

“Break Free From Fossil Fuels Pacific Northwest”!  
Susan Noyes Platt  
Leschi News Leschi Community Council June 2017

People of all ages from excited toddlers to sprightly ninety year olds gathered during the weekend of May 13- 15 to protest at the Tesoro and Shell oil refinery sites in Anacortes. Refining oil from the tar sands puts out toxic emissions that we had to breath and smell during our protest right beside the plants. The plants are on non-ceded Swinomish land that was taken from the tribe by Ulysses Grant in 1873 by Executive Order. They have been the site of deaths of workers and health violations for many years.

All of the coverage so far has focused on the small group of people that were arrested after a three day action to stop the oil trains into the refinery. This was exciting and important, but I want to focus here on the Indigenous Day of Action at March Point on May 14. We had over 1000 people on the march, accompanied by haunting indigenous music, singing and dancing. In addition, hundreds of kayactivists held up powerful messages on the water, both at night, and during the day.

The indigenous leaders spoke to the heart of the crisis in a way that reflected their deep connection to the natural world. They are not on the earth protesting, but of the earth, they are in a continuum with the earth in a cycle of life. This profoundly important relationship has been forgotten by colonizers who, from their first step on the continent, saw only exploitable resources. The Tesoro and Shell refineries stand as a monument to that greed.

Jules James of the Lummi Treaty Sovereignty and Treaty Protection group led the march, by way of honoring the Lummi’s recent success in defeating a coal terminal. At the ceremony after the march, Swinomish elder Diana Vendiola spoke of living on the other side of the peninsula, crabbing, digging for clams, with the belief that “water is life” and sacred. Today the fish are toxic, the water is polluted. “How we treat the earth will be our legacy. If earth can’t support life, there is no life”

Many tribal groups participated, the Lummi arrived by canoe, an elder from the Tulalip blessed the water, youth from the Makah spoke of respecting the teachings of our ancestors, We had other honored elders who asked us to “repay and heal mother earth.”

When the Lummi canoe arrived, dozens of people helped to carry it into the center of the ceremony: it set the theme of pulling together the concerns of the community before individual concerns. Makah youth leader Patsy Bane said succinctly “forget oil, it is killing us.” Lummi leader Jules James spoke of building coalitions as the key to winning “the battle to save the earth. They tell us we can’t, but we don’t live in fear, we love the earth.” He has visited the Cheyenne, the Sioux, and other tribal groups who are voting no to energy plants that poison their people. Ruben George, an honored elder from Canada, spoke of the huge Boreal forest fire in the tar sands of Canada, “we must put a stop to this era of destruction.”

Our actions joined hundreds of protests around the world during the month of May that are targetting refineries and other polluting industrial sites.

The impassioned and urgent declarations of the indigenous speakers, as well as the deep commitment of the many activists I met during the planning and throughout the weekend, deeply inspired me to continue to actively work to “Break Free from Fossil Fuels” with the goal of one hundred percent renewables in twenty years or less.

“It was an honor to speak at In Our Hands rally to help end the era of fossil fuel catastrophe, my point was that we must step back into the circle of life and learn to honor the gifts our Mother Earth has to offer us, the linear action of the colonial world has a finite end and if our Mother Earth reaches the tipping point, the point of no return for stable climate the human race will reach that end and there will be a great reciprocity or giving back to our Mother Earth but not of our liking.... It will be the bones of our grandchildren and their children being given back to our Mother Earth due to our lack of respect for the gifts our Mother” Paul Waggoner