

‘Mní Wičhóni’ is a Lakota phrase that means water is life. What could be more true? We drink water, we bathe in it, we use it for travel, it flows through our homes and communities, it grows our crops, and even makes up half of our bodies. We rely on water in its scarcity and abundance. Protecting water is imperative for us now and for future generations to come.

For many communities the concern of clean water has become a prevalent issue. In recent years with the growing concern for the ecosystem and building anxiety about climate change, people all over the world have protested for the right to clean water. Indigenous Americans and environment activists protested the construction of Line 3 across Canada and the United States. The oil pipeline was built by Enbridge, a Canadian Pipeline company who was responsible for the largest oil spill in the U.S., to transport one million barrels of tar sands, everyday, across major water resources. These major resources include the Mississippi River, Lake Superior, and untouched wetlands. The risk of these bodies of water was met with hundreds of protests and petitions to stop construction. Enbridge has a history of faulty lines and the tar sands industry is dying. The risk posed to millions of people’s drinking, bathing, recreational, and rightful access to water is something both the company Enbridge and American and Canadian governments have ignored. This project has also violated treaties with the Indigenous communities that the Canadian government agreed to.

Indigenous people have been at the forefront of the fight against Line 3, and are also a community heavily affected by access to water. During the mid-20th century, uranium mining was booming in the southwest and many Navajo people worked in the mines. This uranium, along with arsenic found between layers of sediments, made its way into the reservation water supply. The effects were tragic and included risk of kidney disease and kidney cancer. The waters are still contaminated, but the EPA has been working to help clean up since 1994. Due to the low socio-economic state these Navajo communities remain in, many can’t afford access to uncontaminated water. This is unacceptable.

Water is, and should always be, a human right. Access to uncontaminated, unthreatened water should be reality for everyone, globally. There are many bodies of water and many communities who have been threatened or violated because of the ignorance of people in power. Water is central to this planet, our cultures and our lives. It is our responsibility to protect our planet and our communities, right down to the rivers. Water is life and without access to clean water, all life is threatened.