

The Fight for Native Culture

Junior Sarah RiemanJohns believes native rights have become more important than ever in light of the recent DAPL struggle.

Photo by Makali Hawkins



In a country as diverse as America, cultures tend to blend together, and many who are tied to them ethnically become distanced from their roots in order to assimilate. Those who aren't exposed to the traditions of a wide variety of people may have inaccurate views of them, warped by stereotype and rumor.

We've all heard of the Trail of Tears and Wounded Knee in history class, but Native Americans didn't find peace on reservations. They've been fighting for their rights and their land since Columbus's time, and they haven't stopped yet. The Dakota Access Pipeline protest is only the tip of the iceberg; natives are the victims of both deliberate violence and microaggressions.

While wearing a tribal headdress or your favorite Cleveland Indians jersey may seem harmless, it further normalizes the mockery of Native American culture and the abuse and neglect of their communities.

"Cultural appropriation" is an allegation made frequently amongst Americans, as many are exposed to cultures they don't fully understand, and adorn themselves in their attire without considering its significance.

This past Halloween, a photo posted on Facebook by Ana and Terry Markel faced internet backlash. The couple had donned feathered headbands and "Indian" attire, holding #NODAPL signs. The caption read "Halloween is the best!! #nodapl #waterislife"

Many responded to these costumes, and some turned to Twitter to express their frustration. Adrienne Keene, a Cherokee woman and writer for the website 'Native Appropriations,' tweeted, "Our #NODAPL fight isn't a joke. Literally two days ago unarmed protectors were being beaten, shot, pepper sprayed, & arrested. All to protect the water and land. And their fight, pain, and sacrifice is made into a joke."

While in 2015 Obama rejected the DAPL proposal, *CNN* reports that on Tuesday, January 24, President Trump signed executive actions to advance the approval of the stalled pipelines.

"One of our water protectors was hit by a cop on a snowmobile...hard. Medics couldn't reach her. Police called an ambulance, and it appears that she has been transported off site," Linda Black Elk reported on January 16 via social media.

Ruth Hopkins, an activist and Native writer, relayed further news of the Standing Rock protests a day later on her Twitter. She stated that police officers in riot gear fired teargas at a crowd of peaceful protestors who were praying and singing. Though the Dakota Access Pipeline has been forgotten by many, protesters are still fighting to keep the pipeline from contaminating the Missouri River's water; a near guarantee if it's built, considering the frequent leakage of most major oil pipelines.

Native Americans are frequently pushed into the back of American's minds. We are slow to acknowledge and quick to forget the atrocities they face daily.

Canada is currently addressing the murders and disappearances of thousands of aboriginal women within the past several decades. *NPR* said, "One in 4 female homicide victims in Canada in 2012 was an aboriginal woman." Most of the cases involve young women and girls, and nearly 70 percent are murder cases. Native and otherwise affiliated Canadians have been protesting for the cause for years, but it was only recently that the Canadian government went as far as to launch a formal investigation.

With native culture being appropriated time and time again, women dying and disappearing without authorities blinking an eye, and Natives being injured and arrested for trying to protect their sacred lands, many struggle to keep their dying cultures alive.

According to a 2010 US Census, there are 250,000 speakers of Native American languages living in the western United States, and that number is only decreasing. Fourteen percent of Native reservation housing is without electricity, 20 percent is without plumbing, and 20 percent are without sewage disposal or kitchen facilities, as opposed to the national average of 1 percent in those areas.

When it comes to Native Americans, many have a limited view of what that means. It's easy to forget that as of January 2016, there are 566 legally recognized tribes in the United States, and 6.6 million Native Americans living here today. While this number is immensely smaller than it used to be, Native Americans still exist -- on reservations as well as in cities across America.

They deserve the utmost acknowledgement and respect, because without the sacrifices their ancestors were forced to make, we wouldn't be here in the first place.