

# Indigenous Activism

By Emily Murnane

## Recent History of Indigenous Activism:

In 1968, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was a grassroots movement started in Minneapolis, with additional chapters quickly forming in other cities across the United States. AIM and other Indigenous activists have held many protests and occupations, including occupying Alcatraz Island in San Francisco in 1969 for 19 months in an attempt to secure the island for a reservation and occupying Mount Rushmore in 1970 because the land had previously been promised to the Sioux Nation in the 1800s. In 1970, the first National Day of Mourning was held by AIM in Massachusetts after Frank James (Wamsutta) was prohibited from giving a speech that detailed the atrocities of the history of America. The National Coalition of Racism in Sports and Media (NCRSM) was established in 1992 to protest the use of Native American images and names in sports and the media. More recently, there have been many protests by Native activists against proposed pipelines on Native land and in 2013, a lawsuit was filed by conservation groups and the Havasupai Tribe to stop uranium mining near tribal and ceremonial lands near the Grand Canyon in Arizona. For a more detailed account of activist efforts, see [“Native American Activism: 1960s to Present,”](#) by Lauren Cooper for the Zinn Education Project.

## Key Issues and Current Events:

Indigenous activism takes on many forms and focuses on a range of topics. However, there are a few important issues that have gained significant attention recently:

- **Climate Justice & [Proposed] Oil Pipelines-** In America, Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by climate change. Some communities have already been forced to relocate due to the effects of climate change, and water and air pollution is rampant. Not only do pipelines harm the environment for Native Americans, but some have also been built on sacred burial grounds. Often, these pipelines are proposed to be put on Native land because white communities recognize the dangers they pose and don't want to subject themselves to the detrimental effects. For more information on the intersection of pipelines and climate justice, see [“Why the Native American pipeline resistance in North Dakota is about climate justice,”](#) by Kyle Powys Whyte.
  - [Line 3 Pipeline-](#) This proposed pipeline expansion in Minnesota “would violate the treaty rights of Anishinaabe peoples and nations in its path,” could spill, and would make climate change worse.
  - [Keystone XL Pipeline-](#) This controversial pipeline was cancelled by President Obama, restarted during the Trump Administration, and halted again on President Biden's first day in office.
  - [Dakota Access Pipeline \(DAPL\)-](#) Activists, including the Great Sioux Nation, want Biden to shut down the DAPL, which runs from North Dakota to Texas.
- **Mascots-** Many Indigenous activists seek to end the use of Indigenous people or tribes as mascots, such as “Indian” and “Redsk\*n,” which is a slur. According to the National

Congress of American Indians, "rather than honoring Native peoples, these caricatures and stereotypes are harmful, perpetuate negative stereotypes of America's first peoples, and contribute to a disregard for the personhood of Native peoples."

- **Government Officials-** Deb Haaland became the first Native American to hold a cabinet-level position as Secretary of the Interior on March 15, 2021. As Secretary, she will have the chance to impact Native Americans in [many ways](#). The Department of the Interior houses three offices relating to Native affairs, the most important being the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Also, seeing someone who looks like themselves in such a high position could increase civic engagement and political trust among Native Americans. Also, Secretary Haaland will have the opportunity to improve energy policy as it relates to Native Americans.
- **Crime-** Native women experience disproportionately high rates of violence. "[More than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence, and more than 1 in 2 have experienced sexual violence... On some reservations, Indigenous women are murdered at more than ten times the national average.](#)" Temporary "man camps" that are built for pipeline construction [increase violent crimes](#) in the surrounding areas, including murder, manslaughter, and robbery. They also increase rates of rape and sexual assault, especially when they are built on or near indigenous land. The [Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women](#) was started by Native activists in New Mexico 1996. Their work focuses on four areas: training and education, technical assistance, policy advocacy, and community support. [Here](#) are ways to get involved and support their mission.
- **Health Disparities-** The Center for American Indian Resilience at Northern Arizona University has a [comprehensive learning module](#) on the health disparities Indigenous people face. Native Americans have higher rates of poverty and a lower life expectancy compared to other races. They also have higher rates of preventable diseases and infant mortality. On reservations, hospitals are responsible for serving too many people and are often underfunded. Further, many reservations are food deserts- meaning they lack access to healthy food. [Indian Health Services](#) (IHS), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was founded in 1955 to combat these disparities, however it is underfunded and many Natives lack adequate access to its services.

## Resources for Further Education:

### Watch/Listen:

- Growing Democracy Podcast with Dr. Katie Phillips "[Indigenous Activism](#)"
- Ted Talk by Tara Houska, "[The Standing Rock resistance and our fight for indigenous rights](#)"
- Documentary recommendations for PBS, Netflix, and more from [Powwows.com](#)

**Read:**

- [AIM Website](#)
- [“10 Native American Activists You Should Know.”](#) by Jillian Abel
- [“Unsettling Lessons: Teaching Indigenous Politics and Settler Colonialism in Political Science.”](#) by Nancy D. Wadsworth
- [“How the Climate Crisis Harms Native Americans.”](#) by Sophie Hirsh
- [“Staging Indigeneity: Salvage Tourism and the Performance of Native American History,”](#) by Dr. Katie Phillips

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