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Sharing & Learning

Interview with Dennis Bodenchuk Chief of Geology Indian Affairs

Extractive Industries on Indigenous Territories
Peru, 2015



CONTEXT IN PERU: Although nearly 10% of Peru's land is designated as indigenous territories, Peru's government retains all rights to mineral and oil & gas resources throughout the country. The government does, however, have a legal obligation to consult with indigenous communities, but it does not need their approval to license others to undertake extractive projects on their lands. Due to the negative impacts associated with many of these operations, including illegal extractive activities, protests have at times turned violent. For instance, since 2011, socio-environmental conflicts related to minerals extraction have led to 53 murders and almost 1500 injuries.

DOI-ITAP ASSIGNMENT: Dennis Bodenchuk traveled to Peru to participate in the first forum on extractive industries on indigenous territories organized by the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDESEP, a national indigenous rights organization) and Equitable Origin (EO), and co-funded by EO and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Bodenchuk shared his role and responsibilities as a U.S. Government (USG) technical adviser regarding natural resources extraction on U.S. tribal lands, as well as commenting on the working relationship between the USG and Native Americans tribes. This interview is presented below in a question and answer format.

**What was your
role in the Forum
on Indigenous
Communities
and Extractive
Industries?**

My overall role was to share oil and gas and mining best practices in the U.S. I made sure that people understood the relationship between the USG and the indigenous people in America. I let them know that there are very basic and fundamental legal authorities dating all the way back to the 1700s that describe the legal relationship between the USG and indigenous people. I also described how this relationship has evolved to the point where tribes have the autonomy to do things they want to do. I made sure that the audience knew there was an office in the USG [the office I work in] that assists tribes in having a better understanding about their resources through assessment of the resource, knowing the value of those resources, and assisting the tribes in negotiating agreements with developers.

**How was your
experience during
preparation for
this assignment?**

It was excellent from beginning to end. The level of assistance provided to me was spectacular. DOI-ITAP coordinated pre-travel telephone conferences and set up a meeting with the organizers in Peru prior to my presentation. This allowed me to understand what the objectives were, who the audience was, what message they should leave with, what types of examples I should provide, and a whole host of background information about the existing development scenario in the Amazon. All this made me feel very comfortable and confident when I arrived in Peru, because the logistics and the presentation were taken care.

What do you consider were your main contributions to the event's discussions?

The response from the people to my presentation was terrific. They were engaged and they asked a variety of questions. My main contribution was to let the audience know that there is truly a better way to handle exploration and development of oil and gas. They do not have to start from scratch, there is a model that exists in the US and that, fundamentally, the various parties that are involved in that model are not so different than in South America – federal government and indigenous people.

The indigenous people in the Amazon really share so much in common with the tribes here in the US; the difference is their experience right now is what occurred in 1800s and early to mid-1900s in the US. Even though the legal framework was there starting in the late 1700s, the U.S. Federal Government ignored it for the most part, and the tribes did not have the necessary knowledge and understanding about their rights. This was made worse by the fact that in many cases the tribes and the USG did not share a common language.

What was the impact of this experience at your professional and personal level?

It had a big impact on several different levels. First, to understand the issues of indigenous people outside the US, and to hear the stories first hand was eye opening for me. Second, there is such a huge need there, to reach out and help others, that it affected me personally. Here is a group of people who are looking for assistance, searching for knowledge, and they have such a commitment to their people, it was so refreshing to see that. Maybe I helped out a little bit. The impact was all at the personal level, it was terrific. I cannot tell you how grateful I was to go there and play a small role.

What would you tell someone considering participating in a DOI- ITAP assignment?

I would say, please understand who your audience is and the message that you want to leave with them. You need someone that can go beyond simply the rules and regulations of the bureaucracy. It is not just about the US; it is not just about rules and regulations. Above all, the most important and effective tools to consider are that it is about human relationships, about wanting and needing to do the right thing, including respecting people, culture and reclaiming the land. We must connect on a human level.



Past extractives development in Peru has caused severe environmental degradation and social conflict. An extreme example of this conflict is the 2009 clash between indigenous people and the Peruvian government over oil development in the Amazon. (Photo by skyscrapercity.com)

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