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Detroit Indigenous Peoples Alliance respond to Detroit Police Department

Demanding this never happens again and calling the city
to transform this desecration into permanent infrastructure.

Waawiyataanong, Anishinaabeaki (Detroit, MI) Our response has taken some time, as we have been tapping trees, hauling sap and boiling it down for the past two weeks.

On Friday, February 18 the Detroit Police Department broke up the ceremonial opening of our Waawiyataanong iskigamizigan, our Detroit Sugarbush, in Rouge Park. Lead sugarmaker of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians, Jefferson Ballew hosted a sacred fire with a small group of sugarbush organizers and urban native peoples. Despite being informed of the ceremonial nature of this gathering multiple times by a half dozen people, officers threatened to arrest Indigenous participants, including members of federally recognized tribes, forcing them to extinguish this sacred fire. This was a desecration. Further, officers engaged in contretemps that demeaned tribal sovereignty. Children were present and this incident was traumatizing to some participants. Many share responsibility for this night: event organizers, police, and communications between city departments. This shameful incident will not impede our work.

The Detroit Indigenous People's Alliance and allied organizations are actively working with the Detroit Fire Department, the General Services: Parks & Recreation, and would also like to work with the Detroit Police Department, so that this never happens again... Not only for us harvesting maple sap, but also for ANY Indigenous ceremony being held in the City of Detroit.

Our ceremonies, the necessary work of harvesting, processing, and sharing our resources, like maple sugar, are sacred and constitute the foundation of Anishinaabe culture. Responding to public comments from the Police Department, consent for Indigenous ceremonies and activities does not come from city government, but from the creator and from nature herself. These are not just leisure activities, this is who we are.

For this project, consent has come from our local Anishinaabe elders and a handful of Anishinaabe sugarmakers all over the Anishinaabeaki (Anishnaabe name for the Great Lakes). This is the culturally appropriate means of obtaining permission. We have also had the honor of working with anchor urban native programs, organizers and families, including the Sacred Roots Program at American Indian Health and Family Services.

Since the founding of the United States, Indigenous people have negotiated and been partners to treaties with the United States. Most directly relate to activities like the sugarbush. These documents sought to preserve our way of life while simultaneously sharing the wealth and benefit of the land to newcomers. The State of Michigan has been the site of many treaties throughout the past several centuries, including the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, and the Treaty

of Detroit in 1805. Without those two treaties, Detroit would not exist, we are all treaty people here. Harvesting, foraging, hunting and fishing are the types of activities, ways of knowing, that Tribes and Congress sought to protect with the 1975 Indian Self Determination Act, and the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act. When the “rule of law” is used to interrupt these processes, it opens a wound that was never fully healed, and only serves to push us further apart. The DPD should strive to open a dialogue, instead of rushing to criminalize or excuse their behavior.

The Waawayataanong iskigamizigan, the Detroit Sugarbush came to life in 2019, initiated by; David Pitawanakwat of Wikwemikong First Nations, Manitoulin Island, Antonio Cosme of Waawayataanong, Detroit with the National Wildlife Federation, and Shakara Tyler with the Detroit Black Food Security Network and D-Town Farms. The vision for this project has been bringing together urban native and Detroit African Americans to connect with nature, to heal, and to further *food sovereignty. “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007

Our Detroit Sugarbush is a larger collaborative effort, bringing together community-based organizations to build on our common goals of fostering community, food sovereignty, and overall wellness. Some of the organizations that have been directly involved in the project include:

Detroit Indigenous People's Alliance
Black to the Land
Detroit Outdoors
National Wildlife Federation
Friends of the Rouge
Detroit: General Services- Parks and Recreation

Beyond permission from our creator, local elders and Anishinaabe teachers, we adhered to processes set out by the local government and city officials to ensure that these encounters would be avoided. On our behalf, the National Wildlife Federation has signed two MOU's with the city of Detroit in 2020 and 2021. We just finalized the third MOU in response to this situation to include; extension of the MOU timeframe to 3 years, special event permits, and explicitly protecting community gatherings throughout the sugarbush season. We have consistently submitted all the necessary information to the Detroit Fire Department, and following this incident, we have confirmed that our Fire Permit is paid and in good standing. In the future we will be submitting special events forms, making courtesy calls to precinct 6, and following through with the Detroit Fire Department to do our due diligence and protect our community.

This tradition has been missing in the city of Detroit for far too long. This incident has not stopped the Sugarbush work. In an effort to transform this unfortunate moment into permanent infrastructure that will help ensure future generations don't need to revive this work, the Detroit Indigenous People's Alliance is starting this fundraiser to build out the Sugarbush site. We will use funds to build trails that allow easier access for elders, repair a dilapidated structure for storage, and really establish a strong foundation for future generations. We hope the city of Detroit will help us in these aims.

https://www.patronicity.com/project/detroit_sugarbush_transforming_police_violence_into_sugarbush_infrastructure#!/

Now the healing must begin, as Indigenous peoples have suffered from a long history of broken promises, violated treaties, and religious persecution. The police actions on February 18th, disrupting ceremony and cultural practices with overwhelming and unnecessary display of force, including more than 14 officers, helicopters, spotlights, and 7 police cars evokes horrible memories and stories that parents, grandparents, and community elders share of police and the state stealing children, brutalizing native people, and using "the law" to do so. We hope to work with police to address this. Listed below are some broader demands that we are advancing to avoid such incidents.

Demands:

The City of Detroit must work to honor all treaties and adhere to the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for any action that would affect Indigenous lands, territories or rights.

The City of Detroit must permanently recognize the Sugarbush Project and ultimately work towards *Land Back. Land back is the concept of returning lands to the original peoples who were stewards of those lands prior to European invasion and colonization.

The City of Detroit General Services Department must work with the Sugarbush Project to make the location of this sugarbush more accessible to our elders and community. The city of Detroit must fund a significant part of this effort.

The Detroit Police Department must adopt policies and protocols for engaging with Indigenous ceremonies to prevent these problems in the future.

The Police Department must not be allowed to operate their gun range; this should be relocated outside of these sacred spaces.

Police must not enforce sundown park closures as ordinances say parks close at 10pm. Shutting off access to the outdoors especially during a pandemic is wrong.

Police must apologize meaningfully, and never do this again.

The officers who approached the fire must be reprimanded, required to attend cultural awareness training, and be subjected to a restorative circle.

Police must contract native consultants for cultural awareness training approved by the Detroit Indigenous People's Alliance.

For more information please reach out to the Detroit Indigenous People's Alliance:
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