

# The History of Environmental Injustice and Pollution in the Onondaga Watershed

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The Onondaga Lake of the Upstate New York Finger Lakes region was once named the most severely polluted lake in the United States (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). This pollution is a result of failure in regulation due to systemic injustice faced by Indigenous communities nationwide. I became aware of the Onondaga Lake pollution from an early age as some of my family is from Skaneateles Lake, an adjacent Finger Lake. As a child, I heard of the nasty sediment and odor emitted by Lake Onondaga but never experienced it myself. As the cleanest Finger Lake and one of the cleanest lakes in the nation, Skaneateles residents and my family always joked about the prestige Skaneateles residents felt they had from their clear waters. As I have aged, I see now that this “joke” stems from a thorough history of colonialism, dispossession, environmental racism, and marginalization towards Indigenous nations. This summer was my first time on a different Finger Lake, Cayuga Lake, and I finally understood how lucky Skaneateles residents are. Cayuga has nowhere near the magnitude of pollution that Onondaga Lake has but it also does not compare to Skaneateles. There is a stark contrast between the crystal-clear water of Skaneateles Lake and the algae blooms covering Onondaga Lake, hence the pompous attitude from Skaneateles residents. This pollution is a result of environmental injustice and lack of regulation at Onondaga Lake.

The environmental injustice faced by the

Onondaga Nation in Upstate New York reflects the intersection of colonial dispossession and environmental racism faced by many Indigenous communities in the United States. An analysis of the Onondaga Nation’s experience with industrial pollution, advocacy for self-determination, and ongoing marginalization argues for environmental justice to include unique Indigenous experiences for a more inclusive movement. I will show the Indigenous experience of environmental injustice by exploring the background of the Onondaga Nation and Lake, the influence colonial dispossession has had on the landscape, how industrialization has contributed to environmental racism, and how Indigenous connection to land affects their approach to environmental justice and activism.

Onondaga Lake is a sacred space for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy that has been stolen by the New York State government. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was built at Onondaga Lake when five Indigenous nations joined in an agreement of peace. The Great Law of Peace that created the confederacy is one of the earliest recorded forms of democracy and preceded the United States of America’s democracy (Rine, 2023). As a historical conjoining occurred on the shores of Onondaga Lake, it remained the political capital for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and became the site for policy deliberations, negotiations, and more (Rine, 2023). As a nation, the Onondaga relied

heavily on the lake and surrounding landscape for survival, education, and tradition. The Onondaga Nation's traditional diet was composed of mainly fish, accounting for 1/3 of their food intake (Perreault et al., 2012). Plants and herbs harvested from the shoreline of the lake were used in religious ceremonies and as medicines (Perreault et al., 2012). The lake itself provided a means of transportation via boat and was used recreationally, showing the intimate and symbiotic relationship the Onondaga Nation had with their land (Perreault et al., 2012). As the Onondaga Nation used the resources their land provided, they respected Mother Earth's boundaries. Now, the relationship once shared is hindered by state regulations and private property (Perreault et al., 2012). The Onondaga Nation centers around much of the oral history of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Onondaga Lake. This is not only due to the historical significance of the area but also because the Onondaga Nation was the last of the five nations to join the Great Law of Peace (Rine, 2023). Their steadfast fight to remain a sovereign entity has surpassed time and is reflected in their ongoing battle for the repossession of their Indigenous land and the environmental cleanup of Lake Onondaga.

The beginning of the Onondaga Nation's fight for repossession begins with colonialism and the exploitation of Indigenous communities. Colonial settlers first encountered the Haudenosaunee Confederacy when French Jesuits were on a mission for Christian conversion (Rine, 2023). In the eyes of many of these early missionaries, land not inhabited by Christians was not civilized which left it free to inhabit, even if non-Christians (Indigenous nations) were already living there (Rine, 2023). The Doctrine of Discovery became the legal argument for future dispossession of land as it promoted the expansion of Christianity through the Christian authority to seize lands that were uninhabited or did not belong to Christians (Rine, 2023). In addition to their initial

interactions, the Indigenous-Colonizer relationship spiraled into one of strife as the French discovered the valuable salt springs left unused (Rine, 2023). Now, not only was the mission for a claim to land based on conversion but also on monetary benefits the French desired. Unfortunately, we see this doctrine still used as late as the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to excuse the dispossession of Indigenous land. The American Revolution is where the true decline in Haudenosaunee Confederate power over the Finger Lake region began. Following the guidelines of the Great Law of Peace, the Haudenosaunee attempted neutrality but found themselves divided in support of the Americans or the English (Rine, 2023). This divide did not result in direct violence between different nations in the confederacy but created cracks in the once united front of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. This weakness was seen by General George Washington in 1779 when he took advantage of the opportunity and planned a brutal attack on the Haudenosaunee (Rine, 2023). Initially, the Americans took the approach of intensifying internal strife, but the Great Law of Peace was too well respected among the Haudenosaunee for them to betray their brother nations (Rine, 2023). After this initial attempt, Americans took a more direct approach with a violent invasion burning down Haudenosaunee homes, the longhouse where the Great Law of Peace was signed, and their crops, which left many dead or in captivity (Rine, 2023). George Washington's violent attack on the Haudenosaunee at the heart of their confederacy in Lake Onondaga shows the lack of regard early Americans had for Indigenous peoples and is reflected in the lack of policy involvement Indigenous nations face today.

These incidents and countless more led to the initial dispossession of Onondaga land for resource extraction (Rine, 2023). The Doctrine of Discovery was used by the United States government to ensure treaties with Indigenous nations in the

Americas were to be done only through the Federal government which was made official with the passing of the Intercourse Act (Rine, 2023). Philip Schuyler began land negotiations for New York State with the Onondaga nation in exchange for resources that were destroyed by American troops in their initial invasions (Rine, 2023). Schuyler ignored the US Federal government's Intercourse Act and went about establishing the state of New York's exclusive authority over Indigenous land and negotiations with the Onondaga Nation (Rine, 2023). By 1800, the Onondaga Nation had lost complete control over their sacred lake and land as Americans began industrializing the area that was rich in resources (Rine, 2023).

Onondaga Lake itself was an attractive find for the government mainly for its economic prospects, but also for racially motivated reasons. A recurring theme in the Environmental Justice movement is the frequent injustice occurring in low-income minority areas. This choice is often intentional which we see cited by Cole and Foster in their discussion of the Cerrell Report in the context of the EJ movement (Cole & Foster, 2001). The California Cerrell Report was created as a list of characteristics companies should look for in communities when deciding where to place garbage incinerators: rural, poor, low educational levels in residents, Catholic residents, <25,000 residents, and resource-extractive employment in residents (Cole & Foster, 2001). This report listed these characteristics to identify communities that would be least resistant to garbage incinerator placement and reflects a pattern seen throughout the EJ movement (Cole & Foster, 2001). Like El Pueblo, Chester, and many other sites of environmental injustice, the Onondaga Nation holds many of these characteristics. In the eyes of the US government and corporations (especially in early industrialization and colonization), Indigenous people were viewed as poor in terms of American currency, uneducated by American standards, and

were located in rural areas—all characteristics of least resistant communities according to the Cerrell Report. The possession of this land by Americans was likely motivated by economic prospects and belief in less resistance from Indigenous people. Considering the persistent activism seen in the Onondaga Nation, there is a strong argument against the believed passivity of Indigenous nations. The belief that minorities and low-income communities will be less prone to activism is one major reason Onondaga Lake and its watershed were chosen for initial industrialization and water pollution.

The extraction of resources in Onondaga Lake exploited the land's integrity. What once was a landscape buzzing with life and symbiosis between humans and nature was quickly becoming polluted to the point of ruin. A brief overview of the pollution timeline follows. The first salt manufacturing site on Lake Onondaga began operating in 1794 and was the lake's first exposure to pollution (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). Eventually, this led to the dumping of industrial waste created from the salt manufacturing process back into the lake's waters. After the salt springs were exploited, in 1825 the Erie Canal was built and disrupted the Onondaga Creek flow (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). Railroads were built in the area in 1840 followed by highways in 1910 (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). 1884 brought soda ash production facilities to the lake and became one of the largest polluters (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). As early as 1920 swimming was banned and fish were prohibited for consumption due to mercury contamination (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). In 1994 Onondaga Lake was officially added to the Superfund National Priority List as the most polluted lake in the country (Effler & Hennigan, 1996).

Salt deposit exploitation, waste dumping, and soda ash production are the biggest culprits explaining the extreme degradation of Onondaga Lake and its watershed. After the decline in salt

spring deposits, there was less of an economic drive in an area that had been severely polluted. Instead of cleaning up the pollution produced by salt deposit manufacturing, Syracuse chose Onondaga Lake and Creek as the discharge site for the city's wastewater (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). Wastewater introduced excess nutrients to the lake, leading to eutrophication that created large algae blooms (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). Algae blooms deplete oxygen levels in water and therefore harm and kill the marine life that was living in Onondaga Lake (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). The disregard shown to this Indigenous space is most evident during the 1950s when untreated sewage was unknowingly and directly discharged into Onondaga Lake for years (Effler & Hennigan, 1996).

Soda ash production became the next major contributor to polluting Onondaga Lake thanks to Solvay Process Co. (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). Solvay Process Co. chose Onondaga Lake as the site for their chemical plant because of the natural abundance of limestone, the salt deposits, the lake's proximity, and likely because of the prior degradation already occurring. Soda ash is also known as sodium bicarbonate and production of it yields large amounts of waste. Chlor-alkali was also produced at this Solvay plant and its production required Mercury and PCBs which were directly released into the lake waters for 40 years, leading to the destruction of the biodiversity the Haudenosaunee once fostered (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). "Solvay Waste" is the infamous title given to the solid waste leftover from waste discharge into the lake created by soda ash and chlor-alkali production (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). Solvay waste is disposed of by burying or piling up the solid waste which was done over an area of 2000 acres surrounding Onondaga Lake (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). In the waste disposal process, the Solvay waste was placed directly in or on top of the ground with no impermeable material between it and the

soil (Effler & Hennigan, 1996). These piles of waste appear as white cliffs that are on the edge of the lake and continue seeping toxins into the water to this day. Because of the lack of impermeable material, Solvay waste toxins also began seeping into the groundwater and soil, leaving the water supply too dangerous to drink (Effler & Hennigan, 1996).

The choice of Onondaga Lake as a site for this immense pollution was not motivated by economics alone, but also because the government believed the Onondaga Nation and other Indigenous nations would be complacent and found it an avenue of silencing. When you take Indigenous land from Indigenous nations, you physically disconnect them from their culture and weaken their power. In 1794, the US government gave an impression of sovereign identity to the Haudenosaunee with the Treaty of Canandaigua that affirmed their land rights (Barbaro, 2023). This treaty was quickly ignored and their land was taken through "negotiations" regardless (Barbaro, 2023). Not only had the Haudenosaunee lost most of their land and resources, they now were losing any say in policy decisions. It was only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous nations began filing lawsuits and land claims. The Onondaga Nation territory had been reduced to only 7,000 acres by the time they brought their Land Rights Action to courts (Onondaga Nation, 2014a). Preceding this, many other tribes in the Upstate Finger Lakes region of New York State began filing land claims starting with the Oneida Nation's claim to Indigenous land based on violations of the Trade and Intercourse Act in 1774 (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). In a Supreme Court ruling in 2005, the Oneida Nation was not permitted to reassert their sovereignty over the land illegally acquired by the government due to the "longstanding, distinctly non-Indian character of central New York and its inhabitants, the regulatory authority over the area constantly exercised by the State and its counties

and towns for 200 years, and the Oneidas' long delay in seeking judicial relief" (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). The court decided that land stolen from the Oneida Nation could not be returned to the Oneida Nation because current inhabitants have lived there for too long and it would be unfair to locals with roots settled there. The irony of this ruling is that even as late as the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our government still cannot recognize how hypocritical its statements can be. The Oneida Nation, and many other nations in similar legal proceedings, have lived in their Indigenous land for centuries, but that never was put into consideration when the government initially dispossessed their land and excluded them from access. Now, the same logic the Oneida initially used when opposing the dispossession of their land was used to support White locals and prevent Indigenous repossession of land. Once again, we see our government failing to support underprivileged minority groups for the benefit of whites. This ironic and insulting ruling set an unfortunate precedent for future nations attempting to repossess their land.

Another case of marginalization of Indigenous nations in legal proceedings in favor of white populations within the Upstate New York Finger Lakes region is within the Cayuga Nation. In 1980, the Cayuga Nation filed a land rights claim for 64,000 acres of land to the state of New York which was intervened by the Federal government in 1992 as the Federal government ruled the Cayuga claim was a valid one (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). There were many initial successes in the legal proceedings of the Cayuga Land Claim. In 2000, the Cayuga Land Claim entered federal courts, and the nation was awarded \$247 million for land dispossession (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). The success did not last long when 5 years later the Second Circuit US Appeals Court reversed the decision and left them back where they started. This reversal once again set a precedent for future court proceedings, specifically the Onondaga Land Rights Action.

The Onondaga Nation is known as the "Central Fire" of the Haudenosaunee territory for its historical significance as a landmark, but also the nation's persistent opposition to hegemony (Onondaga Nation, 2014a). Before delving into the land rights activism within the Onondaga Nation, I want to highlight a crucial form of silencing that has occurred nationally before any land repossession cases: forced assimilation. The United States has attempted to erase Indigenous culture and power since the English colonized North America. Whether through brutal attacks like the one ordered by General George Washington or by prohibiting Indigenous language education, there is no denying the prolific attempts to erase Indigenous influence. The Onondaga Nation cites Professor Lawrence M. Hauptman regarding The Citizenship Act of 1924 and forced assimilation. Hauptman believed that our government used "a four-pronged formula of forced assimilation" that included religious conversion, boarding schools, possession of Indigenous land, and declaring Indigenous people US citizens (Onondaga Nation, 2018). The Citizenship Act of 1924 was essentially an attempted forced assimilation of Indigenous nations in the United States, and the Haudenosaunee were openly resistant to this (Onondaga Nation, 2018). Citizenship was not the only forced assimilation many Indigenous nations have faced, but also educational assimilation through boarding schools or public education not respecting Indigenous tradition.

Just like the attempted physical erasure of the Haudenosaunee through dispossession of land and displacement, the lack of the Onondaga Nation's language and cultural practices in education was an attempt to erase Indigenous identity. In 1890, a schoolhouse for young children was built for the Nation where the Onondaga language was prohibited, even in casual conversation, and all education was taught in English (Onondaga Nation, 2014b). Further, teenage men and women

were forced into boarding schools in New York and Pennsylvania, many of which had terrible reputations of abuse, endangerment, death, and more heinous activity (Onondaga Nation, 2014b). Without consulting the Haudenosaunee, these policies were put into place in an attempt to dilute Onondaga culture and activism in younger generations. It was only in 1972, almost 100 years later, that the Onondaga school began teaching language and their Indigenous culture to younger generations when its first Onondaga principal began her term (Onondaga Nation, 2014b). In “Land as Pedagogy”, Simpson discusses the United States’ traditional education system and its neglect of essential Indigenous education for children of Indigenous nations (Simpson, 2014). In many traditional Indigenous educations, there is “no standard curriculum because it is impossible to generate a curriculum for ‘that which is giving to us lovingly from the spirits’” (Simpson, 2014). The Nishnaabeg Nation emphasizes individual roles in society and finds it senseless for everyone to perfect the same material as is done in American schooling (Simpson, 2014). Similarly, in the Onondaga Nation, cultivating the land and educating younger generations on their Onondaga nationhood are roles held by women while men and children hold different roles (Onondaga Nation, 2014b). The native land of Indigenous nations is essential to proper and traditional Indigenous schooling. However, the dispossession of land and pollution of Onondaga Lake has left the Onondaga Nation with a lack of traditional education spaces. This is its own form of environmental injustice. The lack of care given to Onondaga Lake and the surrounding land has resulted in severe degradation which denies Indigenous nations the opportunity for educational freedom in their native land. Both the Nishnaabeg and Onondaga Nations have emphasized the importance of cultural and linguistic Indigenous education for children as a form of defiance against

the desired Indigenous erasure made blatantly obvious by the US government.

This overview of educational assimilation is essential to a well-rounded understanding of the marginalization the Onondaga Nation faces to this day and how environmental justice applies. The Onondaga Nation is the biggest advocate for the environmental cleanup of Onondaga Lake which is made evident on their website page “Onondaga Nation’s vision for a clean Onondaga Lake” (Onondaga Nation, 2014c). Their statement proclaims respect for Mother Earth and her creations while denouncing the disrespect pollution gives her by killing or degrading all life in the area (Onondaga Nation, 2014c). They specify that for the lake to heal, the land must first heal to prevent groundwater pollution and contaminated soil. They move on to the waters which are “the source of life” and hope “the waters of the Lake will be restored” (Onondaga Nation, 2014c). They desire to address the root problem of exploitation of resources which has degraded their life force. They thank the fish, the plants, the food, the animals, the trees, the birds, the four winds, and many others which continues to shed light on the immense connection the Onondaga Nation has with their land (Onondaga Nation, 2014c). This statement leads into their political activism as a nation and the example of steadfastness they set for other Indigenous nations to follow. In March of 2005, the Onondaga Nation files the Land Rights Action seeking repossession of 4,000 square miles of Indigenous land and environmental cleanup of the pollution resulting from industrialization (Onondaga Nation, 2014a). In the fall of 2005, New York State filed a motion to dismiss the action based on the unfortunate precedents set in both the Cayuga and Oneida land rights cases (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). In response, the Onondaga Nation filed 4 Affidavits displaying a historic trail of opposition to the dispossession of their land beginning as early as George Washington’s

presidential term (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). 5 years later, in 2010, oral arguments were heard, but a judge ruled the Onondaga Land Rights Action to be dismissed again based on the same precedents set (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). Over the next two years, there is a constant cycle of dismissals from the US government and appeals by the Onondaga Nation. After a continuous lack of success, the Onondaga Nation took their Land Rights Action to the UN World Court in 2014 but there has been minimal progression (Onondaga Nation, 2014a). Though their attempts in the last 20 years to repossess their land have been generally unsuccessful, it does not mean the nation has failed. This decade-long fight for justice, not only for their land but for the environmental degradation and pollution remaining, establishes Onondaga Nation as a leader in Indigenous land rights activism. Their unwavering belief in their claim to the land mirrors the same steadfast fight they made to maintain autonomy before joining the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

The “Land Back Movement” is moving things toward Indigenous justice (Barbaro, 2023). In 2022, the Federal government signed an agreement to return 1,000 acres of the Onondaga Nation’s Indigenous land to them (Barbaro, 2023). The Land Back Movement is one I believe should be heavily incorporated into the EJ movement based on its underlying principles and focus on Indigenous nations. The main priority of the Land Back Movement is to repossess Indigenous land, but also to seek “climate justice, cultural preservation, and liberation from white supremacy” (Barbaro, 2023). Incorporating this movement into the EJ movement would provide diverse perspectives and may be crucial in combating climate change. The UN’s Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services found that “negative environmental impacts were either not as severe or avoided entirely, in places that were owned or managed by indigenous communities” (Barbaro, 2023). The tradition of

care they maintain for their native land might push the EJ movement further toward the direction of climate change reduction. The EJ movement heavily focuses on injustices regarding humans, but I think including Indigenous narratives would expand the movement to focus on injustices within the natural world. As Simpson states in “Land as Pedagogy,” the connection Indigenous nations have with nature promotes a respectful interaction to reduce the impacts of climate change.

It is hard to fathom how three nations in Upstate New York have faced extreme political marginalization, but even harder to imagine how many Indigenous nations across the United States still struggle for repossession. The Standing Rock Sioux is a famous example of an Indigenous fight for sovereignty, environmental justice, and repossession through their resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline (Dhillon, 2017). Dhillon makes an argument in “What Standing Rock Teaches Us About Environmental Justice” that “the imposition of colonial law allowed the US to increasingly undermine Indigenous authority and assert jurisdiction over Indigenous people and their lands – political moves in direct violation of treaty relationships that actively produce settler state sovereignty over the land” (Dhillon, 2017). This quote stood out as one that encompasses the Indigenous experience of environmental injustice. A history of colonialism, dispossession, and disrespect are involved in policy decisions made today. Whether that is the construction of a pipeline through significant cultural sites to the Standing Rock Sioux or the exploitation of salt deposits in Onondaga Lake, economic gain is continuously prioritized at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy. Colonial dispossession and environmental injustice intersect in the Indigenous experience, and that intersection must be considered in modern EJ activism.

The Onondaga Nation were never included

in decisions regarding their environment. If they had been included, Onondaga Lake would likely look vastly different than it does today. Ignoring Indigenous perspectives degrades environments of which they have expert knowledge and could help preserve the biodiversity within. Because of the intimate relationship between Indigenous people and the natural environment, they have insight beyond that of the traditional environmental justice movement. Historic colonial dispossession, contemporary dismissal of land rights cases, and resource exploitation led not only to the degradation of a beautiful lake but also permanently displaced the Onondaga Nation from the land that connects them. Indigenous Nations across the US should look to the Onondaga Nation as an example of persistence to incite change. There is more to environmental justice than representation in environmental policy, pollution distribution, and activism against disproportionate environmental hazards. To gain a more holistic view of the environmental justice movement and to expand its influence, we should consider systemic racism and Indigenous experiences. Their unique perspectives provide knowledge and respect for the land that many US citizens do not have. It would be a disservice to both Indigenous nations, the EJ movement, and the future climate of Mother Earth to ignore their perspective.

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