

October 5, 2016

Dear Mr. President,

I write as a sculptor of walrus ivory and bowhead whale bone, from the food sources I was raised on, and as a founding member of Sikuliiq: Alaska Native Artist's Advocacy Group. Sikuliiq means "new, thin ice along the edges of older floes." It is a Siberian Yupik word from St. Lawrence Island in northwestern Alaska, my birthplace. As artists and allies we formed our Facebook group in response to the fallout to our precious subsistence resource of walrus ivory, stemming from your Executive Order ending the elephant ivory trade in the country. You are quoted in the United States Wildlife Trafficking Alliance newsletter as follows:

"I can announce that we're proposing a new rule that bans the sale of virtually all ivory across our state lines, which will eliminate the market for illegal ivory in the United States," Obama stated at a press conference in Kenya.

"Virtually all ivory" conflates our legal and sustainable use of walrus ivory from food sources with the tragic poaching of African elephants solely for their tusks. While your Executive Order includes an exemption for items permitted under existing federal legislation, not many people know that this includes the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and those who do know have not cared enough to raise awareness and sensitivity, or any form of redress. We are not explicitly identified as exempted in your Executive Order, nor in the numerous state's new laws banning not only elephant ivory, but other animal by products of species they'd subjectively like to protect, such as whales, polar bears, and sea otters. These are our historic resources, also, and federally protected subsistence resources. Consequently there is mass confusion about what exactly is now illegal, and some states have banned walrus ivory anyway, despite MMPA.

Our artists are important providers within our communities through the small revenue our arts and crafts generate, in accordance with the cultural value that prohibits waste. In some remote communities with a 75% unemployment rate (personal communication: Sivuqaq, Inc., Gambell, Alaska), our work is the only economic resource. Oftentimes the income is used by our hunters for further subsistence pursuits, a never ending responsibility of our providers. On St. Lawrence Island approximately 70-80% of our food continues to be from the sea. This is true in lesser but not insignificant degrees throughout Alaskan Native's villages.

According to some published scientific estimates, the walruses are now at capacity for the arctic and subarctic ecosystems that we share, and this positive factor demonstrates a successful recovery from the devastating commercial European harvests of these mammals for oil and ivory in the 1800-1900s. This heedless slaughter contributed to a year of starvation and death in 1879 on St. Lawrence Island, where only 200 people from an estimated population of 3,000 survived. Many of these deaths were from our lack of immunity to the diseases these foreigners carried from their domestication of

animals, in addition to severe weather conditions and the decimation of the whale and walrus populations.

Significantly, we've continued to harvest walrus during this entire period of recovery in numbers, proving that our sustainable use does not cause an endangered status. Indeed, an informative white paper from the MacArthur Foundation, Indigenous Peoples and Conservation (Judith Alcorn), notes the growing global awareness of the important role Indigenous Peoples cultural values contribute to successful, authentic conservation. We've sustainably managed our environments and animal populations for countless centuries. We are aware of the balance required to safeguard the earth's natural resources, and our methods are now studied and emulated.

The MacArthur Foundation's white paper outlines the various types of human rights violations that are too often the legacy of well funded conservation organizations, in their work to save endangered species and preserve biodiversity. Indigenous People suffer displacement and severance from their sustainable resources and tribal territories, a cruel irony, given our very long and wise stewardship role.

This is colonization under a newly cloaked guise of benevolence. The last one was all about the self serving myth of Manifest Destiny and the divine right of kings. That history is largely ignored in America, whereas in other parts of the world Peace and Reconciliation efforts can be ignited through these conservation efforts when the our land based cultures are respected and our concerns taken seriously.

An example of successful stewardship is found on St. Lawrence Island. Our leaders opted out of the cash settlement provided in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and consequently retain fee simple title, surface and subsurface, to our ancestral territory. In the four decades since the passage of ANCSA, our Native organizations have declined numerous offers from various mineral and oil field companies for development of our resources or our advantageous location in the Bering Sea. We are less than 40 miles from Russia and our kinship based clans extend across the continents. We have consistently chosen to protect our environment for the sake of the animals on which we depend, and whom we've respected as sentient beings with whom we are engaged in important relationship.

This successful conservation commitment is impressive given the poverty levels of our two villages, and the high expense of living in remote Alaska. There are sporadic poaching incidents, but they are not frequent and we are generally self reporting. It is understood that the actions of a few implicate our entire cultures in the double standards of the dominant culture.

The MacArthur research, compiled from many wildlife and environmental undertakings, further denotes the complicity of unsympathetic and at times corrupt governments, as another factor with detrimental impact to our human rights, our cultures and territories.

For instance, we American Inuit were informed about the ban of our arts mediums through the confusion generated by the ivory ban legislation currently sweeping the states. A press release from the Department of Interior stated they'd reviewed their mandated responsibility to consult with Alaska Native and American Indian tribes, and decided none of us were affected by the ban of "blood ivory." A pretty glaring oversight, in my opinion, that proves the need for more Native Alaskan staff within these organizations that wield tremendous control over us.

Meanwhile, musicians with less than 2 ounces of ivory were invited to the table to express their concerns, as were sports hunters and knife and gun manufacturers.

We, who depend on the walrus for nutritional needs, and walrus ivory as one of our few economic resources, were not provided an opportunity to express our concerns and issues. We, who are not poachers or sports hunters of elephant ivory, have been banned by association, regardless of our rights. It is highly unlikely that we'll be compensated for losses incurred, and we now must expend unnecessary and most likely costly financial resources fixing this mess created by your administration. This is truly not fair, and does not honor the trust responsibilities inherent to our rights.

While this may be an unintentional oversight, all attempts at communication after the fact, by our various Alaska Native organizations and Sikuliiq advocacy, have been met with a wall of silence from USFWS and the Department of Interior. I've tried unsuccessfully to get representation of our concerns at the recent International Union of the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) convention in Hawaii. I know you were there, hailing their efforts. The Canadian Inuit Circumpolar Conference delegation were in attendance and vigilant, and fought to address our shared objections and concerns. They were ignored, disregarded, treated as traitors to the designated greater cause of eliminating ivory markets worldwide.

In addition, I've emailed the USFWS representative in the Western Alliance Of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, a Mr. Bruce Dale, who attends to CITES matters, and urged him to responsibly represent our urgent dilemma at the recent convention in Johannesburg, South Africa. In mass emails, donors were urged to assist in this gathering to save the elephants and eliminate worldwide ivory markets. He has not replied to my email, and it's unknown to me whether he represented or ignored our concerns, although I've yet to see press coverage affirming he was responsive to our dilemma. Nevertheless, he was duly informed, whatever the case may be.

IUCN and other groups and coalitions have purportedly adopted the UN Declaration of Indigenous Peoples Rights in their work, but they have yet to commit in any meaningful way to human rights. This is evident in this ivory ban, and we are no match for their emotive mass email campaigns that make no distinction between walrus and elephant ivory, despite the fact our hunting and markets have no impact on the poaching of elephants. New or fossilized walrus ivory is easily and visually differentiated from elephant or mammoth ivory. Mammoth ivory, another traditional arts medium, is from an extant animal and poses no threat to elephants. It, too, is distinguishable from old elephant ivory, which is the method of deception used by operators of the black market in elephant ivory.

Due to our current erasure by our government agencies, and in the blatant disregard of our legal rights afforded under MMPA and Tribal Consultation, our market is slowly but surely being eliminated. This is in alignment with the conservation communities stated goals. Former USFWS employees do become executives in these conservation groups, and this is a conflict of interest when it comes to the protection of our rights.

In Greenland, an EU ban on seal products destroyed 90 percent of our fellow Inuit's seal product's market. Again, this effort was led by conservation groups and their opposition to the inhumane methods of non-Native commercial sealers. This situation is identical to ours in that seals are an important food and subsistence resource of circumpolar peoples. This ban affects Canadian Inuits as well. Our outreach to the business owners of the Native arts and crafts sector indicates that the EU ban has begun to affect our seal products market as well. Confiscations are reported in San Francisco of

entirely legal seal products, with customers incurring the high cost of the process of return for these items. One business reported a discontinuance of these once popular items, as customers are not willing to purchase due to the possibility of confiscation and the fees involved in their return.

In the EU seal ban, the Prime Minister of Denmark stepped in belatedly to protect the rights and resources of the Greenlandic people, but their market has yet to recover adequately. Greenpeace apologized in the media for their role in this destruction to an ancient people's culture, vowing they'd do better in the future. My fear is that this scenario is now replicated in the United States, and that this is just the beginning of eliminating all products not from commercial enterprises, such as leather from cattle. States have listed whales, polar bears, and sea otters in their bans. These are also important food sources and the inedible portions produce arts and crafts, and again MMPA protects our right to harvest.

This is absolutely a time sensitive matter, and it has been a frustrating process thus far to get it addressed in a timely manner. Through Sikuliiq advocacy we've enlisted the support of the National Congress of the American Indian in this issue, as well as Senator Murkowski's office. She has initiated dialogue with Governor Brown of California, the site of the most confusion. Our Alaskan organizations, Kawerak, Inc., and Bering Straits Native Corporation, in the Bering Straits region, are also informed and actively seeking to address this through their respective channels.

We now may face a costly and lengthy battle in federal court to protect our rights under MMPA. We bear the brunt of the cost of fixing this mess that is not of our creation. We will most likely face it again, with some other species, some other historic resource.

We do not have access to the kinds of revenue of these conservation agencies, who are listed as charitable organizations, to raise awareness and build sensitivity for the human concerns in the realm of this anti - trafficking movement. All countries with ivory issues, whether source, transit, or destination, must create and fund their National Ivory Action Plans, and build the necessary capacity to implement their plans. We are not identified as a source country, though we absolutely are, and so are not provided with the tools and funds necessary for our own capacity building, which we now require to maintain a vigilant safeguarding of our few remaining resources.

Our villages face the reality of our sea mammals carrying high levels of PCBs in their fat layers. The world's pollutants travel to our cooler regions and settle in the environment. Climate change brings sinking villages and disappearing ice, thawing permafrost and the release of methane gas. We face uncertain futures. Our newly open seas are regarded as a highly anticipated opportunity by many countries not remotely connected to our environment.

Our rights and culture must be protected within this modern day gold rush. We must be treated fairly and equitably, and there must be the creation and articulation of ethical protocols demanded from all agencies that want to do business in our ancient homelands. We must share in the co-management of resources, and in the opportunities and challenges brought by the very possible tremendous change to our world, again.

The conservation groups do not deserve any of the millions of dollars provided them by our government if they do not fully commit to respectful and equitable collaborations with indigenous people worldwide. The local and indigenous populations should be the designated points of

accountability for these groups in their work within our regions. We must demand that more funds from their coffers provide for the poverty, habitat loss, and climate change issues that impact elephant and other animal populations. There is little to no accountability in the current scenario, and I've come to liken these groups to televangelists and charitable organizations who take in millions in donations for noble causes, yet spend substantial amounts instead on their executive structures.

This new dilemma we face is unconscionable. Decisions are made by people far removed from our realities, such as the over reach of eliminating all ivory markets worldwide, regardless of differing regional concerns and situations. This type of paternalistic treatment and disregard is nothing new to us, it is the status quo. Our sole economy in some regions of Alaska is set to suffer unnecessary and perhaps unrecoverable damage and possible elimination without any consultation, in the name of saving elephants we shall never see in our lifetime. By all means, save the elephants, they are wonderful, sentient creatures. Just don't punish and conflate us with poachers, terrorists, and criminal syndicates. Many of us, including myself, are United States Veterans.

I voted for you, Sir, and watched in anger and frustration as you withstood, with admirable dignity, the predictable and ugly racism, the treasonous behavior from Congress. I was given a pin of your family by my late mother, who supported you even with her limited grasp of English. It is on my altar as I pray that you hear me and are moved to right action. You've done much for Native Americans and the environment, and I am grateful. Yet, apparently even your commitment could be strengthened. We've waited a long time for equal rights, equal protection; we are still waiting and fighting for change. When our rights to consultation are routinely ignored, as in Standing Rock, or in this over reaching wildlife trafficking ban, we pay dearly time and again for our crime of being the original people on this land. We need and demand change. It is time to repair relationships with Tribal People everywhere.

Now they want to ban our art, the most important side of this to me, personally, and which I haven't discussed for the sake of brevity. I've attached an image of my work, now outlawed in many states, that speaks to this. This piece was a part of an exhibit by Alaska Native Women Artists, called the Ceremony of Healing, which spoke to the tremendous degree of violence against us, and lack of police protection for us. It is entitled "What Does It Take For You To See My Heart?," and is in the collection of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art. Materials: Walrus ivory, stomach, and penis bone, seal whiskers, beads, wood, whalebone, metal.

This isn't just about an economic resource, Sir, it's about our art, our ancient cultures, the things that bind us together as a people.

When will they have enough, Sir?

Sincerely,

Paallengetaq

Aka

Susie Silook

