

Geoengineering and Decolonization (ETC Podcast)

December 2, 2020



What kind of system of knowledge considers it a good idea to try to manipulate the whole climate of an entire planet? For Episode #7 and our second of two episodes on geoengineering, ETC Group's Dru Jay spoke to Tom Goldtooth, who is the Executive Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network – and as of recently, an ETC Group board member – about the meaning of colonization, what is called decolonization and on Indigenous perspectives on geoengineering. Listen below, and scroll down for a transcript.

Transcript:

Dru Jay: We're here with Tom Goldtooth from the Indigenous Environmental Network. Welcome, Tom.

Tom Goldtooth: Hello, welcome. Glad to be here.

Dru: Could you start by just saying a few words about the views of Indigenous communities you work with and the views that they have about geoengineering?

Tom: Well, first of all, I'm with the Indigenous Environmental Network and we've been around since 1990. Our network was formed by what we call our traditional peoples, our traditional communities, our traditional families. What does that mean? It means those First Nations' tribal members, it means those American Indian and Alaska Native tribal members who are still doing everything they can to hold onto their language, to hold onto their ceremonial way of life to respect the teachings and the original instructions as was passed on to their tribes and to all of our tribes.

I want to say this because we are, as Indigenous people – that's another terminology that we're more comfortable using within our network because we are Indigenous to these lands and territories of both Canada and United States. It's a little deeper than aboriginal terminology. Okay. We are indigenous. We are the original peoples of this Northern hemisphere called North America.

It recognizes a part of this discussion – it's one of the symptoms of colonization. That symptom is internalized oppression, that we have learned the ways of the oppressor, so that we, in a weird way, we start to oppress our own. Part of that internalized oppression is a kind of a love-hate relationship with the colonizers, with the settlers. At the same time, it triggers our people to frustrations and anger. When it comes to these issues of progress, "of Western forms of development" the way that colonizers came and put a different way of looking at trees, and water, and natural resources in a property right perspective. In many areas of the history of settlers coming into our territories, it was the surveyors who came first.

Surveyors came in with these little instruments and started putting markers in our back 40. They were already plotting out our lands and territories, leading up to a property rights and ownership-of-land regime. That's why I need to talk about this because that's the view from the shore as Indigenous peoples within our network. I think there's a high percentage of our people that are proud of what we've done to renegotiate agreements and contracts of the extraction of these minerals, and negotiated more money per barrel of oil or more money for the tonnage of coal that comes out, so the tribe gets substantial money, millions of dollars a year from all this.

That creates a dependency, and we are participating in a native Indigenous red capitalism system that has been part of our assimilation and acculturation. I'm saying this because as Indigenous peoples throughout North America, the impact of colonization has resulted into high levels of acculturation and assimilation. That's why language preservation and language restoration is very critical, both in Canada and United States.

We have elders that have said, "You don't need to know the language because we're living the white man way now. We have to go out and you have to go out and get a job. Move to Winnipeg, move to Montreal, go get a job because there's no jobs here." Even some of our- my mom and that generation, my dad they said it's our right. We have a right to live in a good way. We shouldn't have to wake up in the morning here in Northern Minnesota and our small little cabin and have to break ice and get the woodstove going, 12 people in a little building, a little cabin. That wasn't too long ago. That was in the '50s and the 60's up here.

Why I'm saying this is that one has to look at the impact of also another symptom of what we call internalized oppression. We become our worst enemy when it comes to trying to make the right decision for ourselves, and to recognize that very important and critical arena that describes who we are as Indigenous peoples, our values, our philosophy, our cosmology, our spiritual belief, our language. All that's been challenged with us.

When we look at current technologies that are proposed, there's a realm of them, but since this discussion is related specifically to the use of technologies that supposedly are trying to capture greenhouse gases, they are trying to capture the carbon that's being admitted in these fossil fuel combustion facilities and these businesses. A lot of them are part of the fossil fuel economy, the part of the fossil fuel dirty energy system on how they're trying to pass upon our Indigenous leadership in North America to convince us that, "Hey, there's value to carbon capture use and storage, bioenergy discussions around this as well."

They say that they have technology, and they try to blend it and match it up to our traditional teachings of respect and recognition of that sacredness of Mother Earth and Father Sky, the atmosphere, the air we breathe. For our Indigenous environmental network, our constituency, majority are these families who have organized groups, entities, their parties, our families coming together to talk about this. Some of this organizing that they have done the past 30 years, 40 years, in the case of IEN, we were born in 1991.

IEN has been working on climate change since 1998. We were mandated by youth. We were elders and women's societies that we need to get informed on climate change issues. We are also global, so we work with Indigenous peoples in the global South, Africa, as well as South America, Central America, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and the Sámi, where we also use this same approach of identifying those Indigenous communities, families that still are doing everything they can to hang on to their original traditional Indigenous teachings and original instructions.

Carbon trading is the privatization of air. Before you can trade anything, you've got to determine whose property right it is. Carbon trading, cap and trade, carbon offsets, carbon tax. These are all part of a colonial capitalistic system that privatizes our Father Sky, our air. That's why there's this question about technologies, like capturing carbon. First of all, in our network, we are opposed to it, we reject it, we fight it. We have communities from Alaska, through Canada and United States and globally that are part of our network where we share that position.

Does that speak for other other Indigenous entities around us? No. We find that a lot of our native Indigenous people need information about this. They need the truth, they need proper education. Some of that we need to put it into our own languages. As IEN, we have studied these different forms of carbon capture technologies, and we're very concerned, because they're not proven, there's a lot of assumptions in how those technologies are effective or not, and they're still experiments. Yet, as we and our frontline communities are battling the fossil fuel industry, we're trying to stop pipelines, we're trying to stop the tar sands development in Canada, we're trying to stop more fracking now, hydraulic fracturing.

We're trying to stop the system, but now, we're facing a problem, because it's this very industry says, "Hey, we want to go green, that we're recognizing climate change now." They're saying they want to reduce their emissions and they want to greenwash. What they're using as a distraction from really doing real reduction of emissions at source, they're using these false technologies, techno fixes, and they're saying, "We're putting big money into research and developing carbon capture and storage." They're doing that in the tar sands. That's why we are rejecting it, because it's being used as a delay tactic, as a distraction from the industry to doing what it needs to do is keep fossil fuels in the ground. That's decolonization is keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

The other thing about technologies, we're very- our communities we work with are traditional, so we're very

critical on technologies. What are the protocols and Indigenous ethics when we talk about the sacredness of Mother Earth, and even even the perception of how technology draws out that liquid, that gas, that breath within Mother Earth. That's violating the sacredness of Mother Earth already. I hear there are areas to where they want to put the waste back into the earth, they want to put capture carbon and liquefy it or even whatever technologies and like a straw, put it back into the earth, and then gain an offset from that.

Mother Earth is still alive and she shifts. There's fractures and fissures in Mother Earth and well, the government or the fossil fuel companies get a benefit now in offset by capturing it and whatever process of what they do from there with it by capturing it, storing it, in this case in Mother Earth. Who's to say the next month or four years or 12, 20 years later that there's something happening and then that gas is released? What are the assurances? What is the mechanisms for monitoring? What are the mechanisms for assessing all this?

Is it going to be the fossil fuel or the government who's invested in fossil fuel going to monitor itself? Then what is the capacity of our own communities to also be involved in assessing?

These are big questions. Ethically, we are against these technologies. It violates the sacred teachings, our cosmology, that violates it. That's how we look at it right now, even the other technologies with the atmosphere, with the sun rays, with the solar, the different layers that are around our Mother Earth. There's teachings and all that, that are in the indigenous science of our traditional indigenous peoples, our spiritual leaders that still understand that sacred knowledge of all these natural laws from an indigenous perspective, when we talk about the atmosphere, the layers around the earth, the stratosphere and how there is danger on how we as humans feel that we can develop technologies and controlling the rays of the sun.

Of course, these were all affected by the combustion of greenhouse gases. We know that, but we feel that indigenous knowledge has not been incorporated for mitigating climate change.

Dru: You've touched on a lot of different things here, but I just wonder if you could get into a little more detail on what Indigenous communities have been doing to resist carbon dioxide removal specifically, and if there are communities in your network that either are experiencing or could experience the sort of direct impact of those technologies.

Tom: Like I said, in our analysis and as part of developing our organizing strategies, is that number one, is that we have to shut down the Industry and we have to be advocates on developing policies and adjust transition away from them. That's the number one contributor to the situation we're in with this climate crisis. The root cause, of course, to this fossil fuel economy is capitalism. We got to address the issues of capitalism as well. How do we do that in the belly of the beast of United States and its younger brother, Canada? It's challenging.

Now there's a lot of emphasis on where is Indigenous knowledge on removing carbon, removing greenhouse gases, methane, other gases? That's an interesting question. I normally have said in these kind of situations in the past is, "Don't put that on our shoulders." People always gravitate to why Indigenous knowledge is going to save us, but at the same time, there's this big black snake. It clouds the mind, it slithers across toward our island, the pipeline, the tar sands, the pulling out of oil, even looking at natural gas fracking now.

How do we practice a certain Indigenous knowledge to try to address that issue? I know that there's been a lot of recognition now on the importance of conservation and restoring forests, trees, wetland restoration. There's a lot of emphasis now to support agriculture.

They talk a lot about soils. I understand and our communities understand the importance by practicing our traditional farming, agricultural ways, power that allows the retention of the carbon in the soil, how planting trees is part of a solution. We've always supported that the importance of maintaining a sacred ecosystem in our forest lands. There's a lot of terminology of trees and the different families and species of trees.

It wasn't until we experienced clear cut, clear cut and you look at Fort Frances, north of me and on the Canadian side of the border, it's been devastated, pulp and paper mills for paper. Now there's encouragement to restore forests, to restore wetlands, to restore- and also to include farmers now. That's fine, but in our network, we say that that's fine, but keep it outside of a market system.

Now, part of the matrix, I'm talking about a matrix of World Bank financial institution, investors, national, provincial, state banks, industry, polluting industry, now they're starting to use the soil carbon as part of a carbon trading mechanism. Woven into our fight as ETC - I'm a board member now of ETC - against geoengineering, is

that it also cross cuts into the financialization of natural phenomena. Now it's becoming the same. It's bundled together. The technologies of carbon capture used in storage in California is being used as part of the tax system. We're cautious on how we utilize our Indigenous traditional knowledge for addressing the carbon that's out there in our soils, in the trees.

We don't want to have it taken over by corporations and banks. We lose our rights to it, because at the end of the day of this push towards biodiversity and conservation offsets – the offsets regime – understand that Manitoba and Saskatchewan have already been inventoried on this conservation about diversity as units and priced to it. I wouldn't be surprised that in addition to carbon capture technologies and the tar sands, that it's all also being part of an offset regime as well, that allows the polluter to be off the hook from cutting emissions at source.

We do advocate coming back to our ways of producing our own food, where we're doing that here in the prairie lands, we're doing that in the Southwest. We're advocating as part of Indigenous Just Transition is to come back to a food sovereignty, to come back to food as an inherent right for us to feed ourselves. That means to grow our own food. I could envision vast areas of land where we're using our traditional seeds and we're practicing those ways to where we don't have to till the soil. We're sequestering the carbon in the soil in a natural way.

That's our Indigenous knowledge, but we don't want that to be utilized as part of some mitigation for climate change and some big check coming to us and then we say, "Where did this money come from? Is it from the goodness of the World Bank? Is it from the goodness of a bank in Canada or some investor?" No, that money comes from the polluters who are buying those as offset credits, pieces of paper so that they can look good on paper that they have offset the pollution, but they're still expanding the combustion of pollution.

That's why we make the link together, retaining our trees, and that's why we support our Indigenous peoples to have title to their forest lands in South America, but keep it out of the carbon offset REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) regimes, and just recognize Indigenous peoples. We have people we network who are traditional in the Amazon, like the [unintelligible 00:24:01]. They said, "We don't need money to manage our lands. Just leave us alone and let us live our way, recognize our rights."

When we recognize Indigenous people's inherent rights to our resources, I don't like to use the word natural resources, but I'm just using that for some context here. I really feel that there are still elders and people who understand what I've been talking about as far as original instructions, Indigenous, spiritual relationship. That if we recognize their inherent rights to their territories in Canada, in the bush, and that means rights to conserve the boreal forest – that they're going to protect it. That is part of a solution, Indigenous space to protect the trees who breathe and exhale the carbon.

Dru: An author named Holly Jean Buck recently wrote an article for the Progressive International in which she talked about carbon dioxide removal technologies. She referred to it in the title even, as decolonizing the atmosphere, removing the carbon out of the atmosphere and burying it underground. I'm just wondering what your reaction is when you hear that kind of equation or statement.

Tom: It confuses me. It confuses me because I've come to understand this topic pretty thoroughly as an Indigenous person. I consult with our spiritual leaders, and we have a network of other communities that have gone through the same process. Any time that there is a position like that, I feel that violates the sacredness of our Mother Earth. It confuses me. It also makes me sad because it contradicts those knowledgeable, traditional, spiritual people that I know.

It just didn't make up this position as a political position. This is a life given issue that respects that – the life itself that was given to us by Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit. It doesn't make sense to me. It's not a process of decolonization. I feel that anyone who supports carbon capture and storage and the many technologies related to this, they have different terminologies – anyone that supports that is perpetuating colonization.

Dru: We talked a lot about carbon dioxide removal, but I just wanted to touch a little bit on the solar geoengineering and the idea of blocking the sun and using various techniques in order to offset the effects of fossil fuel-driven climate change. Can you talk a little bit about your view on solar geoengineering and how you respond to the experiments that are being proposed right now?

The SCoPEX project right now — they want to spray different substances into the upper atmosphere, into the stratosphere. They're doing it at a very small scale, I think in the experiment, but this is explicitly to create a

pathway to spraying tens of thousands of tons of either sulfur dioxide or some other substance into the upper atmosphere to block the sunlight from reaching the earth in order to cool the atmosphere.

That's the main one that's being proposed right now, but there's also marine cloud brightening, where they're spraying sea water into the clouds to try to make the clouds brighter so that they reflect more light back into space. Those are the two main solar geoengineering technologies that are being proposed right now.

Tom: On that last one, I was talking to some of the coastal people out in California, and especially those that live around Carmel, around Salinas, around this area where I think there was some visioning by the perpetrators of this technology, and they laughed. Yeah, they laughed. Like the joke was on the white man, what are they trying to do? For one thing, talk about the oceans and water, it's both freshwater, but also oceans. There are natural laws that Indigenous peoples still believe and carry with them. Those natural laws, they add up to our responsibilities and our duties to recognize that the sacredness of our Mother Earth and Father Sky, they're reciprocal. They cannot separate the sky from the earth. They're one and the- They relate, they bond.

To us as Indigenous expression, that's pretty general with all the Indigenous peoples I meet in the north and south. Especially the concept of our Mother Earth, is that these natural laws are part of the creativity principles, creation, the principles of creation. If we, as human beings disturb that natural law - and it's a question of what do we do as human beings to try to mitigate that or try to solve that problem. Do we contribute to the problem? Especially on the ethical arena of duties and responsibilities to the sacredness? How do we ask permission from the oceans to take your water and put it into a spray? How do we ask permission from the sky to do this?

That's something that is part of our knowledge is the protocols. Protocols that the dominant society, the industrialized world does not understand. They don't understand this. That's what got us into this situation already, of the greenhouse effect. It is an important question: what is the ethical reasoning for how humans who have caused the problem to use human-designed technologies? Maybe there are some benefits, but for us in our network and those spiritual people that we talk to, is that they have no protocols for addressing this issue.

Science very often is removed from understanding that sacredness of Mother Earth that we know. We have our own scientists. There are some scientists that are right on, they come to our ceremonies. They understand what I'm talking about, but they're very few. Same with solar radiation, some of our spiritual leaders have language for that, some of that is sacred language, not the common people language. The effects, recognizing light, and how light travels, recognizing the concepts of energy. Wakan Tanka, I use that word, the Great Spirit, Wakan Tanka, that's about energy.

We have understanding that is deep, profound knowledge around science, Indigenous science. We say that the technology as we understand that you mentioned with manipulating the atmosphere, the different layers and levels, there's different levels of worlds, we believe, between here and the stars. What does that mean then when we have spiritual leaders at these different worlds, different layers of worlds? What are the protocols for manipulation of that?

We brought this up with some of the Indigenous people in Arizona, some of the members of the tribes around Tucson that didn't know anything about this proposed technology. When they break it down, and they're even using some business in Tucson that has high-altitude aircrafts or balloons. I think it was balloons. They even wanted to know more about that. What right do they have to go up there? [chuckles]

Many of them are farmer people. We talked to some of the La Via Campesina people, the farmers. They're really concerned about the impact of this type of experimentation on the weather, impacts to the weather. They said, "How do they know that this isn't not going to affect the weather on the other end of the spectrum? Is it going to make it better or worse in another way?" I have to say, "Yes, they should be doing the environmental impact statements."

That's another problem too, environmental assessments. They usually end up approving development, they use EIS, this is a tool for engagement, but they always end up with three scenarios and it goes forward. we don't have much faith in environmental impact statements, but we do need to be involved. We do advocate for that. ETC needs to be advocating involvement in these technologies and assessment of the impacts, definitely. Those are questions that the people were asking, right off the bat. It violated the sacredness of our understanding of protecting our Mother Earth and Father Sky.

Dru: We're almost out of time, but I just wanted to ask you, if you could speak directly to the to the people who are putting forward these experiments or who are working on the carbon dioxide removal technologies, what would you say to them?

Tom: I think those people need to reevaluate their relationship to the sacredness of Mother Earth and Father Sky.

Dru: Thank you, Tom Goldtooth.

Tom: Thank you.

Dru: You have been listening to the ETC group podcast. For more about ETC group, visit etcgroup.org. Thank you for listening.