A First Nation elder's perspective on the environment

An interview with Lavina White

Don Alexander

Lavina White is an elder and former president of the Haida Nation. The following are a few excerpts from an interview conducted in 1992. Reference is made in the interview to South Moresby. South Moresby is a part of the Queen Charlotte Islands (known by the original inhabitants as "Haida Gwaii") on the west coast of British Columbia.

In 1985, conflict came to a head between the Haida people and the forest industry, which (with the backing of the provincial government) was logging land that was sacred to the Haida and subject to land claims. These lands were also seen as priceless examples of coastal temperate rainforest by environmental groups, who launched their own campaign. At one climax point, Haida elders at a blockade were arrested, hauled away, and charged with criminal contempt of court.

Eventually, the federal government stepped in and created a national park, with promises of allowing the Haida a co-management role. The Haida and the environmentalists remain divided over whether the outcome was just and properly acknowledged the needs of the aboriginal community and their rights to the land.

DA: When did you first get involved in the South Moresby issue?

LW: When the Haidas were ready to take action in South Moresby, we got together and had a large meeting downtown – those that live in Vancouver, and those that came down for the meeting. And the only one that they asked not to go to the front lines was myself. They told me I couldn't go to the front lines, because I've always been an activist. And, so, if that was their wish, I had to honour it, and so I went to Ottawa instead [to talk to the Indian affairs and environment ministers].

I had a hard time convincing a couple of people that are very prominent in the environment movement of what I was saying to the [federal environment] minister. I told him that they couldn't make a park out of the area because we have a land issue that isn't settled yet. And he said, "Well, yes," he's talked to the Haidas and they agreed that it should become a park. And I said, "How many people did you talk to?" And he said, "Oh, there were about five" [two members of the Haida executive and three others]. I said, "Well, that's a problem. The people have to be involved in that decision, and I'm sure they're not going to agree with it becoming a park, because what I hear them saying [including the elders who speak Haida] is that we must regain control of *all* of our lands."

DA: What stands out in your mind about the experience?

LW: About the South Moresby issue? The thing that sticks in my mind is that our people put their lives on the line when they went out there. They didn't know what was going to happen to them. And, yet, when they [the federal government] offered the $38 million that was going to be used for the island, who got it? Sandspit, which is a white community, and Queen Charlotte city, which is a white community. They're the ones that got the docks and the buildings and everything. And, by the time you add all that up, the money was gone.

So, they were putting us through a farce again, of making us come to the meetings and speaking of the money. And we had some very hostile people [from Sandspit and Queen Charlotte city] at the meetings. I went to the mike and I asked them, "Where were you when our people were standing in South Moresby? Now you want money." But they weren't there. And it's the same old system they use on us all the time, of dangling money in front of you, and hopefully people will go for it. And nothing came of it. Maybe one or two people will do all right by it. But I don't think anything's come of it. [She goes on to talk about the exclusion of hereditary, traditional leaders from the process.]

DA: Were the goals of the people you were working with pretty much unchanging throughout the process? That you wanted recognition of the land claim, you didn't want a park, and you wanted the logging to stop?

LW: Within the Haida Nation, there's a strong feeling of regaining control of *all of our lands* – not just part of it – all of our lands, and our lives and our resources. And, until that happens, there's no way we can even say we're a self-governing people. And that's what the federal government is having a hard time with right now. I think most native people feel the same way. They have to have control of their own areas or homelands before they can be self-sufficient.

But they've depleted our resources so badly ... and that's one of the reasons I got involved in the environment movement. [I wanted] to try and create some kind of understanding that you can't go on just devastating the lands and the rivers and the seas – you know, something's got to give – try to make them realize that Mother Earth is a living entity, that you can't just do what you want to her. And it's been a long, long struggle. And you try and speak in a way they could understand, but that doesn't always happen....

The systems are failing all over the world right now. They think it's only the communist system that's going to fail, but the colonial systems are failing too. And I think we have to get more people together and talk about changes that need to be made, instead of letting it crash.... And that's the kind of talk I gave in Eugene, Oregon at the Peace Conference. I said, "there'll be no global peace until there's global justice." And I really believe that – and global equity in resources. But the colonialism still goes on. When they deplete this area, they go to South America. It goes on and on and on [under] what they call "flags of convenience." But it's a system that's going to come to an end, very quickly, very suddenly. I've got to believe that to be able to go on, and I'm pushing for it [laughs].

DA: I know the disobedience was difficult for the elders because they didn't know what would happen. But, when people did the blockade and the civil disobedience, was that something that they hadn't done before in recent memory?

LW: No, our people have always been strong, and they have always stood on matters of principle. It's just that the world is more aware of what's going on right now. They knew that, even if they took civil action, they would be criminalized by Canada's laws.... And so they [the provincial government] criminalized us, when we took civil action to protect our lands and our resources.

DA: Were there certain things that you learned about the environmental movement that you'd like to share?

LW: About the environment movement? That some very prominent environment groups are neo-colonialist, which really surprised me. They're out to make parks. Their fight is to make parks, even during times when we're supposed to be working together to stop the devastation. There's a group that wants to control tracts of forest for themselves. It doesn't matter whose land claim it's in. They want to take over the special areas of indigenous peoples, and they want to control them.

DA: What are the greatest obstacles for the

"The indigenous people of each country should be involved in the decision making when it comes to economics or environment.... Those of us whose roots are deep here should be the ones that make those decisions."

– LavinaWhite
Tthow Legwelth
Haida Nation

Haida, and what kinds of resources would enable the Haida to fulfill their efforts?

LW: I think the greatest obstacles are the governments. They have a colonial mindset that you can't change, and the other is economic factors. We never have money because there's no economics at the reserve level. There's none whatsoever. Maybe the odd ones that go out to work nearby, like loggers. I said [recently], "It's time they quit logging on our island. It looks terrible from the air. As blind as I am, I can see stumps all over."

There were some musicians from back east from the other coast who came to our islands a little while ago, and they were on the same plane as I was. And they were really noisy and happy they were going there. And, as we came over the island, they got quiet – real quiet, by the time we landed. And we went across on the same limousine, and so we got talking. And they couldn't get over the devastation of our lands – stumps everywhere. And that's why they got quiet. They just felt so bad about it.

DA: So, really South Moresby is the only island that's not being logged?

LW: Everything else is being clear-cut. That was one of the reasons I was against making a South Moresby stand because I knew, one way or another, they would take it from us. I wasn't against the stand. I just couldn't see how it could lead to any resolution of our land issue. I said, "We'll deal with the *whole* land issue, not just pieces of it." Our land issue became a South Moresby issue for a very long time. And I was worried about that, even when they first started talking about it.

DA: It diverted attention away from the big picture.

LW: Yes, and it's never been the same since. All of the Indian nations are talking about healing processes, because of everything they've been put through. A lot of healing has to take place. But I don't believe it's going to take place until we're really in control of our lands. That's the only healing process I know of that will work. Outside of that, it's only a short-term vision. The healing processes that they're putting in place now are very short-term. The inability to use our resources the way we used to use them, is one that's been difficult, because it's outlawed for us.... [She recounts an example of being charged for gathering herring roe on kelp, a traditional Haida activity.]

DA: Do you have a vision that you'd like to see realized?

LW: I've had a vision of our place in our country that I can't ever let go of. And it's that the native people have their homelands, and have control over their own lives; absolute control, with all the responsibilities over our resources and lands. We have to have control. Otherwise, I don't see anything changing for us. And that's the goal I'm working towards and will always work towards. And I'll never give up, and my children after me will take it up. If they don't resolve it in my time, it will be resolved later on.

But the thing that I find really terrible is that they plan to give us empty lands with no more resources. They've depleted the fish stocks, depleted the rivers where the habitat is. Like the abalone, for instance. The only ones that had permits were white people from down south who came up into our lands and cleaned out the abalone in areas where they won't grow again.

I think the whole world needs a different head space right now, because of the environment crisis and the resource crisis. Look at how young our country is, and we're already having problems with resources and jobs. So, about four years ago, I said, "I see a time coming when the money has to be made from restoring the lands and the waters and the air." We have to be serious about that, and people that are involved in it have to get paid well for changing things. But I think the whole world – because of the crisis we find ourselves in – really needs a philosophy like ours, in regard to the environment.

DA: You mentioned earlier that native cultures have a lot to contribute in terms of educating and changing the thinking of people all over the globe.

LW: You know, I'm hoping that's what happens, because we've always been looked on as the people that have nothing to contribute. And, now that we have a crisis, they're beginning to look, and I hope that they just don't do the same thing as is usually done. They want everything that is us, but they don't want *us*. They take our knowledge, our information, our art forms, our artifacts, but they leave us out.

DA: They just pull things out of context.

LW: Yes.

DA: It's really kind of similar to the attitude towards nature.

LW: Yes, it is.... We've been living here for thousands and thousands of years, on our homeland, and we're still here. That should boggle one's mind. And then 100, 90 years of colonialism and our homeland is almost completely destroyed.

And so, hopefully, the world will begin to look. I think that native people should be, the indigenous people of each country should be involved in the decision making when it comes to economics or environment. I think those two areas are where the indigenous people should be, because we have a different outlook on our homelands than somebody that would come and it doesn't mean anything to them. Those of us whose roots are deep here should be the ones that make those decisions. I really believe that. That's the only way back. All of creation is sacred, not just certain spots. Until we begin to learn that, I don't think things can turn around. ❑

Don Alexander has just completed a PhD in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Waterloo and is involved in organizing a conference on sustainable urban communities in Vancouver.