Accepting the Paul Beeson Peace Award

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Thank you, again, for the honor of receiving the Paul Beeson Peace Award. I would like to also thank each of you for your efforts to promote a more healthy and livable society and world. This may be an especially important time to reflect on the state of the world, and what citizens can do to improve the prospects for the future.

I think most of us here know that we live in a unique time on this planet. We are able to travel great distances now with ease — something unimaginable to our grandparents. We can communicate in ways, which were considered science fiction until recently. Medical science is offering new treatments for disease almost daily. And science continues to reveal the most basic workings of nature and the universe.

And yet, with all these achievements, never before has the planet faced such a multitude of threats to the diversity and continuity of life. These threats result from conscious and deliberate decisions by humans.

Is there something inherent in modern technological culture, which fosters and creates these dangers? Or is it possible that society can resolve that health and security is an inalienable right of future generations?

On June 9, *1855,* the Yakama Nation signed a Treaty with the United States. In this agreement and contract between nations, the Yakama granted the United States rights to immense tracts of its ancestral land, about one quarter of present day Washington State. In exchange, the United States agreed to forever recognize the sovereignty of the Yakama on its Reservation, and to uphold the rights of Tribal members to fish in all usual and accustomed places, and to hunt and gather foods and medicines on public lands.

What do such rights mean, though, when such natural resources have dwindled in number or even collapsed towards extinction, or have become an unhealthy part of the diet?

The Yakama Nation has responded to these recent challenges in the only way possible, through its cultural insights and understandings. Yakama culture continues to respect the land and its creatures, through time-honored laws, which protect life and the cycles of nature and provide for human well-being. These practices have sustained the Yakama since time immemorial, based on the understanding that all life is intertwined and interdependent. Science has now confirmed this ancient knowledge, but perhaps from a different perspective.

Science is also beginning to confirm another understanding - that human health, genes, and the environment are all interdependent. Indigenous genes are adapted to thrive on natural foods and medicines, which are themselves adapted to this particular region. These foods and medicines are in turn inseparable from the culture and way of life of Native people. But changes brought by modern practices have disrupted the timeless harmony of environmental and human health.

A recent scientific study illustrates this situation, and hopefully will lead to corrective actions.

In August, the Environmental Protection Agency released a report, which was both informative and alarming for the indigenous people of this region. It should be of concern to all those interested in the well being of this region.

In brief, the Columbia River Fish Contaminant Survey stated that Native Americans are exposed to elevated cancer risks and that Tribal children are exposed to a multitude of health effects, simply from eating Columbia River fish. As most of you know, fish is at the heart of the culture and lifestyle of Native Americans in this region. These fish, including resident fish and salmon, have been found to be contaminated by a number of toxic chemicals.

EPA generally tries to protect people from cancer risks greater than one in a million, and at the highest, one in ten thousand. In their survey, EPA estimated risks to Tribal people can be as high as one in fifty. The hazard index to Tribal children was found to be as high as 290 - the level of concern is an index of 1. Most of these toxic chemicals were banned decades ago, but are still present in the water and sediments of the Columbia.

Tribal people face the greatest hazards by virtue of a culture and lifestyle, which is dependent on fish. But until this contamination is removed, all people eating fish from the River face health threats. Most important, these threats could have been prevented with a more careful and knowledgeable approach.

This brings us to another threat looming on the horizon. In its top-secret wartime effort, the Federal government chose a site along the Columbia River to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. This site, known as Hanford, is now the greatest storehouse of toxic waste in the Western Hemisphere. The toxic chemicals recently discovered in fish generally have an environmental half-life in the range of ten to twenty years. Hanford radioactive waste can have a toxic half-life of tens of thousands of years. And unlike the chemicals found in Columbia River fish, which are decreasing with time, Hanford’s waste has only begun to move into the environment.

It has been some eight years since former Governor Mike Lowry, Senator Dan Evans, and Secretary of Energy Hazel O’Leary convened the Hanford Summit to address the region’s cleanup strategy for this 580 square mile nuclear complex.

It is still worth asking today, “what has been done to this land?” And after eight years, and many billions of dollars spent, “what has been done to restore this land?”

The Federal agency responsible for the cleanup program, the U.S. Department of Energy, has built a solid track record of funneling taxpayer funds to its nuclear contractors. Its record in removing Hanford waste and restoring the ecosystem is less decisive.

At times, DOE seems to have adopted the manner of its sister agency, the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It was more than a hundred years ago that General Custer told the BIA, “Don’t do anything till I get back.” (His words are still heeded today.)

Eight years ago, Secretary O’Leary spoke of changing the culture in the nuclear complex. But, as we know, old habits can die hard. A good example of the atomic culture being alive and well involves the fate of some of the most dangerous material on Earth.

Hanford’s huge nuclear waste tanks contain about 270,000 tons of highly radioactive salt, sludges and liquids. These tanks are a prime reason that Hanford is the largest environmental cleanup project in world history. Twenty years ago, Congress instructed DOE to permanently isolate this extremely hazardous waste in a repository deep below the Earth’s surface. The Yakama Nation contributed to this legislation, the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982. So what progress has been made since then?

DOE is forging ahead with a $4 billion dollar chemical processing plant to treat this material for disposal. Though the technologies for treatment have yet to be selected, and though they remain untested, and though the facility design is less than half complete, construction is now underway at a furious pace.

Now for the difficulties.

DOE’s plan depends on reclassifying much of this waste. If this toxic material can be renamed “incidental waste”, then DOE can permanently dispose of it in place, on Yakama ceded land, near the new Hanford Reach Monument, not far from the Columbia River. Though on-site disposal would allow huge budget savings for cleanup, it is obviously a problem for the citizens of the Northwest.

This plan also appears to be illegal, and the Yakama Nation has joined a lawsuit to keep DOE from re-labeling toxic waste in order to evade its responsibility. At stake is the possible creation of the Nation’s first permanent sacrifice zone, and the Nation’s first radioactive National Monument.

To be fair, this plan for leaving waste in place is not directed just at Hanford. Rather, as a cost saving measure called “Accelerated Cleanup” the Bush Administration plans to leave immense quantities of nuclear waste in place across the entire country. Leaving toxic waste in place sounds more like ‘no cleanup’ than ‘Accelerated Cleanup’ but it is part of a national strategy called ‘long term stewardship.’ The main component of long-term stewardship involves passing the responsibility for these hazards onto future generations. This would be accomplished by what are called ‘institutional controls’ which consist mainly of deed restrictions and signs to warn people to stay away, for thousands of years.

Controlling events thousands of years into the future, however, has its perils. As has been noted, the only problem with institutional controls is that there is no institution, and there are no controls.

A National Academy of Sciences Committee studied this problem and concluded that all waste left in the near surface would eventually migrate and contaminate the environment. DOE responded to this scientific finding by disbanding the Committee.

The questionable logic offered to solve these serious problems seems to only further support the theory that intelligent life does indeed exist outside our solar system - as indicated by the fact that they have yet to contact us.

For the Yakama Nation, restoration of the natural environment is one of many challenges facing our government and our people. The Yakama have been here since the beginning of time, and will be here until the end of time. Hanford, as the ancestral wintering ground of the Yakama, is an area of great cultural significance and a place abundant in natural resources at the confluence of the region’s three great rivers. Damage to this land from nuclear operations has happened in the most fleeting amount of time, sometimes by ignorance, often by willful neglect. However, only deliberate and continued neglect will allow harmful effects to remain.

The Yakama Nation would like to realize restoration of the Hanford environment; so Tribal people can once again exercise Treaty rights permanently guaranteed 147 years ago. This is a reasonable goal, one, which helps fulfill the commitment between our Nations, and one, which benefits all people of our region. Hundreds of future generations, and especially children, might benefit without ever knowing of the efforts undertaken on their behalf. This makes such an endeavor all the more significant.

To succeed in reversing threats to the natural world and promoting its return to health could be humanity’s most meaningful achievement. The Yakama Nation wishes to work with all those whose goal is restoration of this land and its resources, for the health and integrity of the environment, and for generations yet unborn.

Thank you.