

Idle No More: What is it and (Why) Should it Matter to Environmental Educators?

Gregory Lowan-Trudeau, PhD

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Many Canadians now recognize the term “Idle No More” as representative of a grassroots Indigenous movement that has gained widespread attention across the country and internationally over the past six months. Environmental educators may be even more aware of Idle No More than the average Canadian due to its connections to ecological justice, or are they? Some environmental educators may have already organized or participated in Idle No More events. However, others might still be wondering what it is all about and, perhaps, how they might become involved?

What is Idle No More?

Idle No More was founded by a collective of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in Saskatoon in late October of 2012 (CBC, 2013a; Gordon, 2013a). On their official website (idlenomore.ca), the founders suggest that, after generations of colonization, oppression, and legislation of Indigenous peoples in Canada, the final catalyst for Idle No More was the passing of the federal government’s second omnibus bill, C-45, a follow-up to Bill C-38 that was released earlier in 2012. Bills C-38 and 45 should also be of particular interest to environmental educators as they contain significant amendments to the Fisheries, Navigable Waters, Environmental Assessment, and Indian Acts among others, drastically reducing the number of protected fish species and waterways in Canada, “streamlining” environmental assessment procedures, and introducing the potential for private ownership of reserve lands, a dangerous move that could allow industry to further occupy and degrade traditional territories.

Bills C-38 and 45 not only threaten ecosystems across Canada, they also contradict the collaborative spirit of the original treaty agreements (Gordon, 2013b) and bring into question the government’s constitutionally mandated “duty to consult” (Natcher, 2001) with and accommodate Indigenous communities on any proposed legislation or resource development that might impact Indigenous communities and/ or their traditional territories. After decades of inadequate consultation, broken agreements, and industrial pollution of traditional territories, many Indigenous communities in Canada are understandably frustrated and especially wary of further legislation and resource development.

In response to the concerns mentioned above, among others, Idle No More was founded with the vision to:

- Build sovereignty & resurgence of [Indigenous] nationhood
- Pressure government and industry to protect the environment

- Continue to build allies in order to reframe the nation to nation relationship (Gordon, 2013c)

If you have been following the Canadian media over the past six months, you will know that Idle No More has taken shape in an eclectic, but united bricolage ranging from round-dance flashmobs in prairie shopping malls to hunger strikes by Indigenous leaders and Teach-Ins at college and university campuses. An especially poignant and powerful manifestation was the Journey of the Nishiyuu led by seven Cree youth who trekked over 1500 km from their home community Whapmagoostui on the eastern shores of Hudson Bay to Ottawa, gaining support along the way as their group swelled to close to 400 by its conclusion (CBC, 2013b).

As a grassroots movement, Idle No More is inherently spontaneous and locally driven. This is a good thing as each collective comes together in response to local concerns, united by a collective national spirit. It should also appeal to the bioregional (McGinnis, 1999) sensibilities of environmental educators; a group, in my experience, supportive of local responses to regional, national, and global issues.

How (and Why) Might You Become Involved?

Canadian environmental educators might consider becoming involved with Idle No More for several reasons. Indigenous educators may feel compelled to act in their own communities for cultural, political, and/ or ecological reasons. Non-Indigenous allies may also want to participate as supporters of the oft tenuous, but vital connection between social and ecological justice (Haluzá-Delay, 2013; Tripp and Muzzin, 2005). Perhaps most importantly of all, in the current political climate, challenging the questionable legislation contained in Bills C-38 and 45 is arguably one of the only legal avenues available to Canadians concerned about the federal government's recent actions.

Some educators may choose to participate as private citizens in rallies or other public events. Others might wish to incorporate the spirit of Idle No More into their teaching by raising awareness of colonization, historical and present-day treaties, and contemporary socio-ecological conflicts such as the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline and the Alberta oil sands. While many educators, especially those in formal classroom settings, are understandably hesitant to engage with politically charged subject matter, it is still important for us to present critical issues of social and ecological justice for our students' consideration (Haluzá-Delay, 2013; Tripp and Muzzin, 2005).

Here at UNBC we organized and hosted a week long Teach-In in March composed of a wide range of educational, cultural, spiritual, and artistic events. Activities included sharing circles, lectures, open classes, as well as dance, music and visual art performances. It was wonderful to witness and experience the openhearted discussions and exchanges that occurred that week between students, faculty, and community members from all cultural backgrounds. I hope that other educators and

institutions across Canada will continue this work by supporting and fostering similar initiatives in the spirit of Idle No More.

Bio: Greg Lowan-Trudeau, a Métis scholar and educator originally from Southern Alberta, is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of First Nations Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia. www.kichigami.com

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