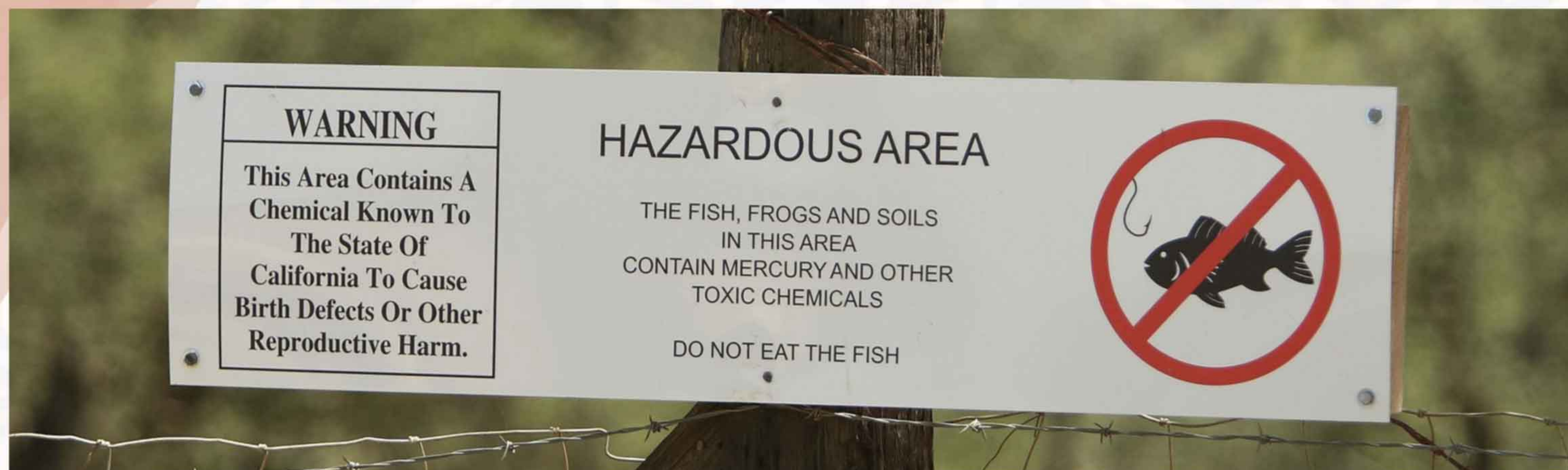




INTERNATIONAL INDIAN TREATY COUNCIL

MERCURY AND THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



MERCURY: AN ONGOING THREAT TO OUR HEALTH AND UNBORN GENERATIONS

Mercury is a heavy metal and a neurotoxin with dangerous effects on human health and the development of unborn babies and young children. It is found in nature, but the most dangerous sources of exposure are the result of human activity. Mercury is linked to serious health problems, including heart disease and neurological problems. The most serious impacts are to the brain, kidneys and nervous systems of unborn and nursing babies and young children. In 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimated that more than 75,000 babies are born each year pre-polluted with mercury as a result of exposure by the mother, putting them at risk for learning disabilities and other kinds of neurological damage. Umbilical cord blood has been found to contain almost twice the level of mercury than that found in the mothers' blood.

Mercury was widely used to extract ore in gold mining in the US and Canada before 1950's and is still used in small scale "artisanal" gold mining in many countries today. Indigenous Peoples living near or downstream from abandoned gold mining sites, and those engaged in small scale mining activities using mercury in Latin America, Asia and other regions, continue to be directly impacted. Current gold mining and processing can also produce mercury contamination. In 2003, gold mining and processing at Placer Dome's Cortez mine and Barrick's Goldstrike in Northern Nevada released 2,435 pounds of mercury into the environment.

The greatest source of mercury contamination in North America is from coal-fired powerplants which emit mercury that can travel through the air to settle on lands and waters many miles from the original source. Medical and municipal waste incinerators, paper milling and other industrial processes also produce mercury. [Dental amalgam](#), incorrectly called "silver" teeth fillings, contains up to 51% mercury and is another major source.

The most toxic form to humans and wildlife is methylated mercury, created when mercury is exposed to decaying plant matter, for example in marshes or lakes created by dams. Methylmercury bio-accumulates or builds up in the cells of plants and fish, moving up the food chain in higher and higher concentrations. Humans and animals such as seals, panthers, eagles, otters, waterfowl and bears are exposed by eating contaminated fish which can contain up to a million times more mercury than the surrounding waters. Most impacted Indigenous Peoples do not have access to adequate information about the health effects of mercury contamination. They have been denied their "Right to Know" about this serious health situation.

MERCURY: IT'S COLONIAL LEGACY AND ONGOING IMPACTS

During its colonization of the Americas, Spain exported an estimated 45,000 tons of mercury to Mexico causing contamination of soil and waterways to this day. In Boriken (Puerto Rico) coal ash dumps have caused severe developmental disorders, increased levels of Siamese twins, miscarriages and other reproductive health impacts.

During the California Gold Rush miners dug up 12 billion tons of earth and used approximately 26 million pounds of mercury to extract gold ore. Clear Lake, the traditional homeland to Pomo Indian fishing communities, contains over 100 tons of mercury, while the amount of mercury required to violate US federal health standards is equivalent to one gram in a small lake. Abandoned gold and mercury mines were never adequately cleaned up and left contaminated sites that continue to produce toxic runoff. In 2021, the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) identified over 100 site-specific advisories for lakes, rivers, bays and reservoirs, with special warnings for pregnant women.



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In British Columbia, Canada, the dam holding Teck Cominco's mercury mine tailings burst in 2004, releasing large amounts of mercury into waters used for traditional subsistence fishing. In Northern Ontario, paper mill emissions containing mercury have had devastating effects on the health and subsistence fishing of the Grassy Narrows First Nation Peoples.

The United Nations (UN) Environmental Programme estimates that over one million people in Latin America, including many women and children, are currently involved in small-scale mining using mercury. In Boriken (Puerto Rico) and the Dominican Republic coal ash dumps have caused severe developmental disorders, increased levels of Siamese twins, miscarriages and other reproductive health impacts



IITC'S ADVOCACY FOR ELIMINATION AND CLEANUP OF MERCURY

The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) advocates for Indigenous Peoples to be fully informed about the dangers of mercury, to ensure clean-up of contaminated sites impacting their lands and waters, and to halt further contamination, based on their rights to health and Free Prior and informed Consent.

IITC began to address the human rights and health impacts of mercury contamination in 1999 in response to information disseminated by the State of California for the 150th anniversary of the Gold Rush which failed to mention the devastating impacts on California Indian Nations and the environment. IITC has produced two "Gold Greed and Genocide" videos addressing the impacts of the California Gold Rush, including a study guide for students, that are available for download at <https://www.iitc.org/gold-greed-genocide/>.

In 2009, IITC launched the Indigenous Women's Environmental and Reproductive Health Initiative to provide information and training, and advocate for the rights of Indigenous women, children and families affected by mercury, pesticides and other environmental contaminants.

From 2009 – 2013, IITC participated in the development of the Minamata Convention, an international legally binding Treaty to eliminate mercury contamination on the global and national levels. It went into legal force on August 16th, 2017, after 50 countries including the US ratified the convention. Indigenous Peoples must be actively involved in this process to ensure full and effective implementation of the Minamata Convention's commitment to eliminate the release of mercury into the environment, including in our own homelands.

THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP MERCURY OUT OF OUR BODIES IS TO KEEP IT OUT OF THE ENVIRONMENT. THE GOAL IS TO ELIMINATE MERCURY USE AND ENSURE CLEAN-UP OF CONTAMINATED AREAS.

For more information or to get involved in IITC's work on Mercury:
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Connect with IITC online: subscribe to IITC's e-News on our web page at www.iitc.org
or connect with IITC on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

For more information on the impacts of mercury and global work for prevention of exposure and clean up contact the International Pollution Elimination Network (IPEN): ipen.org/toxic-priorities/mercury

The International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), founded in 1974, is an Indigenous organization working for the protection of human rights, cultures, treaties, and traditional lands from the local to the international levels. In 1977, IITC was the first Indigenous organization to receive Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and in 2011 was the first to be upgraded to General Consultative Status.