

The Onondaga Nation and Environmental Stewardship

For many years, the people of the Onondaga Nation have worked cooperatively with their neighbors to protect the environment, clean up pollution, and promote economic development in the Syracuse/Onondaga region of Central New York. These goals are inseparable from the goals of the Land Rights Action. Restoring the health of the Onondaga Lake and Creek watershed is every bit as important as acknowledging title to the land. The health and well-being of the Nation is interconnected with the health and well-being of the land, air and water.

THE FIRST PARAGRAPH OF THE LAND RIGHTS ACTION READS:

“The Onondaga People wish to bring about a healing between themselves and all others who live in this region that has been the homeland of the Onondaga Nation since the dawn of time. The Nation and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationship with the land, which is embodied in Gayanashagowa, the Great Law of Peace. This relationship goes far beyond federal and state legal concepts of ownership, possession or legal rights. The people are one with the land, and consider themselves stewards of it. It is the duty of the Nation’s leaders to work for a healing of this land, to protect it, and to pass it on to future generations. The Onondaga Nation brings this action on behalf of its people in the hope that it may hasten the process of reconciliation and bring lasting justice, peace, and respect among all who inhabit the area.”

The Nation is carrying out a long-term strategy to use its land rights to promote conservation, environmental protection and responsible economic development in partnership with its neighbors.

ONONDAGA LAKE

Onondaga Lake is a tremendously important sacred and historic site to the Onondaga Nation and the other Haudenosaunee nations, whose confederacy was founded on the Lake’s shores. The resources provided by the Lake sustained the Onondaga people for many centuries and the use of those natural resources has long been a vital part of their culture. Since the arrival of Euro-Americans, Onondaga Lake has suffered over 200 years of widespread habitat destruction resulting in the loss of ecologically and culturally important species, ongoing bacteria, nutrient and sediment pollution, and a legacy of highly toxic industrial pollution that has earned the Lake designation as a US federal Superfund site. The damage to Onondaga Lake and its watershed has harmed the Onondaga people’s cultural, economic, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.



Onondaga Lake is surrounded by urban development and plagued by municipal and industrial pollution.

The Onondaga Nation’s leaders are dedicated to restoring the health of Onondaga Lake and its watershed as a crucial step toward a healing, not only for the Nation’s people and culture, but also for all people

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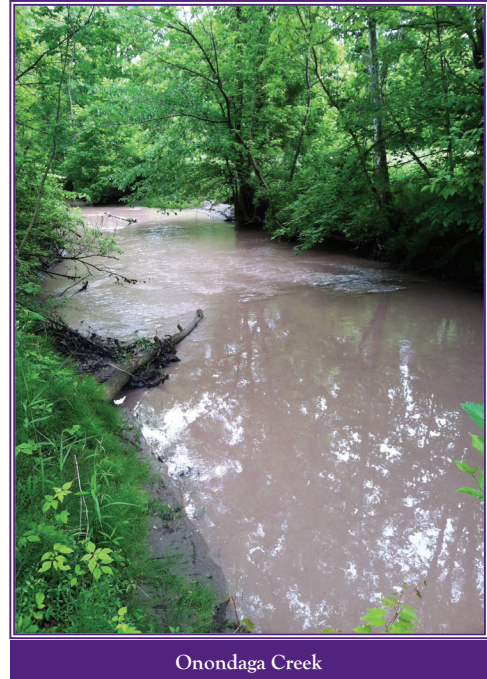
who live in this area. The Nation has provided much-needed leadership in denouncing the inadequacy of the Superfund remediation plans that will leave in place the vast majority of the industrial pollution present in and around the Lake. The Nation has also participated in government-to-government discussions about future restoration efforts as part of the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration process for the Onondaga Lake Superfund site. In 2010, the Nation published *The Onondaga Nation's Vision for a Clean Onondaga Lake*, offering an inspiring alternative vision for how to restore the watershed and our relationships to it.

ONONDAGA CREEK

Onondaga Creek has its headwaters upstream of the Nation's currently recognized territory, and is extremely important in the life of the community. In the mid-1990s, the Onondaga Nation joined forces with the town of Tully, a small community south of the Nation's currently-recognized territory, in an effort to stop a gravel mine in that community. The mine threatens to pollute and degrade Onondaga Creek, which flows through the Nation's territory and continues through downtown Syracuse into Onondaga Lake. The Nation also continues to seek solutions for the Creek's oversized dam and for the mudboils, which dump tons of sediment per day into the Creek. Onondaga Nation elders recall when the water of Onondaga Creek was crystal clear; in recent decades, it has the consistency of chocolate milk.

From 2005-2009, the Onondaga Creek Conceptual Revitalization Plan was created with input from the Onondaga Nation along with a wide representation of other neighbors and stakeholders. The Plan contains a strong vision for a restored, naturalized Creek and is a cornerstone for planning future activities in the watershed.

In Syracuse, the Onondaga Nation has worked with the Partnership for Onondaga Creek for over a decade, advocating for environmental justice and non-polluting solutions to the combined sewer overflows that pollute Onondaga Creek. In 2008, the Onondaga Nation joined with Atlantic States Legal Foundation to bring Onondaga County and NYSDEC back to the negotiating table to consider green infrastructure - creating ways for rainwater to be used or infiltrate into the ground instead of running off into the sewers - as a method of reducing the combined sewer overflows into the Creek. The plans for two of three sewage plants were canceled, along with a massive pipeline along Onondaga Creek on Syracuse's south side through an already disadvantaged community. The rain gardens, green roofs, street trees, rain barrels, and green street improvements of the resulting Save the Rain program are making Syracuse a more beautiful and sustainable city. The hockey arena at the War Memorial in Syracuse now uses captured rain water to make its ice, and the 60,000 square foot roof on the convention center is now one of the largest green roofs in the Northeast.



Onondaga Creek

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In 2010, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency presented an Environmental Quality Award to the Onondaga Nation, Partnership for Onondaga Creek, Atlantic States Legal Foundation, and Onondaga County Executive Joanne Mahoney for their work.

STOPPING THE COAL

In 2007 a coal gasification plant was proposed for Jamesville, NY. This massive operation was to be located near homes and an elementary school; it would have brought in 110 cars of coal a day through the City of Syracuse and shipped its byproducts, such as sulphuric acid, on the same tracks. This operation's promise of carbon capture was no more than a pipe leading to nowhere, venting CO₂ into the atmosphere. When local opposition mounted, the plant was then proposed for Scriba, NY. The Onondaga Nation lent its assistance to both the Jamesville Positive Action Committee (JAM-PAC) and the Scriba Coalition of Responsible Citizens, raising concerns with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) through its government-to-government consultation relationship, and providing extensive background research to the Syracuse Post-Standard and the neighbors opposing the plant. Both communities were successful in keeping the plants out.



EPA Environmental Quality Award Ceremony, 2010



Grassroots organizations have asked Onondaga Nation leaders to speak at many events against hydrofracking

OPPOSING HYDROFRACKING

Before most people in CNY knew what hydrofracking was, the Onondaga Nation and Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force (HETF) were working to protect local waterways and wells by educating neighbors & the NYSDEC staff about the dangers of this method of gas drilling. The 2009 HETF Statement on Hydrofracking was one of the first documents calling for a widespread ban on the process. Onondaga Nation leaders have spoken at numerous rallies and conferences, as well as co-sponsoring events of their own to raise awareness of the issue, such as the 2012 Water is Life music festival. The Onondaga Nation's legal team works to advise local landowners on how to terminate their gas leases, and assist in the defense of municipal moratoria and bans.

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GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, is known internationally as an eloquent speaker about the need to stop global warming; a message that begins with returning to respect for Mother Earth. He has taken this message to the United Nations, international leaders, and more recently, the boards of major corporations and as the closing statement in Leonardo DiCaprio's documentary "The 11th Hour". Locally, the new building on Route 11 has an array of solar panels in the shape of the Hiawatha Belt, demonstrating beauty in form and function.

THROUGHOUT THE ABORIGINAL TERRITORY

The Onondaga Nation has also lent its assistance to the residents opposing the noxious factory farms that are polluting rural NY's air and water; to the neighbors working to restore Lake Neatahwanta near Fulton, NY; to opponents of the solid waste landfill located in Ava, NY, and to neighbors working to protect Three Falls Woods in Manlius, NY.

The extraordinary multi-cultural, multi-racial, environmental and political collaboration that exists between the Onondaga Nation and neighboring communities is not only encouraging, but may well become the centerpiece of a wholesale economic revival in central New York, a revival based on promoting the natural resources of the region without exploiting them irresponsibly. It is the hope of the Onondaga people that this revival will benefit every community in the region, regardless of size or ethnic makeup, and that through their land rights action, the Nation can continue to pursue, and to realize, these important goals.

The Onondaga Nation, its leaders and its people, continue to operate under their traditional mandate to be stewards of the earth, and to preserve the land, water and their fellow creatures for the Seventh Generation in the future. The land rights action is an important step toward fulfilling that mandate. The Nation hopes to continue working with its neighbors, as it has for years from Watertown to Binghamton, toward reversing some of the environmental damage that has affected everyone in Central New York, and re-establishing the area as one of the most beautiful and important ecological regions in the world.

