

The famous prison on Alcatraz closed in 1963, and the US government declared the island 'surplus federal property'.



Activist Belva Cottier proposed that the Bay Area's Indians could occupy the island legally via the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, a treaty which returned to Native peoples all abandoned and out of use federal lands.

*Excerpt from This Land is Our Land by by Eleri Harris and Mariah-Rose Marie M*

# THE OCCUPATION OF ALCATRAZ, 1969-1971: DEFENDING A ROCK, DEFENDING NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS

Sustainable Development Goals #10 & #16

## BACKGROUND

Alcatraz is a rocky island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. For thirty years, it was home to a maximum security federal prison, housing some of the country's most dangerous criminals and gangsters. The prison was officially closed in 1963 and the property lay vacant for several years. In November of 1969 a group of several dozen Native American young people traveled to the island by boat and began an occupation that lasted for eighteen months. They claimed a right to the land under the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 and under a federal policy that stated that all retired, abandoned or out-of-use federal land was to be returned to the Native people from whom it was originally taken.

Men, women and children from many different American Indian tribes took part in the occupation. They were Cheyenne, Eskimo, Mohawk, Shoshone, Ho-Chunk and more. They called themselves Indians of All Tribes (IOAT) and issued a proclamation demanding they be given the island to establish a Native American cultural center, school, and library. This was especially timely as a Native American Cultural Center in San Francisco had recently burned down. Over the course of the occupation thousands of people came to show their support, while up to 400 lived there semi-permanently.

Because the occupation lasted for more than a year, a great deal of organization was needed to provide food, shelter and schooling for the children, to communicate to the outside world and to negotiate with the U.S. government. Many problems also emerged as people disagreed about leadership, tactics and how to deal with the federal government.

Influenced by the civil rights struggle of African Americans in the 1960s, the occupation of Alcatraz by young Native people has been called the first pan-Indian act of civil disobedience in modern history. Many people say it brought the issue of the treaty rights and sovereignty of Native people to the foreground – a discussion that continues to this day.

## POSSIBLE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Civil disobedience is defined as the peaceful refusal to obey certain laws or government demands that are considered unjust. Why do people engage in civil disobedience? Do you think it is an effective method to create change?
- What is tribal sovereignty? How is land related to sovereignty, physically and symbolically?
- What does it mean to refer to something as pan-Indian? Are there other examples of pan-Indian activity today? If so, what is motivating that activity?
- Historians say the while the occupation of Alcatraz ended without Native demands being met, it gave birth to a social gains and political movements that continue to this day. Do you agree?
- What were the issues the Alcatraz Occupation grew out of, and where do those issues stand today?

## RESOURCES

### Personal Stories

- [Mankiller](#) - Trailer for the film about Wilma Mankiller
- [Alcatraz Occupation Four Decades Ago Led to Many Benefits for American Indians](#) (Indian Country Today)
- \* [The Rock that Hit the Water](#) - Trailer (If she can do it, you can too)
- [Contrary Warrior: The Life and Times of Adam Fortunate Eagle](#), film trailer (IMBD)
- [Photographing the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz: An Interview with Ilka Hartmann](#) (Medium)
- [Richard Oakes delivering the Alcatraz Proclamation \(1969\)](#) (San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive)
- \* [Alcatraz November 2017](#) #Indigenizethebay

### Art & Images

- [Comic - This Land is Our Land: The Native American Occupation of Alcatraz](#)
- \* [Why is Ai Weiwei Breaking Into Alcatraz?](#) (Smithsonian)
- \* [Coit Tower Projections - 40 year anniversary of the Alcatraz Occupations](#)
- [Alcatraz - Indian Occupation Period Photo Gallery](#) (National Park Service)

### Articles

- [Alcatraz Proclamation of 1969](#) (Found SF)
- \* [Alcatraz American Indian Occupation Graffiti Preserved](#) (New York Times)
- [Native American Activists Occupy Alcatraz Island, 45 Years Ago](#) (History.com)
- [1969 Alcatraz takeover 'changed the whole course of history'](#) -(CNN)
- \* [The occupation of Alcatraz: Don't give us apologies. Give us what we really want.](#) (The Native Press)

- [We Hold the Rock](#) (National Park Service)
- [Alcatraz, Indian Land](#) (Native Peoples Magazine)
- [Native American Activism in the 1960s and 1970s](#) (Newsela)
- \* [What do the Sustainable Development Goals Mean for Indigenous Peoples?](#) (Cultural Survival)
- \* [Tribes call on Washington to respect Native sovereignty](#) (The Salt Lake Tribune)
- \* [Lenape Indian Tribe looks to reclaim historic Delaware land, establish sovereignty](#) (Delaware Online)

### Data and Maps

- [Interactive map](#) (Native-Land.ca)
- [Timeline of the Alcatraz Occupation](#) (PBS)

### Videos and Audio

- [Debate on the Rock: The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz](#) (History Day Documentary)
- [Colin Kaepernick at Alcatraz Thanksgiving Sunrise Ceremony](#) (Lakota Peoples Law Project)
- [Sunrise Ceremony on Alcatraz Celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day](#) (KQED News)
- [We Hold the Rock](#) (NPS)
- [American Indian Movement: Alcatraz](#) (KPIX)

### Websites

- \* [INDIGENIZE THE BAY!](#) (Indians of All Tribes)
- \* [50th Anniversary: Peaceful Occupation of Alcatraz Island](#) (Facebook event)
- [Alcatraz Island Museum Collection](#) (Golden Gate National Recreation Area)
- [Occupation of Alcatraz Collection](#) (Bay Area Television Archive)
- [Northern Plains Treaties: Is a Treaty Intended to be Forever?](#) (Native Knowledge 360)
- [How Do Native People and Nations Experience Belonging?](#) (Native Knowledge 360)

