

Sacred Land Film Project

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Rights and Responsibilities

by Christopher McLeod

THE WILDFLOWERS bloomed late this year at Panther Meadows on Mt. Shasta. In mid-August, the Winnemem Wintu stood among patches of snow around their healing spring.

As the people arrived for an annual ceremony, performed since long before Columbus, the spring bubbled eagerly. Florence Jones, the 96-year-old Winnemem healer, calls the bubbles greeting. "It's a sign," explains her great-niece, Caleen Sisk-Franco, "that the spring is happy."

One by one, Caleen called five boys to stand above the spring, to receive blessings in the cleansing smoke of a sunflower root. Each of the boys was seeing the spring for the first time. At 15, they were finally old enough. A cousin, only 14, waited in camp at the base of the mountain—still too young, according to



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Wintu tradition, to be exposed to the power of the spring. Florence, too, waited at camp. The journey up the mountain and over the trail to the spring was too long and difficult.

At the edges of Panther Meadow, three Forest Service rangers stood quietly by the trail. As hikers approached, they were told about the ceremony, and asked to respect the privacy of the Winnemem. In the past, everyone has complied voluntarily.

The boys had each come down from the rock above the bubbling spring and returned to their places by the stream. Others were called up to offer their words to the spring, the mountain and the community. My turn came. I stepped up.

Just then, Forest Service archaeologist Julie Cassidy walked in and said quietly, "There is a man who refuses to turn back.

I tried to talk to him, but he just kept going. He could be trouble."

A young white man emerged from the trees at the side of the meadow, forty yards from the spring. Two women stood in the trees behind him. I was standing at the head of the spring, but everyone was turned the other way, looking at the man. Mark Franco, Caleen's husband, walked over and began talking to him.

"Please don't come any closer," Mark said, "we are doing a private healing ceremony." The man was angry.

He pushed by Mark, saying loudly, "Oh, you're a healer! You don't act like a healer." Mark took him by the arm and restrained him from going down the path to the spring.

Caleen stopped the ceremony.

I walked over. Six Wintu men were now standing between the intruder and the spring. The man was yelling, "You're not very peaceful."

"Maybe I should escort him out," I offered. Recognizing that we were the only two white guys in the meadow,



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(AT LEFT) FLORENCE JONES, 96, TOP DOCTOR OF THE WINNEMEM WINTU, AND DANIEL SCHOLFIELD, 2, EAGLE DANCER; (ABOVE) THE WINTU EAGLE DANCE AT MT. SHASTA.

he felt somehow like my responsibility. I took him by the elbow and started moving away.

"Man, who are those people?" he asked.

"They are Winnemem Wintu, and this mountain is sacred to them. They are doing a healing ceremony and you're interrupting it. Their ancestors have been doing this same ceremony here every summer for a thousand years."

"Well, I'm part Cherokee," he asserted. "It doesn't seem very healing to me, the way that guy treated me."

"They need privacy to sing their songs and heal their people." I replied. "They are preserving their culture and their ties to Mt Shasta. The Forest Service asks people to stay away. It's the least they can do, since the Winnemem aren't even a federally recognized tribe."

"They don't deserve to be recognized," he said, and at that I stopped and let him take his anger and defiance down the trail. He never looked back. The two women who had followed him in looked uncomfortable and embarrassed.

He reminded me of climbers who continue to climb Devils Tower in June to spite native people and the Park Service. Defiant, insulting, fast-talking, alleged defenders of individual rights, they are unable to understand the concept of restraint in the face of history, tradition, and community responsibility to place that has been fulfilled for generations.

Over dinner, Caleen said, "When the ceremony was interrupted, the spring stopped bubbling."

"It must have been a rude awakening for the teenage boys to see that kind of behavior during their first ceremony at the spring," I said.

She shook her head, "It didn't surprise them. They see racism every day. I'm just worried that this is a taste of what we have ahead—people asserting their right to do what they want and challenging the fact that we can't enforce the closure."

The experience reinforced for me the importance of the process that led to the Devils Tower climbing management plan. After several years of dialogue and listening, Lakota elders decided it was best to have the Park Service teach history and ask visitors to make a personal choice to respect the wishes of Native Americans. Trying to legislate the protection of sacred sites, by restrictive regulations or a one-size-fits-all national law, is very problematic with more than 500 sovereign Indian nations, each with their own places and traditions (mostly secret), not to mention the many unrecognized tribes like the Wintu.

When I read the sacred land protection bills that have been drafted in the last two years, in Washington, D.C., and California, I realize just how complicated this is—and how hard it is to draft a good bill. Each one was rewritten and amended repeatedly after developers and corporate lobbyists bent the ears of legislators until the legislation was unrecognizable. None of the bills passed, and it is probably a good thing they didn't.

As cultural resource specialist Tom King observed, "The whole business of sacred sites legislation is a long procession of the visually impaired leading the mentally deficient."

It will take years to bring about the self-reflection, awareness, and historical understanding necessary to change the materialistic, industrial paradigm, achieve reconciliation between native



Lise Balk King, The Native Voice

Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabeg)—author, activist, Program Director for Honor the Earth, and long-time advocate of stronger alliances between native people and environmentalists—speaks at a rally in defense of the Black Hills prior to a screening of *In the Light of Reverence* in Rapid City, South Dakota.

people and the heirs of colonialism, and make peace with the Earth. Education is the key.

In early September I traveled to Durban, South Africa, to show *In the Light of Reverence* at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Fifth World Parks Congress. The week-long conference of 2,500 people began with a welcoming address by Nelson Mandela, who said, "A sustainable future for humankind depends on a caring relationship with nature, as much as anything else."

The next evening, at a special ceremony on "The Spiritual Dimension of Parks," I showed *In the Light of Reverence* to a large and receptive audience. Dozens of people from all over the world approached me afterward to tell me stories of their struggles to protect sacred places.

During the following four days, I heard reports on sacred natural sites in parks or protected areas in 16 countries, including lakes and mountains in Latin America, pilgrimage trails in the Andes, valleys in the Himalaya, and sacred groves in Africa and India (there are 14,436 recognized sacred groves in India alone).



(From left) Chris Peters (Pohlik-lah/Karuk) of Seventh Generation Fund; Caleen Sisk-Franco (Winnemem Wintu), keeper of ceremonies; Vernon Masayeva (Hopi) of Black Mesa Trust; and Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), author, in a panel discussion after a film screening at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

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Listening to stories from around the world, I realized that sacred places are the original “protected areas.” Many are sanctuaries like Zuni Salt Lake, Devils Tower and Pipestone, where fighting was prohibited and special rules applied. I understood that our next film must emphasize that:

- biodiversity flourishes in areas considered to be sacred;
- conservationists can preserve biodiversity by supporting indigenous peoples’ management of their sacred places; and
- cultural diversity protects biodiversity.

A month later, at a screening in Denver, Vine Deloria explained how native people would traditionally approach the place known today as Pipestone, Minnesota. After offering a prayer, they would wait, and if everything was done in the right way, they would be met with a short, gentle rain. Then they would enter the sanctuary. “This is a physical endorsement of a spiritual event,” he said, “a real response by planet Earth.”

“Religion isn’t a preference like rock climbing, skiing, or making asphalt,” Vine said. “It is not a weekend preference.” He urged the audience to take native religions more seriously, to see the world in a much broader context, and to struggle with the challenge of “how to thank a higher power.”

It brought to mind what Vine says at the conclusion of *In the Light of Reverence*: “The basic problem is that American society is a rights society, not a responsibilities society. What you’ve got is each individual saying, ‘I have a right to do this.’ Having religious places, and revolving your religion around that, means you are always in contact with the earth, you’re responsible for it and to it.”

All of this work is making a difference. In late 2002, we launched The Sacred Land Defense Team, and through e-mails, letters and financial donations, Team members were able to contribute to a number of struggles this year. We helped the SAGE Council in Albuquerque defeat a bond measure that would have funded the paving of miles of new roads around Petroglyph National Monument.

In August, the Salt River Project (SRP)

of Phoenix announced that it would relinquish all permits and coal leases for the proposed Fence Lake coal strip mine, which threatened to devastate Zuni Salt Lake and the surrounding Sanctuary Area in New Mexico.

SRP claimed in a press release that it had found a cheaper source of coal in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming, but from our perspective, the Zuni Tribe and the Zuni Salt Lake Coalition can rest assured that their intense, well-organized, and spiritually-based opposition to the 18,000-acre industrial disaster was the real reason SRP pulled the plug on the coal mine.

I called to talk to a friend who is now on the Zuni Council, and Zuni Governor Arlen Quetawki answered the phone. He was happy to talk. “Our prayers were answered,” he said. “We showed that if we do it the right way we can bring down the big giant.”

The Governor expressed concern for Wyoming, and predicted the threat to Zuni Salt Lake would come again.

Six weeks later, the Bureau of Land Management announced it would lease the area for oil and gas development.

Working to save places isn’t enough. From corporate responsibility to personal responsibility—we have to change the way we live.

We organized two screenings of *In the Light of Reverence* in Denver in early October—one at the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s annual conference, and one at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Good crowds turned out to hear Vine Deloria (Lakota), Vernon Masayesva (Hopi), Chris Peters (Pohli-kah/Karuk), Caleen Sisk-Franco (Winnemem Wintu), and Bambi Kraus (Tlingit) speak after the film.

The next morning Caleen, her 11-year-old daughter Waimem, and I went out to Red Rocks Amphitheater to hear Interior Secretary Gale Norton speak to the National Trust conference. Her speech was standard fare—public relations, humor and diversionary tactics. At the end, she sat down—right in front of us. Caleen was prepared with a letter and a plea that Norton personally look into and correct the injustice that the Winnemem Wintu had been taken off the BIA list of recognized tribes in the 1980s, for no reason and with no explanation.

As she spoke to Norton, Caleen began to cry. Her elder is 96, the children are growing into teenagers, and the Winnemem are trying not to lose hope. They all need to see the injustice done to them as a tribe wiped away, so they can stop fighting a political war and get back to their real work—education, cultural preservation and taking care of the land.

Secretary Norton looked intently at the papers, thanked Caleen, and seemed genuinely concerned.

I felt something turn inside me. My own view of this ultra-conservative, pro-industry politician shifted. Perhaps she would do something for the Wintu. Perhaps she could see through the politics and glimpse their humanity. Perhaps I could glimpse hers as well.



Wintu ceremonial leader Caleen Sisk-Franco appeals to Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton to formally recognize the existence of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe.



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