

Chief Sealth Letter

The following represents excerpts from a letter, written in 1855, that was sent to President Franklin Pierce by Chief Sealth of the Duwamish Tribe of the State of Washington. It concerned the proposed purchase of the tribe's land. The letter excerpts are printed courtesy of Dale Jones of the Seattle office of Friends of the Earth.

The actual letter:

THE EARTH IS SACRED

“The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and good will...we will consider your offer. What Chief Sealth says, the Great Chief in Washington can count on as truly as the return of the seasons. My words are like the stars-they do not set.

How can you buy or sell the sky or the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us. Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and the experience of my people.

There's no quiet place in the big cities...no place to hear the leaves of the spring or the rustle of insect's wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand, the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond and the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a mid-day rain, or scented with a pinon pine. The air is precious to the Indian. For all things share the same breath: the beasts, the trees, the man.

If I decide to accept, I will make one condition. All people must treat the beasts of this land as their brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way. What are humans without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beast also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

When the last Indian has vanished from the earth and the memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forest will still hold the spirits of my people, for they love this earth as the newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. If we sell you our land, love it as we've loved it. Care for it, as we've cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your might, and with all your heart, preserve it for your children. This earth is precious.”

The revised letter for Earth Club Kids:

THE EARTH IS SACRED

“How can you buy or sell the sky or the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can

you buy them from us? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is special in the memory and the experience of my people.

There's no quiet place in the big cities...no place to hear the leaves of the spring or the sound of insect's wings. But perhaps because I am an Indian and do not understand, the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a bird or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond and the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a mid-day rain, or scented with a pine. The air is precious to the Indian. For all things share the same breath: the beasts, the trees, the man.

If I decide to accept, I will make one condition. All people must treat the animals of this land as their brothers. I am an Indian and I do not understand any other way. What are humans without the animals? If all the animals were gone, men would die from great loneliness, for whatever happens to the animals also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever happens to the earth happens to the sons and daughters of the earth.

When the last Indian has vanished from the earth, these shores and forest will still hold the spirits of my people, for they love this earth. If we sell you our land, love it as we've loved it. Care for it, as we've cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your might, and with all your heart, preserve it for your children. This earth is precious."