Canada Watch

Reflecting on a panel on Indigenous rights, environmental injustice, and the role of activism

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The intersection of Indigenous rights, environmental activism, and the complex political landscape of Canada has been brought into stark relief by the controversy surrounding the Coastal GasLink pipeline project. The pipeline, set to traverse the traditional lands of the Wet'suwet'en people in British Columbia, has sparked significant resistance from Indigenous communities, environmental activists, and settler-colonial critics alike. As an academic deeply embedded in the study of environmental justice, political ecology, and the sociopolitical dynamics that shape the environmental crisis, I find this case to be a poignant reflection of the broader challenges facing contemporary Indigenous activism and the ongoing struggles for land and resource sovereignty, and as a continuation and deepening of colonial dynamics pitting evermore destructive extractivist logics against Native survival and its rootedness in the land. As a non-Indigenous person, I feel a strong responsibility to share information about environmental injustices in a way that directly addresses how settlers, including myself, have benefited—and continue to benefit—from the challenges and hardships faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada.

LEADING A SUMMER SCHOOL SESSION DURING THE SUMMIT

Recently, I had the opportunity to present a panel on the Wet'suwet'en resistance to the Coastal GasLink pipeline to a group of Canadian Studies students during the 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit. This was a particularly rewarding experience, as it allowed me to engage with students who, while perhaps unfamiliar with the depths of these issues, were keenly interested in understanding the intersections of environmental justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and settler-colonial power. What became evident during the panel discussion was the growing concern among Canadian Studies scholars—from several European countries as well as from Nigeria—about the systemic injustices faced by Indigenous communities, as well as a desire to critically examine the Canadian government's approach to these matters.

The experience was a testament to the importance of teaching and discussing these issues within academic contexts, particularly in light of Canada's ongoing reckoning with its colonial past. The students, many of whom had not fully engaged with these topics before, demonstrated a clear understanding that the struggles of the Wet'suwet'en were not isolated, but part of a larger historical and contemporary context of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism. As they voiced their concerns about the marginalization of Indigenous voices in the decision-making processes surrounding resource extraction, I was struck by the way they completely identified the issues of environmental justice and Indigenous rights in their own countries.

CONTEXTUALIZING INDIGENOUS POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

One student remarked about the plight of the Sámi people in her region while others equated environmental destruction with the complete "historical erasure" of Indigenous peoples in their land as an ongoing process. Many students were acutely aware that the environmental degradation associated with resource extraction projects like Coastal GasLink is disproportionately borne by Indigenous communities, who are often excluded from decision-making processes. This reflects a broader critique of environmental governance in Canada, where the interests of industry and the state frequently take precedence over the rights and well-being of Indigenous peoples and their right to self-determination.

At the heart of the Wet'suwet'en resistance to the Coastal GasLink pipeline is a broader struggle for environmental justice. For the Wet'suwet'en people, the land is not just a resource to be exploited; it is a living, breathing entity that sustains their cultural, spiritual, and physical well-being. Their opposition to the pipeline reflects a deeply held belief that the environment is a part of their identity, and its destruction by industrial projects like Coastal GasLink is not only an environmental issue but also a cultural and existential one.

What struck me during the panel discussion with the students was the recognition that environmental justice cannot be achieved without addressing the fundamental issues of Indigenous sovereignty as an integral piece of Canadian Studies scholarship.

The realization that Indigenous environmental justice is not just about the land itself but about the ongoing assertion of control over Indigenous peoples' governance, knowledge systems, and cultural practices was brought into stark relief. This issue, I believe, highlighted a broader theme regarding the support for Indigenous political struggles extending beyond Canada's borders.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

This kind of student engagement and sharing of international experiences reinforces my own thinking about the role of academia in facilitating critical discussions about the intersection of settler-colonial power, environmental degradation, and the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. It also underscores the necessity of providing students with the tools to question dominant narratives around development, progress, and the commodification of natural resources. Through these discussions, we begin to see how Indigenous resistance is not only about protecting land but also about challenging the deeply embedded structures of colonial power that continue to shape and define contemporary Canadian society.

Reflecting on the positive panel experience, I am reminded of the importance of academic spaces in fostering critical dialogue on these issues. Canadian Studies students are uniquely positioned to interrogate the complexities of Indigenous–settler relations. They are keenly interested in learning about Indigenous issues. The Wet'suwet'en resistance to the Coastal GasLink pipeline is not just about one project; it is a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada and globally. It is a struggle against the environmental and cultural devastation wrought by colonial systems of power, and it is a struggle for a future in which Indigenous peoples can govern their lands, protect their cultures, and contribute to a just and sustainable world for all. In the words of a Wet'suwet'en woman activist: "We are the land and the land is us."

However, there remains much work to be done in terms of integrating meaningful Indigenous perspectives into the mainstream academic curriculum even for Canadian students and ensuring that these voices are not marginalized in discussions about environmental governance and social justice. The enthusiastic engagement from students studying Canada from abroad was heartening, yet it also underscored the challenge of translating the complexities of Indigenous political struggles into a rather short case study discussion. ■