

Sacred Land Film Project

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Christopher McLeod

When Manifest Destiny Hits Home

by Christopher McLeod

FIVE HUNDRED PEOPLE packed into a four hundred-seat auditorium at the University of Colorado, in Boulder. They had come on a crisp October night to see *In the Light of Reverence* and hear from Anishnaabe activist Winona LaDuke, author Terry Tempest Williams, Hopi leader Vernon Masayesva, and University of Colorado Law Professor Charles Wilkinson. The film screening was the centerpiece of a two-day Sacred Lands Forum that attracted over a hundred native activists, tribal officials, federal land managers, legal scholars and journalists to a strategy session on improving protection of sacred lands.

Winona LaDuke introduced the film with a powerful account of the spiritual importance that aboriginal homelands hold for native people. "Sacred

WINTU LEADER FLORENCE JONES, LEFT, WITH MARY NORTON, AT MT. SHASTA. FLORENCE SAYS, "NATURE TAKES CARE OF YOUR MIND AND HEART AND SOUL." SHE TURNED 94 THIS YEAR.

places are where we pray," she said, adding, "I'd just like to see as much patriotism to this land as there is patriotism to the flag." The room erupted in applause.

Our year started with the disappointing news that *In the Light of Reverence* would not be screened at the Sundance Film Festival. One week later, Cara Mertes, Executive Producer of the acclaimed PBS documentary series P.O.V., called to say the film had been accepted for national broadcast on public television—and that P.O.V. would run the film at 72 minutes in length, thus ending our long battle to avoid cutting it down to 56 minutes!

On February 17, at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, over 1,000 people—friends, family, Native American colleagues, donors, and other supporters—turned out for our world premiere, undeterred by a winter downpour.

Peter Coyote hosted a wonderful night which celebrated ten years of hard work and intense collaboration. After the screening, co-producer Malinda Maynor and I asked everyone who had worked on the film to come up on stage and our fabulous team stretched all the way across the stage from wall to wall. What a sight! Many in the audience commented later that they had no idea how many people it takes to make a documentary. Others noticed how happy everyone looked and how we seemed like a big family.

Thus began a series of 40 screenings of the film, from Hopi to Mt. Shasta, from Washington D.C. to New York, where we gathered in community to discuss the issues raised in the film. Rock climbers and government land managers, native elders and college professors, anthropologists and professional facilitators have all struggled with the clash of worldviews revealed in the film—and something new is emerging from the dialogue.

At the Telluride Mountainfilm Festival—which is attended by outdoor adventurers of all kinds—two screenings of the film were followed by audience interaction with Lakota author Vine Deloria, Jr.

A rock-climber asserted that he could climb Devils Tower (the Lakota's sacred Bear's Lodge), have a spiritual experience and still be respectful and responsible.

Vine asked, "Who are you being responsible to? You should be part of a community that you can return to and give something back."

"Why do I have to be part of a community?" responded the climber. "I don't think there has to be a community that defines spirituality or the exercise of spirituality."

"I'm at a loss to understand what you think is spiritual," said Vine. "If you can go around and do basically anything you want, and think you are being responsible because you have a good feeling, I don't see what you're being responsible to."

"I'm being responsible to the environment," said the climber.

Vine paused, looked at the climber and took a deep breath. As the moderator, should I intercede? The irreconcilable clash of worldviews pervaded an awkward silence.

"Very traditional people," replied Vine, "are telling selected members of different tribes the real reasons why these places are sacred. It's impossible for most of you to understand, but if you would start with the idea that the physical world has a spiritual basis, you might get it. You can go to people who know quantum physics and they will say, 'All we're talking about are formulas of energy.' But the oldest tradition of the Bear's Lodge is that there is a way to walk physically into the foundation of that tower. In there you find spirits and a lake. You can bring healing powers back out. You can bring prophecies of the future back out, and you take these back to your community. And this is done in very complicated ceremonies."

The climber said no more, and as the audience spilled out onto the street, the dialogue continued long into the night.

Our community tour was punctuated by a March screening sponsored by the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian on the Mall in Washington, D.C., at which dozens of people were turned away due to an overflow crowd. We also showed the film at the Department of the Interior and a Congressional screening sponsored by Senators John McCain and Barbara Boxer. In addition to answering questions after the screenings, Vernon Masayesva had numerous meetings about the depletion of Hopi springs caused by Peabody Coal Company's coal slurry at Black Mesa, and Caleen Sisk-Franco led a five-person Wintu delegation in pursuit of federal recognition. The film helped open doors that previously were firmly closed. Senator McCain's staff reported that they had a visit from Peabody lobbyists a few hours before our Congressional screening.

In early August, the Smithsonian sponsored two more screenings of the film in New York. On a hot morning in lower Manhattan, Vernon Masayesva, Leonard Selestewa and I sat eating breakfast at a sidewalk café. Looming above us were the World Trade Towers. People were streaming to work on Wall Street. Leonard gazed off, watching the urban landscape. I imagined he was really seeing his cornfields on Black Mesa in Arizona.

"Do you think these people ever consider what would happen if something really went wrong?" Vernon asked softly. "Do they think about where their water and food come from, where the water goes when they flush?"

In Seattle, Southern Cheyenne elder Henrietta Mann addressed the Seventh Generation Fund's Sacred Earth Conference, after watching *In the Light of Reverence*. In a message to environmentalists, climbers, New

Agers and those whose ancestors came to America more recently, she said, "We put down spiritual roots over thousands of years. To develop cultural ways takes time. Traditions, belief systems, songs, creation stories, our understanding of how the land came to be and where people come from—it takes time to sink spiritual roots into the land."

Henrietta spoke of children and the passing on of traditions: "We are planted on this earth to walk the road of life. Children have young roots that need nurturance. Young saplings need to grow tall to protect the people. We each need a connection with our sacred mother earth to develop the right kind of heart and mind."

At another time and place, Terry Tempest Williams asked, "What is our wound?" After a pause, she answered: "Separation from the sacred."

Racing towards our national broadcast date of August 14, assaults on sacred land intensified as energy and mineral extraction once again became the number one priority in Washington. Peabody Energy had donated \$250,000 to the Republican election campaign and another \$100,000 to Bush-Cheney's inauguration committee, and they and the others wanted to see results.

Threats have been mounting, from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Alaska, oil) to Zuni Salt Lake (New Mexico, coal), from Weatherman Draw (Montana, oil) to Medicine Lake (California, geothermal) as the right to consume and the refusal to conserve steamroll across the land.

To respond to the emerging threats to sacred sites we created a new map and section on our website (www.sacredland.org) chronicling 13 endangered sacred places and suggesting specific actions people can take to get involved. The website had 270,000 hits in August.

On the day of our PBS broadcast, seven Hopi runners completed a 230-mile, 4-day run from Black Mesa to Phoenix. They carried with them an "Indigenous Declaration on Water" and joined a march to BIA headquarters where chanting Hopi demonstrators presented a petition with 4,000 signatures to the area director. The petition demanded that Peabody stop pumping groundwater to move coal and stop depleting Hopi springs. Most of the signatures had been gathered at film screenings (as we consistently tried to give our audiences concrete things to do to channel the feelings aroused by the film).

HOPi PROTESTORS MARCH TO BIA HEAD-QUARTERS IN PHOENIX, DEMANDING THAT PEABODY COAL COMPANY STOP EXTRACTING THREE MILLION GALLONS OF PRISTINE GROUNDWATER EACH DAY TO SLURRY COAL.



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The War Gods at Petroglyph National Monument

In early November, I walked with activist Sonny Weahkee (Cochiti/Zuni) of SAGE Council, and Chief Ranger Michael Quijano (Apache) in Petroglyph National Monument, west of Albuquerque, where 30,000 ancient rock carvings adorn a carpet of volcanic boulders. A six-lane highway is slated to cut through the most concentrated area of petroglyphs in the park, to provide quicker access to housing developments that are blighting the desert as Albuquerque sprawls.

Sonny is leading a grass roots fight to save an area long held sacred by Pueblos of the Rio Grande valley. Michael

Quijano, his ally, is not your average park ranger.

"The earth cracked open here and spilled blood on the land," he says, as we stand on the high volcanic ridge looking west to Mt. Taylor, east to the Sandias, with the Rio Grande flowing out of mountains to the north and into mountains in the south. Interstate highways now cover the ancient native trade routes to the four directions. This has

always been a crossroads—and it is a well-marked place of pilgrimage.

"This is the center of a huge cultural landscape," says Quijano. "It is a very special place, a place of power. Petroglyphs are never placed arbitrarily. They signify something and tell of something important: 'Look where you are, things will come to you.' That's true where there are three or four glyphs. Here there are 30,000."

We hike into an area where nearly every rock has an image on it. Humped-back flute player. Spiral. Hand print. Four-pointed star. We are standing where the \$70 million highway would intrude.

Sonny is introducing a new member of the Albuquerque City Council to his sacred landscape. "Our medicine people still know how to communicate with the spirit world from this place," he explains. "And when our people pass away, the spirit path to the next world starts at the north end here and goes south. The road will cut right through it. All over the West you see golf courses with roads leading to the edge, then they go around. Roads go around golf courses and never go through. But this is a religious area."

As we end our hike, Michael Quijano, shows us a figure on a rock. "This is one of the twin war gods," he says. "We make offerings in times of war. It is time to bless the warriors. They are going off to protect the people and the land. Medicine people come here to make those blessings and call for protection. Maybe at this time, people can understand why that is important." —C. M.

Michael Quijano, Chief Ranger at Petroglyph National Monument, visits one of the warrior twins



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Vernon Masayesva told the BIA director, "You must protect our water. Water will be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th." Vernon later observed, "Hopis have never done anything like that before. They love protesting!"

After delivering the petitions we visited a newsstand to discover that the *New York Times* had run a great review of the film. This important issue of threats to sacred land was no longer invisible. It had been recognized.

The next morning, I called Cara Mertes in New York. The overnight ratings were in. *In the Light of Reverence* had been watched by three million people and was the highest rated P.O.V. documentary of the year. As for the *New York Times* review, there had been many others, but this was the one we most wanted. Cara said, "They had told us they weren't going to be able to review your film. It's this year's miracle!"

At the Sacred Lands Forum in Denver in October, Gregg Bourland, Chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux, said, "As we begin this war to root out terrorism, does it mean we should give up civil liberties and destroy our environment—while others make a lot of money? This mentality—take and destroy because God said so—is the same Manifest Destiny we have been up against since 1492. After the September 11 attacks, President Bush said, 'Consume.' Our native elders say: 'Conserve. Don't take more than you need. Consuming destroys the environment.'"

That evening, Vernon Masayesva, Leonard Selestewa and I joined Terry Tempest Williams for tea. The café was crowded, so we sat on the floor and talked about September 11 and the World Trade Towers.

"I'm just glad I was able to meet them before they were killed," said Leonard.

As we go to war over terrorist acts of murder, it is worth remembering that this land was taken with the justification that God mandated the taking, and the killing.

When Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma compares the World Trade Center to Oklahoma City—"It is a sacred place now, there are people who died there whose bodies will never be found"—let's also remember that native people had to fight for the last ten years to have the 1864 Sand Creek massacre site in Colorado recognized as a National Memorial Park.

As we struggle for remembrance and reconciliation, we can all ponder the question which Pohlik-lah leader Chris Peters posed to a roomful of government land managers and Indian activists at the Sacred Lands Forum in Denver: "What is more American: the right to drill for oil, or the right to pray?"

