

Sacred Land Film Project

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When We Sacrifice the Sacred

by Christopher McLeod

Over five years of filming *Standing on Sacred Ground*, I have been inspired again and again by the determination of native people resisting destruction of their lands. On the windswept, bomb-cratered Hawaiian island of Kaho'olawe, I was privileged to witness and film the jubilant process that can follow a resistance struggle: the restoration of land and people, environment and culture together.

It was a welcome sojourn. Six weeks of filming in the tar sands of Alberta, Canada had left me disheartened and sad. The pace and scale of the extraction of huge geological deposits of oily sands—by a crude form of stripmining—is laying waste to a vast area of boreal forest and wetlands. The native people who live downstream have watched their lifeblood, the Athabasca River, deteriorate into a water source that frightens everyone. We spoke to dozens of people who longed for the days when they could eat fish from the river and dip in a cup and take a drink. No more.

In 1978, after I heard the phrase “national sacrifice area” applied to the Four Corners, I started making documentary films in the desert Southwest. Peabody Coal was stripmining the Hopi's sacred Black Mesa to power Las Vegas, Phoenix and Los Angeles. Thirty-three years later, the harm to the desert is irreparable, despite corporate and government misinformation touting “recla-



SYNCRUDE'S TAR SANDS REFINERY REFLECTED IN A TAILINGS WASTE POND THAT SITS NEXT TO THE ATHABASCA RIVER IN ALBERTA, CANADA

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

Korea (Korea National Oil Company) mingling with ExxonMobil, Shell, Chevron, BP, Conoco Phillips, Imperial, Marathon, Husky, Suncor and Syncrude, and with one million barrels of oil per day already flowing south to thirsty cars in the United States, Alberta should be declared an “international sacrifice area.”

We have seen tremendous momentum build this year as the campaign to stop the Keystone XL pipeline caught fire. But in spite

of fish deformities and cancer clusters in native communities, a massive industry PR campaign has undermined the scientists who are documenting toxic contamination. Government collusion with the tar sands operators is accelerating the rate of resource exploitation. Like mountaintop removal, deep sea drilling and fracking, the tar sands represent the final throes of an addiction we must acknowledge and end.

After diving deep in Alberta, I can say that the tar sands are Black Mesa times 100. YouTube videos refer to it simply as Mordor. Though local resistance is growing, there are sadly few traditional elders left to explain the cosmic significance of what is going on. With oil companies from France (Total), Norway (StatOil), China (PetroChina Ltd. and Sinopec), Japan (Japan Canada Oil Sands) and

mation success.” Sacred springs, ancient burials and the land itself have been sacrificed for the higher purpose of cheap electricity.

In October, I had a chance meeting with a radio journalist I have long admired, Caroline Casey, whose *Visionary Activist Radio Show* is broadcast on KPFA, here in Berkeley. I described the feelings of horror I couldn't shake after witnessing the tar sands destruction. With a sad and knowing smile, she said gently, “You're drinking the poison for the rest of us.”

Simplifying daily life, taking the bus or walking, leaving the lights off, breathing deep. Making humble offerings to



life's great mysteries. These are necessary acts of respect and reverence. But to trade something precious—water, air, fish, people—on the altar of growth and progress, is to sacrifice the sacred itself. Common sense says there will be consequences. It's natural law.



In the late 1970s, at Thomas Banyacya's kitchen table at Hopi, I had another chance meeting, with Dr. Emmett Aluli, a Native Hawaiian physician who was battling the U.S. Navy over its target bombing of the island of Kaho'olawe.

In the last year, I have finally been able to film this storied and inspiring Hawaiian island. Cameraman Andy Black, sound recordist Dave Wendlinger and I arrived by boat at uninhabited Kaho'olawe last winter, tossed our thoroughly waterproofed film gear into the surf, and swam to shore with our hosts, members of the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana (PKO). 'Ohana means family.

After long discussions, the PKO had decided against allowing filming of their Makahiki ceremonies, in which offerings are made to the fertility god Lono to bring life-giving rain to the island. Instead, they invited us to participate in the ceremony. They asked us to sacrifice for the sacred. Andy, Dave and I were taught to prepare *ho-o-kupu* (offerings) and present them with prayers in the Hawaiian language.

In a procession of three dozen people we walked to three sites to make offerings and pray for rain. It was beautiful to fully focus attention on the plants and vegetables being prepared, to float in the ocean at sunrise, cleansing mind and body, and to feel the love and care of an extended family as we walked the long volcanic paths together, barefoot.

While we were making our first offerings at sunset on a cliff overlooking the ocean, a beam of light pierced the western clouds and streamed toward Maui's Haleakalā volcano, and a bright rainbow appeared in the east. I tried to keep my full attention on the ceremony, and not imagine the stunning shot we might have gotten had our camera been rolling. In my mind's eye I can see the 'ohana chanting, showing reverence, and sinking roots deep into the red dirt.

Six months later, in May 2011, after seven earlier trips to Hawai'i over four years to gain the trust of Kaho'olawe's



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

"Ala loa means the long trail," says Syd Kawahakui, describing the footpath that volunteers are building around the perimeter of Kaho'olawe. "Our kapuna (ancestors) and makua (adults) started this path for us. It's our turn now, so our kamalii, our children, will have something they can actually look at and follow that says, 'This is the way.'"

protectors, and to prepare for filming in an environment lacking electrical power, but with surplus wind and weather, Andy, Dave and I returned to the island with Emmett Aluli. One of the nine original protestors who occupied Kaho'olawe in 1976 and launched the movement to stop the bombing and win return of the island from the U.S. Navy, Emmett has made the trip by boat from Maui countless times since. We filmed him with his wife, historian Davianna McGregor, and 15 others: chanting and planting, making cultural observations at ancestral sites, and introducing children to the island.

A rain ceremony was planned, and there was much discussion after I asked if we could film it. There was opposition to doing anything that would be termed a re-enactment, and there was understandable concern about having a camera at a ceremony. I explained that we need to be able to show the crucially important spiritual aspect of ecological restoration in our documentary, because prayer and ceremony are essential elements of taking care of every sacred place. In the end, the group decided we could film from one fixed position at a little distance.

The ceremony began at sunrise atop the island's highest point. Water was poured on a rock shrine as a resonant chant called for rain. The wind was whistling, the light was magical, mist swept in gray curtains around us, and a few gentle raindrops graced the thirsty land. When the ceremony concluded, spirits were high, and we went back down to

the coast for a swim.

As the entire group swam in a cove, the film crew drifted out into deeper water wearing snorkels and masks. Suddenly, a pod of 40 dolphins surfaced around us. They were jumping and spinning and swimming around and beneath us. Down below I saw babies close to their mothers, and even a lovemaking pair in mirror reflection of each other. The dolphins frolicked around us for 20 minutes, and then they were gone.

Back on the beach, the concerns about filming a ceremony had waned, and the friendly appearance of the dolphins seemed to be a good sign from the ocean and the island.

Talking story on the beach that evening at sunset, Emmett challenged the group to express their individual and collective understandings of what makes a place sacred.

"We need to hear why you come to Kaho'olawe, what you tell your friends, why you keep coming back, why you bring your family, and why you do the ceremonies," said Emmett. "How do you want to see the island used? How do you want to pass it down? What's the vision for the seventh generation?"

After many others had responded, 13-year-old Kaipu Baker spoke up: "I'll take a step forward and say the planet is sacred. Every single piece of land, whether it's in Africa, Siberia, America—there it is, sacred. But here it's just at another level. Kaho'olawe is at a pretty high level, and what matters is how you



“At a certain time, we needed fighters. Maybe now we need healers,” says Craig Neff, a member of the Protect Kaho’olawe ‘Ohana, as he shows visitors an ancient grinding rock that survived bombing by the U.S. Navy. “The island is bleeding when it rains, so stopping the erosion, calling Lono to re-green the island, is important to me—along with the physical labor of building check dams and planting. Doing work here on island is satisfying. The harder you work, the better you feel.”

maintain the sacredness. I think when the Navy started bombing over here, the sacredness kind of dropped, and then when Uncle Emmett and them started coming and occupying the island, the sacredness started to come back. I hope someday I can achieve half of what they achieved, because I’m sitting here, being

like, I want to be great like you!”

Debating which images to use in the editing room, updating our progress to broadcasters in e-mails and phone calls, video conferencing with story subjects from Peru to Papua New Guinea, and scheduling, budgeting and managing this sprawling project, Kaho’olawe stays

with me, and so do the tar sands operations in Alberta. These are touchstones that keep me going. Humans have an awesome power to transform land. Best to use that power sparingly, and let the land transform us.



A Special Thank You: Kickstarter Campaign For *Finding Sacred Ground*

In August 2011, we began production of the pilot version of a mobile phone app called *Finding Sacred Ground*, which will use multimedia and augmented reality to give users a guided tour introducing them to the hidden history—the native history—of popular tourist destinations. Sacred Land Film Project is partnering with the National Park Service and the Lakota community, including Park Superintendent Dorothy FireCloud and Interpretive Park Ranger Caryn Hacker, both enrolled members of the Rosebud band of the Sioux Nation, to create a pilot tour application exploring the indigenous history of Devils Tower in Wyoming.



In November of this year, Sacred Land Film Project ran a fundraising campaign on Kickstarter, the crowd-funding website, to raise funds to hire developers Anselm Hook and Paige Saez, both of the augmented reality project incubator MakerLab, to create the initial pilot version of the application. In less than one month, we met our goal, with more than 90 backers pledging amounts ranging from \$1 to \$1000. We were overjoyed to see such an outpouring of support from our friends!

We’d like to express our heart-felt appreciation to all the generous people who donated to our Kickstarter campaign:

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