

Native American Activism in the 1960s and 1970s

By Native American Almanac (Visible Ink Press), adapted by Newsela staff on 10.31.17

Word Count **1,092**

Level **1220L**



About 50 Native Americans took over an abandoned Nike site after the U.S. government ended their 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island. In this June 14, 1971, photo, young Native Americans sleep on the road and rest on a car used as a roadblock to the abandoned residential area. A sign reads "Indian People of All Tribes." Photo by: Bettmann/Getty Images

A nationwide Native American conference was held at the University of Chicago in June 1961. More than 500 Native Americans from more than 90 tribes and bands participated and created a "Declaration of Indian Purpose," which supported the right of a tribal community to maintain itself and develop with government money and assistance. The conference helped mobilize a generation of Native American activists.

Native American organizations founded

After the conference, there was a widespread organizational and activist response in native communities. The National Indian Youth Council, founded in 1961, and the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, were part of a great proliferation of organizations on reservations and in cities. In addition, dozens of native newspapers and magazines were established during the late 1960s and 1970s.

Important legal, political and economic national organizations were also established: the National Indian Education Association, founded in 1969, the Native American Rights Fund, founded in 1970, the National Tribal Chairmen's Association, founded in 1971, and the Council of Energy Resource Tribes, founded in 1975. These organizations represented Indian interests at various levels of government. They contributed to a growing awareness of the shared interests and common problems of all Native Americans.

The growth of a Native American population in various U.S. cities contributed to the emergence of a national Native American activist movement. This came to be known as the Red Power movement.

During the 1960s, Native Americans began uniting to take control of their own future. A generation of Native American activists forced the public and the federal government to look at problems confronting reservation tribes. The fish-in movement was launched in response to court and law-enforcement restrictions on North Pacific tribes' access to fishing, which had been guaranteed by treaties, but which had been stripped away during the 19th century. The fish-in movement provided a training ground for future activism in other parts of the U.S.

Alcatraz Island claimed by the "right of discovery"

On November 20, 1969, 89 "Indians of all tribes" landed on Alcatraz Island, off of San Francisco, California, the former site of a federal prison. The group claimed the island by the "right of discovery," in the same way white settlers justified taking over native lands in earlier centuries. The group wanted the U.S. government to give money to turn it into a Native American cultural center and university. Over the next 19 months, they negotiated with the federal government.

The negotiations did not result in any plan for the future of Alcatraz Island. However, the occupation itself, which ended on June 11, 1971, marked the beginning of a period of greatly increased Native American activism in cities and on reservations. Occupations became a tactic designed to draw attention to the historical and contemporary grievances of North American Indians. Most didn't last long.

"Trail of Broken Treaties"

During the 1970s, government buildings also became the sites of protests. Among them were regional Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) offices in Cleveland and Denver, as well as the main BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., in 1972. The BIA is the department of the government that is in charge of all Native American tribal lands. It also provides health care and education to Native Americans. Many Native Americans felt then that the BIA was just controlling Native American land for the government's purposes, breaking its treaties and providing poor education.

The unplanned occupation of the Washington BIA occurred at the end of a protest known as the "Trail of Broken Treaties." This protest involved caravans that traveled across the U.S. to meet in Washington, in order to present Native American concerns at the national BIA offices. When protesters found their planned camping ground was no longer available, they took over BIA offices for a week.

"Wounded Knee II"

No single event of the Red Power era more clearly illustrated the combination of Native American grievances and community tensions than the events on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation in the spring of 1973. The 10-week-long siege came to be known as "Wounded Knee II." It was named after the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. In that first conflict, Native Americans had been protesting their treatment by the U.S. government at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge. The U.S. Army killed 146 Sioux during a standoff.

"Wounded Knee II" involved a dispute within the Oglala Lakota Tribe. Reservation traditionalists asked AIM to assist them in their struggle against the elected chairman Richard Wilson, whose administration they charged was corrupt.

Federal marshals and FBI agents surrounded the hamlet, creating a standoff that drew national and worldwide media attention. Native militants, who were armed, made clear their intention to fight rather than surrender. The standoff finally ended with a negotiated settlement and withdrawal of both sides.

International Indian Treaty Council

Following the stand at Wounded Knee, AIM brought together thousands of native representatives in a 10-day gathering that founded the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC). In 1975, the council applied for and received United Nations recognition. By the mid-1980s, it was attracting representatives from indigenous, or native, communities from around the world. The IITC reached a milestone in 2007 when the United Nations General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

"The Longest Walk"

The last major event of the Red Power era occurred in July 1978 when several hundred native people marched into Washington, D.C., at the end of a protest known as "The Longest Walk." The peaceful protest march had begun five months earlier in San Francisco. It was intended to symbolize the forced removal of native people from their homelands and draw attention to continuing problems they faced.

Land and water rights

During the 1970s, Native American activism shifted to the courts as well. Tribes went to federal and state courts to claim land and protect their treaty rights. In the eastern United States, Native American groups claimed lands taken illegally during the late 1790s. Based on a section of the Indian Trade and Intercourse Act of 1790, Native Americans in Maine, Rhode Island and Connecticut succeeded in reclaiming some state lands illegally taken in violation of the 1790 law.

In the 1970s, Native American activists demanded that water rights be protected, especially in the Southwest, where water is scarce. During this same period, Native Americans in the Great Lakes and northern Pacific coast region used the courts to try to win back their treaty rights to fish at "accustomed" places. The fish-in movement sought to lift restrictions on tribal access to fishing.

Quiz

1 Read the paragraph from the section "Alcatraz Island claimed by the right of discovery."

On November 20, 1969, 89 "Indians of all tribes" landed on Alcatraz Island, off of San Francisco, California, the former site of a federal prison. The group claimed the island by the "right of discovery," in the same way white settlers justified taking over native lands in earlier centuries. The group wanted the U.S. government to give money to turn it into a Native American cultural center and university. Over the next 19 months, they negotiated with the federal government.

Which conclusion is BEST supported by the paragraph?

- (A) The Native Americans who claimed Alcatraz Island had the right to turn the island into a cultural center and university.
- (B) The Native Americans who claimed Alcatraz Island were dependent on the U.S. government to help them achieve their goals.
- (C) Native Americans wanted their own university because they were barred from attending other universities.
- (D) Native Americans had to negotiate with the federal government to get land in the same way that white settlers had to negotiate for land.

2 Read the details below from the article.

The fish-in movement was launched in response to court and law-enforcement restrictions on North Pacific tribes' access to fishing, which had been guaranteed by treaties, but which had been stripped away during the 19th century.

During the 1970s, government buildings also became the sites of protests.

This protest involved caravans that traveled across the U.S. to meet in Washington, in order to present Native American concerns at the national BIA offices.

Each of these details is evidence of activist actions that ____

- (A) were taken by the Red Power movement.
- (B) failed to get the attention of the federal government.
- (C) led to the formation of the Red Power movement.
- (D) involved a violent response from the federal government.

3 Read the paragraph below from the section "International Indian Treaty Council."

Following the stand at Wounded Knee, AIM brought together thousands of native representatives in a 10-day gathering that founded the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC). In 1975, the council applied for and received United Nations recognition. By the mid-1980s, it was attracting representatives from indigenous, or native, communities from around the world. The IITC reached a milestone in 2007 when the United Nations General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Which sentence in the paragraph has a subjective tone?

- (A) Following the stand at Wounded Knee, AIM brought together thousands of native representatives in a 10-day gathering that founded the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC).
- (B) In 1975, the council applied for and received United Nations recognition.
- (C) By the mid-1980s, it was attracting representatives from indigenous, or native, communities from around the world.
- (D) The IITC reached a milestone in 2007 when the United Nations General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

4 Read the sentence from the section "Alcatraz Island claimed by the 'right of discovery.'"

Occupations became a tactic designed to draw attention to the historical and contemporary grievances of North American Indians.

Which two words could replace "tactic" and "contemporary" WITHOUT changing the meaning the of the sentence?

- (A) goal, current
- (B) test, enduring
- (C) strategy, modern
- (D) maneuver, complex