

TO: Anthropocene Working Group  
FROM: Randy Kritkauskay / Wshke Nabe, Enrolled Potawatomi Tribal Member  
DATE: July 26, 2023  
SUBJECT: Implications of Anthropocene Designation

Bozho (Greetings) from Turtle Island, known to non-indigenous people as North America. This half of Mother Earth has experienced human habitation for a comparatively brief time, geologically speaking. We arrived here about 30,000 years ago. Since then, we indigenous two-legged (humans) lived in harmony with nature as we were governed by a principle of reciprocity and a covenant calling for us to be good stewards in exchange for the gifts of a bountiful nature.

A mere 500 years ago a second wave of two-leggeds arrived from Europe, encouraged in their “conquer humans and nature” mindset by a geographical-cultural fiction, the so-called Doctrine of Discovery, a papal bull of 1493 where Pope Alexander authorized the occupation and taking of indigenous lands and all “appurtenances” found there upon. So empowered, colonists immediately set to work attempting to dominate the human inhabitants, as well as the flora and fauna of Turtle Island. The conquerors reduced the human population, my ancestors, by 90%. They inflicted astounding harm on the web of life that had existed virtually unspoiled from time immemorial.

Despite these impacts, I am reporting to you that the original human occupants of Turtle Island and our other-than-human kin have *not* been entirely subdued, conquered or dominated. For you to claim otherwise would be to exhibit the same hubris that colonists brought to these shores and thereby to continue the legacy of colonial history. Please hesitate to plant yet another flag of human domination (Land of the Anthropocene) on Turtle Island.

You might ask how I assert that our Mother Earth, Turtle Island, is not entirely subdued and relegated to a secondary role by human activity. My answer: in case you have not noticed, Our Mother is actually alive, resilient, and dominant even in her wounded state, just as she has been for eons in the Holocene Epoch. Working in your offices in glass towers, most of you probably have little direct and ongoing experience with the natural world. Perhaps that fact, and being urbanites susceptible to cultural trends and lenses more than to direct contact with nature has distracted you from scientific evidence, not to mention simple common-sense observations of the real world.

If you confronted a grizzly bear in the wilderness, you would be given a lesson in the limits of human domination over nature. Perhaps this wilderness example does not resonate. Then think about your recent encounter with one of nature’s smallest brainless beings, the COVID virus. Who dominated? Perhaps it is time for a bit of humility about humanity’s role dominating the web of life.

Please begin by recognizing that you are not engaged in a science-based decision-making process whereby a hypothesis about humans being “central” to living systems on earth is being

tested and evaluated objectively with scientific rigor.<sup>[1]</sup> Instead you are involved in a cultural and philosophical argument. You and others are searching for evidence to support the notion that we have entered “the Anthropocene” rather than stepping back to critically evaluate that assertion.

I appreciate and understand your desire to add the weight of your opinion to our global discussion about and attempts to reverse the course of harmful anthropogenic impacts on Mother Earth. But good intentions undertaken by scientists who have inadequate knowledge of cultural dynamics and history can be devastatingly counterproductive when they drag science into the speculative realm of philosophy.

Indeed, climate change is disturbing and the human footprint on the planet is all too real. I know well. I am not writing from the perspective of an “Indian” living in splendid isolation in one of the remaining unspoiled areas of wilderness on the planet. ECOLOGIA, the international organization that I co-founded, has worked for decades on ecological catastrophes: the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant accident, desertification in China, deforestation in Russia, the disappearing Aral Sea, and climate change.

Like most of us I feel direct impacts of global warming. As someone living in the northeast of the USA, I must now consult daily reports of air quality because Canadian wildfires exacerbated by climate change are a threat to my health. Looking at maps of wildfires in Canada, one could get the false impression that a crushing human footprint is everywhere and that “the planet is on fire”. However, emotional reactions and panic should not drive scientific reasoning. I have been through this argument and panic before while working as an environmentalist in the Soviet Union for more than a decade. During that time, western NGOs, foundations, and even US foreign aid programs were motivated by a 1992 book titled *ECOCIDE* by Feshback and Friendly. As the title suggests, the book argued that the end of nature across the vast expanse of the Soviet Union was at hand. Then I flew over Siberia on my way to China. Hour after hour I flew over green taiga. Ecocide applied to the hot spots where we worked. But the all-powerful Soviet system and its efforts to reverse the flow of rivers and triumph over nature barely left a visible footprint in Siberia, seen from 30,000 feet (the big picture). If I were to fly over Canada now I might see signs of deforestation and the damage of wildfires. But mostly I would see green. Turtle Island is largely green.

As a resident of Turtle Island and as a denizen of the second growth forests in the northeast United States (the largest forest recovery on the face of the planet) I write to affirm that the natural world is very much alive here and showing signs of extraordinary healing capacity even as she is injured daily. My other-than-human kin, the Coy-Wolves who inhabit our forests and meadows, exemplify this. They call to me nightly with messages about being present in the region’s vast expanse of recovered forest. Coy-Wolves are hybrids of coyotes and wolves who can be traced to interbreeding in the early 20th century. They have moved into territory once occupied by wolves who were extirpated by European settlers in the eastern USA. Coy-Wolves not only occupy the former wolf niche, they are found in suburban and even urban

neighborhoods. Biologists consider Coy-Wolves to be one of the most adaptable mammals they have encountered. This resilient and creative reaction to the disruptive forces of human actions has happened, as with our reforestation, during the time frame you are considering for consideration as the Anthropocene.

A premature designation of the Anthropocene risks creating a moral hazard that will contribute to further human harm to the earth's living systems. Please consider the consequences of an authoritative scientific body declaring that the natural world is now subordinate to human endeavors:

- a) Those already seeking to undermine environmental regulations by requiring a cost benefit calculation for such protections could now argue, with your scientific testimony, that regulation and protection of ecosystems are moot, the struggle is a lost cause. Everything is merely an extension of human society.
- b) You will unleash a wave of despair that will demoralize and cripple efforts at nature protection and restoration. A whole generation of young people is teetering on the brink of giving up on both the planet's ability to recover and humanity's ability to work *with* nature. They are accepting the inevitability of mass extinction and even the demise of humans as a species.
- c) You are declaring that indigenous people and our protection of eighty percent of the world's biodiversity is irrelevant because industrial society dominates (is central) and will continue to extend its control. By writing off the vibrant world of nature that we know and is part of our everyday life, you may deliver the final blow to indigenous cultural survival.

Asking questions about *the possibility and potential threats* associated with entering the Anthropocene is provocative and perhaps even helpful. However, answering this question definitively, with inadequate evidence and prematurely, could be catastrophic.

On behalf of Turtle Island, indigenous people, and our abundant and vibrant flora and fauna, please hesitate to pronounce us to be mere echoes of a bygone geologic era. It would be the ultimate act of erasure.

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<sup>[1]</sup> The original argument for renaming our era was set forth in "The Anthropocene" by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 when they asserted that "*the central role* of mankind in geology and ecology" is evident. They expanded the meaning of "central role" to imply that humans play a dominant role.

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