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Goldman Sachs to Native Alaskans: Drop Dead

The bank claims to value 'stakeholder engagement' but dropped Arctic drilling without consulting us.

By Harry Brower Jr.
Jan. 24, 2020 6:33 pm ET

Pipelines in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, Feb. 16, 2017.
PHOTO: DANIEL ACKER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Utqiagvik, Alaska

As the mayor of Alaska's North Slope Borough, I represent about 10,000 people in an area larger than most states. **Beneath our lands are some of the largest oil and gas reserves in the world, including Prudhoe Bay and the coastal plain of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge.**

Since the 19th century, when our Inupiat ancestors made initial contact with the West, we have worked to maintain a balance between the modern world and our rich cultural inheritance. Largely because of the oil and gas under our lands, which are developed using the highest environmental standards, we have come far. My biggest fear is that we will be set back in our quest—this time by those who claim to care about us but are using my lands and my people as symbols for a larger political goal.

Last month, Goldman Sachs announced it will no longer fund oil and gas development in the Arctic region. The announcement came as a shock to me and my constituents, particularly because the New York-based investment bank claims "stakeholder engagement" and "consultation" with indigenous peoples are core business principles. No one will be more affected by Goldman Sachs's decision than the people of Alaska's North Slope, yet we learned about it in the media.

By ignoring the concerns of Alaska Natives and basking in positive publicity, Goldman Sachs demonstrated the condescending, subtly racist attitude that too often has been the hallmark of the way Westerners deal with indigenous people. Had anyone at Goldman Sachs bothered to ask us what we thought about funding energy plays on the North Slope, here's what we would have said:

From the time of Western contact until we were able to claim the rights to our lands, the people of the North Slope and other indigenous Alaskan communities suffered and lived under horrific conditions. In 1953, researchers from the University of Pittsburgh traveled throughout rural Alaska conducting a health survey. The visitors were shocked by what they found.

"The indigenous peoples of Native Alaska are the victims of sickness, crippling conditions and premature death to a degree exceeded in very few parts of the world," the team wrote. "Among them, health problems are nearly out of hand." They documented "the large numbers of the tuberculosis [sufferers], the crippled, the blind, the deaf, the malnourished and the desperately ill."

These were my direct forbears—including my mother—and the ancestors of many who still live on the North Slope. In the face of such desperate poverty, our ancestors—some still alive—organized to get access to our lands and resources. Elders, including my father, helped organize Alaska Natives throughout the state. They formed associations. They started a newspaper.

They traveled to Washington in large numbers, some even sleeping in tents outside, to lobby Congress for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, the largest lands claim act in history. The act transferred ownership of what had been federal land to the indigenous people who lived there and paved the way for North Slope oil production as well as logging, mining and fishing rights in other areas of the state.

I'm proud that Prudhoe Bay has produced 18 billion barrels of oil since 1977, contributing billions of dollars to state coffers and funding development in Native Alaskan communities. Today I see fellow residents becoming doctors, lawyers, teachers and engineers. Some, like me, have become whaling captains.

We have a long way to go to enjoy the amenities that most people in the "lower 48" take for granted. But thanks to oil production, our children are no longer forced to live hundreds of miles away from their families simply to attend high school. We are able to eat our native foods, practice our native ceremonies and speak in our native tongues. Many of us now live near a cutting-edge medical clinic. We can heat our homes, turn on our lights with a flick of the switch, and in some cases we even have indoor plumbing. We are no longer one whaling hunt from starvation.

We are able to have all this because we treasure and protect our land and wildlife—the resources that executives and environmental groups in cities thousands of miles away claim to care about. The way we see it, caring about the land and wildlife should also mean caring about the indigenous people who inhabit the land—and that means knowing us, which Goldman Sachs hasn't bothered to do. We aren't hungry for oil, we are hungry for progress and understanding from those on the East Coast and beyond. We don't need your protection or judgment. We need your respect. We need to be treated like fellow Americans.

Goldman Sachs says its decision to forgo participation in Arctic drilling projects was born of a desire to fight climate change. But given its business interests in oil-producing states around the world, including involvement in last year's initial public offering of Saudi Arabia's oil company, Aramco, that can't be true.

Goldman executives are simply looking to curry political favor with powerful green interests. The cost of Goldman Sachs's hypocrisy will be paid by my people, who may soon be on a path back to the deprivation and hardship our ancestors worked so hard to leave behind.

Mr. Brower, a whaling captain, was elected mayor of Alaska's North Slope Borough in 2016.

Appeared in the January 25, 2020, print edition as '.'