

Sacred Land Film Project

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Politics and Prayer

by Christopher McLeod

AS THE SUN'S FIRST RAYS poured over the caldera's eastern rim, two Zuni elders walked slowly across the white crusty surface of the small lake and planted prayer feathers in the flesh of the Salt Mother. It could have been a thousand years ago, when pilgrims from Chaco Canyon came to gather the pure, life-giving salt regarded as sacred.

Our camera was set up about 40 yards from the two men, on the edge of Zuni Salt Lake in New Mexico, a remote sanctuary now threatened by a coal stripmine. The Salt River Project apparently needs to supply more electricity to Phoenix.

Edward Wemytewa, our Zuni guide, had briefed us in the dark, an hour before sunrise, as we drove toward the lake. They were familiar instructions, and important ones. Don't get too close, just film a snippet, and be aware that there are risks involved in filming this kind of thing in this place. So be careful.

After some scurrying and worrying, a scene was now unfolding that had not been filmed since the 1920s. I looked into the video monitor and was stunned by the beauty of the image. The men prayed quietly. The sun backlit the lake, the salt, the feathers and the men. I nodded toward the monitor and whispered to Edward, "Have a look."

He squatted down and peered into the shaded television screen and his eyes widened.

"Can you zoom in a little?" he whispered to the cameraman.

We had come to Salt Woman's home to offer prayers and answer a Zuni call for



GATHERING SALT AT ZUNI SALT LAKE

assistance in their ongoing battle—soon to be a full fledged war—to stop the 18,000-acre Fence Lake Coal Mine, which the nation's third largest public utility wants to impose on Zuni aboriginal lands. The miners will pump groundwater to control dust, depleting an aquifer and threatening to dry up Salt Lake.

The air was still, silent and cold. A dove sang softly. A flock of ibis lifted off the lake and circled the shore as sunlight reflected off their wings. For the next hour the three Zuni men used scraper and shovel to harvest the salt that comes to the surface with the scant flow of underground waters. Ancestral spirits live in the aquifer but the Salt River Project owns the rights to the water.

After the pilgrims loaded their salt into a pick-up truck and drove off toward Zuni village, we stayed behind with two Fish and Game Department rangers, so that we could film the landscape. We drove to the base of a small cinder cone that sits in the center of the larger caldera at the southern edge of Salt Lake. One of the rangers led us up a trail to the top. Nestled in the cen-

ter is a deep crater and a dark green pond. We shot some panoramics and then set up our camera to get a shot of the water. I moved close to the monitor to look into the lens shade that blocks out the sunlight. Zoom into green. Suddenly, white sparkles flashed across the dark liquid, glittering randomly in successive waves that made everyone gasp.

"She's talking to us," production assistant Jaime Chavez exclaimed, as another sprinkle of starlight danced across the water.

The ranger who took us up the cinder cone asked me if I'd been able to see any of the ceremony in the plaza over the last four days.

"Yes, were you participating?" I asked. He nodded.

"How do you feel after being out there so many days?" I asked.

"I'm tired," he replied. "But I feel good. Making people laugh is hard."

"Is that what it's about?" I asked.

He nodded again. "Yeah. Lifting people's spirits up. Harmony."

We looked back down into the shim-

mering lake and thought about the effect of a new coal stripmine on harmony.

Even before the November election opened the door for yet another orgy of materialism, energy companies were having their way with native sacred lands:

- In spite of several hydrology reports that predict Salt Lake will be harmed by the massive stripmine, the Department of the Interior issued a federal permit for the mine. The Salt River Project started construction of their railroad line in September, and already four human burials have been unearthed. They call this "mitigation" or "salvage archaeology."

- At Black Mesa, in Hopi-Navajo country, the world's largest private coal company stated its intention to stop pumping groundwater to slurry coal, which the Hopi claim is drying up their springs. Fred Palmer, Peabody Energy's vice president, told *Time* magazine that Peabody "does accept that the aquifer has religious significance." Peabody subsequently applied to the Office of Surface Mining to expand the mine and increase groundwater pumping by 32%. OSM scheduled public hearings at Hopi, but then cancelled them, under pressure from Peabody.

- At Medicine Lake in California, just east of Mt.

Shasta, requests by energy developers prompted Interior Secretary Gale Norton to reopen the record of decision in an area that had been closed to geothermal exploration by the Clinton Administration. The BLM quickly issued permits to Calpine, which is now drilling in the heart of a vision questing area sacred to the Pit River tribe.

- In one bit of good news, the National Trust for Historic Preservation bought the oil drilling rights to Valley of the Chiefs in Montana, a remote canyon rich in thousand-year old petroglyphs and sacred to at least 10 tribes. This delayed drilling for two years, but BLM could reissue leases in the future.

Energy companies weren't the only aggressive threats to sacred places this year:

- The mayor of Albuquerque approved the secret, overnight paving of a "private road" on the edge of Petroglyph National Monument, a culturally sensitive area that is slated to be cut in half by a controversial six-lane highway. The new, unplanned road, dubbed Universe Boulevard, may

make the highway project happen sooner because the new road makes it easy for 6,000 cars per day to flow onto an existing road in the park. Local activists protested, a few were arrested, but SAGE Council director Laurie Weahkee was so troubled by the new road that she says, "I haven't been able to go out there and look at it."

- Glamis Imperial of Canada continued to press for a cyanide heap-leach open-pit gold mine at Indian Pass in the California desert. The Quechan people defeated the proposed mine after a six-year fight in the 1990s, due to its potential impact on their land and culture, but Gale Norton reversed the decision and re-opened the permit process. Glamis's attorney was on the Bush transition team, and DOI and Glamis officials met numerous times before Norton's decision was announced. Members of the Quechan Nation read about it in the newspaper.

To help combat these growing threats we spent the year holding film screenings and public forums around the country, expanding our Web site to document assaults on sacred lands, producing a 48-page *Teacher's Guide* with two dozen lesson plans for educators and resources for students, and completing the DVD of *In the Light of Reverence*, which contains seven scenes that didn't make it into the film, an extended interview with Vine Deloria, Jr., two interviews with the filmmakers, and the video on Salt Lake that we produced for the Zuni.

Because comprehensive protection of sacred lands is still an urgent need, we also spent a good part of the year participating in the formation of a national Sacred Lands Protection Coalition, composed primarily of tribal leaders and native activists, but soon to expand to include environmental, human rights and religious groups. The coalition is focusing on education, consultation, oversight hearings and legislation.

The day after the coalition was formed, we held a screening of *In the Light of Reverence* at the Department of the Interior. Vine Deloria spoke after the film and urged coalition members not to get bogged down creating a new organization: "Identify the places that are threatened and get to work protecting them," he counseled.

The following day we showed the film at the Pentagon, invited by native people who work there and care about sacred



Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., speaking after the film screening at the Department of the Interior in Washington: "How are we going to present the sacred to people who have no idea what is sacred?"



The Sacred Lands Protection Coalition delegation to the Pentagon screening, from left, Ricardo Torres (Wintu), Vernon Masayesva and Leonard Selestewa (Hopi), Waimem, Mark and Caleen Sisk-Franco (Wintu)



LEFT: Zuni Governor Malcolm Bowekaty testifies before the Senate Indian Affairs Committee. Listening, from left, are Quechan leaders Lorey Cachora and President Mike Jackson. Bowekaty told the Senators, “Zuni Salt Lake is in real danger of disappearing. The Department of Interior has failed in its obligations under existing laws and trust responsibility to protect this sacred lake and associated cultural resources from destruction.”

BELOW: Tex Hall, president of the National Congress of American Indians, addresses a press conference after Congressman Nick Rahall (D, WV, at right) introduced legislation to protect sacred lands. Quechan President Mike Jackson is at left.

ALL PHOTOS BY
CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

sites on Defense Department land. Cranes were still repairing terrorists’ dirty work, men and women in camouflage were directing the war in Afghanistan, and Wintu leader Caleen Sisk-Franco offered a prayer to heal a suffering world.

At the coalition’s request, the Senate Indian Affairs Committee agreed to hold a series of five oversight hearings to investigate whether federal agencies are enforcing laws meant to protect sacred places. In June and July, fifteen native leaders, including Vernon Masayesva (Hopi) Caleen Sisk-Franco (Wintu) and Zuni Governor Malcolm Bowekaty, testified.

On July 16, Congressman Nick Rahall (D, WV) introduced legislation to protect sacred lands, stating at a press conference in front of the Capitol, “At a time when the Bush Administration is promoting increased energy development, we must enact comprehensive legislation that prohibits the loss of further Native American sacred lands. We must not stand idly by as these unique places are wiped off the face of the Earth.”

Some native activists oppose Rahall’s bill because it lacks a strong, enforceable cause of action, leaves out unrecognized tribes, and was drafted by legislative aides with minimal consultation. Tex Hall, president of the National Congress of American Indians, supported introducing a bill, saying, “If you don’t put in a crop, you’re not going to harvest anything. We can’t sit and wait until it’s a perfect bill.”



The Zuni men carried the salt back to the Zuni women. By tradition, women don’t go to Zuni Salt Lake. It is a sanctuary where thoughts of violence and conflict are left behind, and men who enter may not fight. The place and the rituals hold teachings about respect, gratitude and peace.

Back in the village, the pilgrims were surrounded by family. They poured the salt on the floor of the kitchen. Corn meal was offered, prayers were whispered, male hands and heads were cleansed by women and water.

In the end, we ate supper together, and after a long, tiring day I forgot to get one last shot of the Zuni putting salt on the food and the food in their mouths—Salt Mother coming home, having the last laugh.

A few months later I am running with Zuni and Hopi runners into the Hopi village of Shungopavi on Second Mesa in Arizona. The Hopi and Zuni are supporting each other’s struggles to protect their waters and lands from energy companies. While running, they pray. The run is a prayer.

Ahead of me, I see the ranger who accompanied us to Zuni Salt Lake running into the plaza—still seeking harmony, still trying to lift spirits in dark times, still resisting. Old women offer us a drink and pour water on our heads. A runner says something in Hopi and everyone laughs.

Native people have long confronted destruction with humor, and it continues.

