

Survival is still the issue.

This is Liliias Jones with commentary.

It may not make "Today in History," but six years ago, 12,000 people were living in a tent city on a hot, dusty ranch pasture at the end of a runway. The event was the 1980 Black Hills Survival Gathering, put together by a group called the Black Hills Alliance.

The runway was part of Ellsworth Air Force Base, which along with Minot, Grand Forks, and 3 other bases comprise the Strategic Air Command, the center of our nation's nuclear forces. Day and night, the B-52 bombers took off and landed overhead, reminding those of us there that the issue we faced really was survival.

The Survival Gathering actually grew out of concern over pollution, from uranium mining and nuclear power to powerlines, toxic wastes, and chemical plants. The Gathering also grew out of concern for the most threatened peoples of the globe -- from family farmers to the native peoples who were and are threatened with extinction due to the inroads of European-based cultures. But the basic issue, as we came to understand over the course of that 10 days, was land and the control of land.

Who controls the land determines how it is used. And control of land has meant power throughout human history. While anyone with a basic understanding of history knows that, what proved more elusive to most of us was the variety of ways land is controlled in modern society. For example, we can see that farmers have little actual control over their land. Banks have control through loans. Those who set market prices control who plants what where and how.

There are also hidden land controls in urban areas. The federal, state, or city government can at any time -- and with little oversight condemn a person's land for a highway, pipeline, powerline, dam, or waste dump. And industries control neighboring land. For example, do I really control my land if a neighboring plant has the right to spew toxic chemicals that make my land unusable or threaten my life? Do I really control my land if someone has the right to pollute the water I drink, water that flows beneath my land?

Those of us at the Survival Gathering got a better understanding of these issues. We also realized that there's no longer any place to run to avoid them. Moving from the city to avoid pollution doesn't do much good when chemicals are sprayed all over the countryside. Moving to the deep woods doesn't do any good when minerals are

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found beneath one's land. Moving to the seashore doesn't avoid spills from offshore drilling, which can be done without our approval. Life-threatening pollution is literally everywhere. Add the threat from nuclear annihilation, and a person can get downright paralyzed with fear.

But the Survival Gathering was also about hope. People shared their experiences fighting, and often winning, the movement of polluting forces into their areas. People shared tactics and strategies. People shared the power of information.

I often run into people who were there and who felt empowered to do more, to keep up their local battles, and not to give up hope. More people need to catch this hope and to move with it. Only people can change the present conditions. Only people can decide to control the land for good, not ill.

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