpaid debt to the Indigenous nations whose lands we occupy, and today we have a chance to take a stand for justice. Maybe you know that the Haudenosaunee now live on tiny scraps of their original homelands, from which they were forcibly removed. Maybe you know the painful history of how dams, toxic waste dumps, and industrial pollution have diminished and degraded reservations in New York state. Maybe you think illegal land-taking is only a remnant of a shameful colonial past. Maybe you think environmental justice *means* something in an enlightened state like New York.

In the case of the Tonawanda Seneca and the WNY STAMP (Western New York Science & Technology Advanced Manufacturing Park), you'd be wrong.



WATCH: Robin Wall Kimmerer on why Indigenous communities oppose STAMP

I recently had the privilege of walking through the Big Woods with Tonawanda Seneca Nation citizens and fellow scientists, under a towering canopy of immense oaks, maples, and basswoods. On that lush summer day, thrushes, thrashers, and rare warblers sang above us as we traipsed through ferny glades, the earth soft with centuries of leaf fall and carpeted with wildflowers, more diverse than I've seen in many years of botanizing. So rich is this territory that Chief Kevin Jonathan calls it "one of the most important hunting and gathering areas for the entire Haudenosaunee Confederacy."

Signs of wildlife were everywhere, and the deer eyed us warily as if to ask, "What kind of human are you?" That's a good question. At night, the air rings with peepers-calling, toads trilling, and the soft, low hoot of endangered short-eared owls. Listen hard and you might hear the ceremonial songs from the longhouse, songs of gratitude for the land that has cared for the Seneca people since time immemorial.

"This land is our way of life," said Chief Roger Hill as we waded into a clear, bright stream. "It is everything to our people; it's all we have left." Today, these precious lands are threatened, and both state and federal agencies are complicit in the destruction. When we walked through this old-growth forest to the edge of the reservation, the trees ended abruptly, and we were greeted by the looming presence of enormous reactor domes for the manufacture of hydrogen fuel.

Bulldozers—subsidized by your tax dollars—are revving their engines and spewing stink into the flower-fragrant air to construct a proposed industrial park that could destroy it all. New York state has thousands of acres of industrial wastelands and abandoned developments that would be highly suitable for such a project. But instead the WNY STAMP project in Genesee County is being sited right on the border of the Tonawanda's pristine Big Woods. While there is just one fully confirmed tenant so far, others may include distribution warehouses and industrial manufacturers.

STAMP has been referred to as "land development," but the more accurate term is "habitat destruction"—in one of the last unbroken landscapes in western New York. Yet STAMP is proposed in the heart of one of New York state's most important conservation landscapes, surrounded by species-rich, federally and state-protected wildlife areas, including the Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge as well as the Big Woods. Biological surveys, in addition to Indigenous knowledge, have revealed that the Big Woods is home to threatened species as well as a threatened culture.

What kind of human thinks building a mega-industrial site here is a good idea? Many citizens of the Tonawanda Seneca Nation rely on the Big Woods for subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering of traditional medicines. It is a place where traditional lifeways are passed from generation to generation. The Seneca have been caring for this place in an unbroken line from before written history, in the face of uncountable threats from settler society. Today, families are fed from this beloved landscape, which keeps an ancient culture thriving. It is heart-wrenching to consider the irreparable cultural harm of building an industrial park on the Big Woods border.

Chief Jonathan stated that if this project goes forward "we'll have irreversible damage to our way of life." Habitat destruction and environmental degradation related to industrial development at STAMP proceed step-by-step with the issuance of required government permits. This spring, United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) officials courageously admitted they had failed to consult with the Tonawanda, as required by law, before granting a permit for a pipeline through the Refuge for STAMP's industrial wastewater. The agency ordered consultation with the Nation and an assessment of the environmental and cultural impacts of the STAMP pipeline project.

This seeming victory for land and people was, however, short-lived. Days later, in a stunning reversal, USFWS overturned their own ruling, and in mid-July, heavy equipment rolled through ancestral Seneca territory to the edge of the Refuge and gouged into the earth as drilling for the wastewater pipeline began.

Now, the Nation has learned that pipeline drilling caused a spill of hydraulic fracking fluid within the Refuge in mid-August, just days into construction. Incredibly, while this spill was reported to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), construction activities were allowed to continue. Another spill occurred in early September, at the same time that sinkholes began to appear along the pipeline route. The Nation was not notified of either spill until the local media reported on them.

"If this construction continues, it would be an immense injustice to Mother Earth," says Subchief Scott Logan, one of many Nation leaders and citizens who have spoken out in opposition to STAMP as a violation of their sovereign rights and their cultural covenant to care for the land. Construction activities have been temporarily halted within the Refuge and Orleans County, due not only to the spills and sinkholes but also to a temporary restraining order issued by a state court in a lawsuit filed by Orleans County, where the STAMP developer hopes to discharge the wastewater.

This temporary pause is not enough. The Tonawanda Seneca Nation has demanded that the USFWS withdraw the right-of-way permit and conduct consultation and a full environmental review. To date, the USFWS has refused to do so. State and federal programs trumpet their commitment to "environmental justice" but fail to protect these traditional Haudenosaunee people and the remnants of their precious homelands. Officials with the power to temper this assault on the Tonawanda's territory, culture, and environment instead fall in line to promote the steady march of industrialization and environmental destruction.

What kind of leaders are they, and what kind of citizens are we? Will we perpetuate the shameful practices of the colonialist past—or take a stand for justice at last? Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and NYSDEC Commissioner Basil Seggos: Will you use your courage to reshape this age-old narrative of unjust taking from Indigenous nations? If the state and federal governments truly stand behind their commitments to environmental justice, then we should stand with the Tonawanda—for the Big Woods, and for Indigenous land justice. **🙏**

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER is a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She is the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, which has earned Kimmerer wide acclaim. Her first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing, and her other work has appeared in *Orion*, *Whole Terrain*, and numerous scientific journals. As a writer and a scientist, her interests in restoration include not only restoration of ecological communities, but restoration of our relationships to land. She holds a BS in Botany from SUNY ESF, an MS and PhD in Botany from the University of Wisconsin and is the author of numerous scientific papers on plant ecology, bryophyte ecology, traditional knowledge and restoration ecology.

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