

Melting justice: the Willow Project and indigenous rights in Alaska

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During his presidential campaign in 2020, Joe Biden made a pledge to end new oil and gas drillings on public lands (Nilsen, 2023b). Shortly after his win, the US president issued a memorandum on resource extraction from federal lands, stating that oil exploitation in the Arctic would be a catastrophic decision (Kolbert, 2023). The administration's efforts to drift away from fossil fuel dependency and align closer to global climate action, however, have been dismissed in favour of re-election ambitions.

Amid voters' concerns over rising oil prices, Biden seems to have forgotten his own promises. His administration has already approved almost a hundred more drilling leases compared to the previous term (Milman, 2023). The Willow Project, an oil extraction development in the National Petroleum Reserve of northern Alaska [NPR-A], is the most recent approved lease. It received a green light on March 13 – exactly a week before the publishing of the 2023 IPCC climate report (Frost, 2023). The estimated yearly carbon impact would be the size of introducing two million gas-fueled vehicles to roads (Nilsen, 2023b). At the intersection between environmental protection and indigenous rights, the Willow Project exposes the challenges of fighting against climate change and neocolonialism.

In this paper, I investigate the following question: *how does the Willow Project exacerbate climate injustice experienced by Alaska's indigenous communities?* To answer it, I will reflect on the historical context of colonialism in Alaska and assess the project's controversies in light of indigenous rights. To illustrate the scale of the issue, I will expand beyond the project's immediate setting, aiming to encourage readers to critically assess its implications on global environmental efforts.

Defining climate justice and neocolonialism

Vulnerable communities have often contributed the least to environmental degradation and yet are the most impacted by it. Climate justice is both a theory and movement that assesses and challenges the disproportionate effects of climate change on certain groups, focusing “*on who benefits, who loses out, in what ways, where and why*” (Sultana, 2022, p. 119). Climate justice recognises the interconnectedness of climate and social justice issues by promoting just climate solutions and empowering marginalised voices (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Relevant for this case is also the concept of procedural justice which assesses the justice of decision-making procedures, to ensure that those who are affected the most are treated fairly and given equal opportunities to participate in the process (Moseley et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, neocolonialism involves the ongoing exploitation of ex-colonies by global superpowers, enabled by the forces of cultural imperialism, capitalism, and globalisation (Wijesinghe et al., 2019). It often includes subtle and indirect forms of control, such as encouraging export-oriented development strategies through natural resource extraction. This reinforcement of colonial power dynamics comes at the expense of marginalised groups, as powerful groups reap the benefits of economic development while local communities bear the environmental burden. All of these aforementioned concepts shall be relevant for understanding the following case.

Brief history of Alaska’s indigenous communities

The native people of Alaska constitute almost one fifth of the state’s entire population, including a diverse range of communities, unique histories, and cultures (Native Federation, n.d.). When the USA bought off the area from Russia in the 19th century, little was known about the vastness of its natural resources reserves (Göcke, 2012). The discovery of oil, gas and

mineral deposits in the mid-20th century irreversibly transformed power dynamics in the region. In pursuit of its economic interests, the USA has not only disregarded the natives' culture and way of living, but also their right to govern their own land (Göcke, 2012).

In 1906, the Congress adopted the Alaska Native Allotment Act, allowing the government to disrupt the ownership of indigenous land and displace native communities. 65 years later, it was repealed through the enactment of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), which effectively transferred over 44 million acres of land to Alaska Native corporations (Bureau of Land Management, n.d.). While it addressed some of the past injustices, ANCSA continued to perpetuate the region's economic dependence on the U.S. Government and resource extraction – with oil revenues making up over 80% of the state's budget (Taylor, 2023). This dependence persists even to this day, underpinning the green light given to the Willow Project and justifying the desire for Alaska's economic development.

The Willow Project controversies

The Willow Project has received support not only from Alaska's lawmakers, but also from parts of the local population, who see it as a crucial regional investment (Nilsen, 2023b). However, in Nuiqsut (the closest settlement to the project's site) citizens have openly expressed their concerns on Willow's health and environmental impacts (Nilsen, 2023b). One of the only direct benefits for Alaska's residents are 300 permanent jobs upon construction completion (Marris, 2023). With the expected profit being distributed mainly between ConocoPhillips and the federal government (Marris, 2023), is the project really a gift of economic development, or a Trojan horse for the exploitation of indigenous resources and lands?

By prioritising resource extraction over the wellbeing of the local population, Willow perpetuates neocolonialist patterns of oppression and marginalisation. The NPR-A is inhabited

by communities whose identity has been shaped by centuries of interconnectedness with the region's ecosystem. Willow could disturb the migration patterns of caribou, species considered a crucial subsistence resource for the native population (Chasinghorse, 2023). Distortion of traditional hunting practices and displacement of people from their ancestral lands would erode indigenous identities in Alaska. Through further alienating itself from nature, the Western world would once again oppress the ones whose relationship with nature is deeply linked with and simultaneously goes beyond mere survival.

What is next?

The Arctic is a unique, fragile ecosystem extending across three continents (Flannery, 2005). If the Willow Project goes forward, it could set a precedent for future resource extraction in previously considered 'off-limits' areas. While Willow undoubtedly undermines global efforts to mitigate climate change, it also highlights the procedural injustice experienced by many native communities around the world. The needs of corporations and the federal government have been prioritised over the needs of those who have lived in the region for centuries, revealing that neocolonialist power imbalances still persist in Alaska.

Detrimental implications of the proposed development, however, have not gone unnoticed. In less than one month, TikToks using the hashtag #StopWillow reached a total of 50 million views, resulting in a petition of several million signatures (Nilsen, 2023a). The law firms Earthjustice and Trustees for Alaska have filed lawsuits against federal agencies, basing their claims on inadequate evaluation of Willow's environmental impacts (Taylor, 2023). Will the public discontent stand firmly enough against those in power, bringing back justice to Alaska's Natives? This remains to be seen. In a world where colonial structures have never truly ceased to

exist, indigenous voices need to be recognised, heard and empowered. Only through addressing the historical and ongoing injustices can we work towards a better and just future for all.

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