

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,
indigenous people stand up
for their traditional sacred lands
in defense of cultural survival,
human rights and the environment.

Our 40-Year Journey

BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

IN MARCH 2001, I was preparing to premiere our new film, *In the Light of Reverence*, at the Environmental Law Conference in Eugene, Oregon. I knew that some heavy-hitting friends were coming to see it—authors Terry Tempest Williams and Barry Lopez, tree-sitting activist Julia Butterfly Hill, Hopi elder Vernon Masayesva and Haudenosaunee Faithkeeper Oren Lyons.

Stage fright doesn't begin to describe the pit-of-the-stomach nervousness I felt. How would I introduce the film to this audience? What inspired this film, and all of my films?

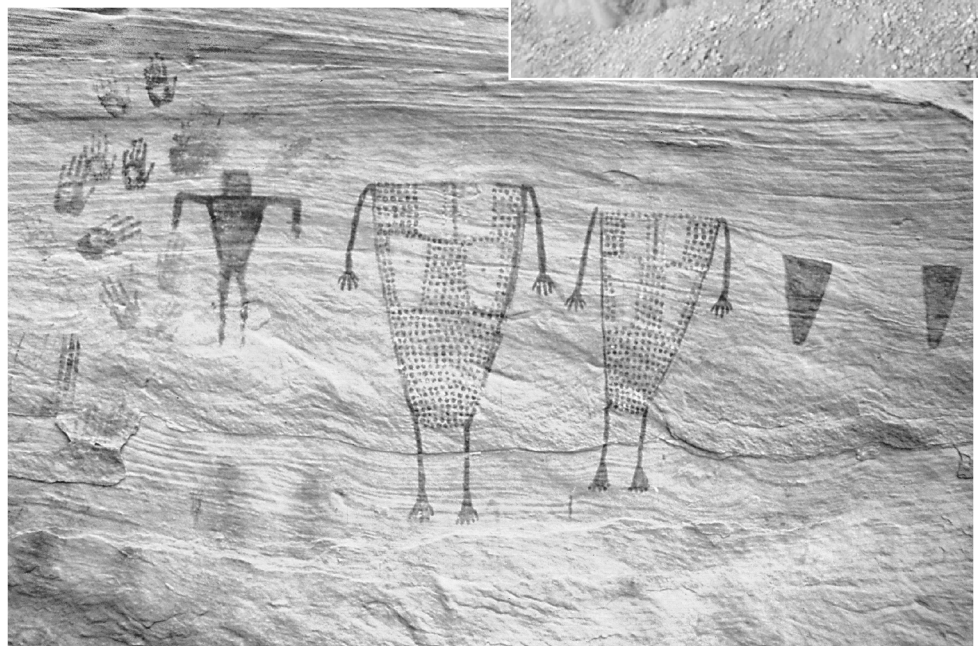
As the evening screening approached, I looked back over 20 years and recalled a motivating moment that I immediately identified as *The Shock*.

It was 1978, and I was on the Hopi mesas in Arizona, recently graduated from Yale with a degree in history, stunned by the scale of violence I had just witnessed while filming the Peabody Coal Company stripmine on Black Mesa. As I listened to Hopi elders recount a version of history that rang truer than anything I had learned at Yale, I felt disoriented and distressed. How had I failed to study Native American accounts of racism, colonization and theft of land and "resources"? I could feel the land and its caretakers deprogramming me.

At a two-day kachina ceremony where magical spirit beings sang for rain, one of the masked dancers threw an orange to me.

I caught it as a gentle rain began to fall. Gratitude overwhelmed me and tears filled my eyes. That evening, 100-year-old David Monongye, the Keeper of the Hopi Prophecy, spent hours explaining clan migrations, his people's long search for the spiritual center of the earth, the cultural challenge of maintaining humility in a world of hubris, the dangers represented by industrial technology, and the inevitable upheaval that lay ahead if human abuse of Mother Earth continued.

I felt the vitality of the rocky mesas and the veracity of this suppressed history. The gentleness and generosity of Hopi storytellers, corn farmers and kachinas



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

blew my mind. The guardians of the heart of Mother Earth were doing their best to resist being extinguished in an undeclared National Sacrifice Area. Just a few days after witnessing monster draglines and flaming coal seams, a sense of shock washed over me—at the ignorance I embodied, at the entitlement of energy-consuming Americans like me, at the grief suddenly unleashed.

It was a grief and shock that has motivated 40 years of work. The Sacred Land Film Project continues to tell obscured stories, disruptive stories, earth stories.

So that's how I explained the origin of the new film. I told the story of *The Shock*.



Hopi elders did not like filmmakers, or photographers, or outsiders who claimed they had come “to help.” But I had arrived at an auspicious, apocalyptic moment. The coal stripmine was sucking massive amounts of water from the underground aquifer that feeds the springs that give life to thousand-year-old Hopi villages. The word “sacred” is often invoked to explain the significance of that water to the desert-dwelling Hopi people. Meanwhile, the legacy of radioactive contamination from atmospheric atom bomb testing and uranium mining confirmed the ominous warnings of long-held prophecies.

On the day I met Hopi traditional spokesman Thomas Banyacya, he agreed to do an audio interview, during which he laid out the stakes of the battle his elders were fighting. A Christianized Tribal Council and a Mormon lawyer from Salt Lake City had secretly signed the Peabody

coal lease without the knowledge or consent of dozens of traditional leaders spread across the three Hopi mesas. Coal-fired power plants were being built in a ring encircling Hopi territory, all to feed the limitless growth of Las Vegas, Phoenix and Los Angeles.

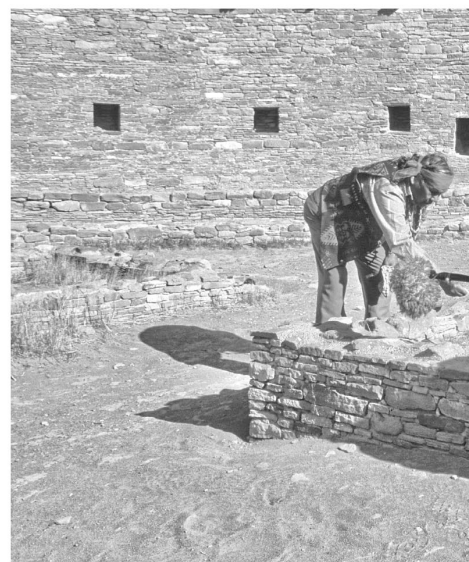
Thomas and I went outside after the interview and stood under a clear sky.

“I know you want to make a film about the rape of the earth, stripmining, power plants polluting the air, radioactive uranium tailings blowing in the wind, lung cancer, birth defects. Those are material things,” he said. “But the environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis, and until your people—and until you—learn that, overcome your blindness, and reconnect to the natural world spiritually, the environmental crisis will continue. The violence will go on and on. We can stop the stripmining here, but we’re facing a much bigger problem.”

We looked up at the vast blue sky. Not a cloud in sight. I felt a wet sprinkling on my face. It was raining. A gentle rain. Thomas reached out to touch the water. Sunlight sparkled in the palm of his hand. He smiled at the cloudless sky and said, “This is good.”

Four years later, Randy Hayes, Glenn Switkes and I completed *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* Thomas Banyacya spoke at a dozen screenings in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, New York, and Washington, D.C. I quickly learned that our job was to amplify native voices and values. We won a Student Academy Award. The Reagan Administration attacked the film, which was funded by the Arizona Humanities Council, as “a misuse of federal funds.” The day the film aired on PBS, *The New York Times* ran a nice review.

The motivational shock that sustained the project felt a lot like the hair-raising electrical current we filmed in



Thomas Banyacya

buzzing transmission lines that stretched across the Four Corners landscape. And I had only just begun to hear about sacred mountains, pilgrimage trails and cultural landscapes. Feeling like a child with no cultural guidance, I began to heed Thomas's advice and seek a daily practice of spiritually reconnecting to the natural world. Our long journey was underway.



Before a screening at the Sierra Club's annual conference in Aspen, Colorado, in 1984, I sat with my Anishinaabe friend Winona LaDuke, then age 25, who had been sounding the alarm about the coal exploitation and power plant pollution that were fouling Navajo and Hopi land. She'd been invited to give the keynote speech, an early sign that native voices were beginning to be heard within the environmental movement.

I was considering the subject for my next film. Winona said, “I suggest you don't make a career out of making films about Native Americans.” It was sound advice. I was already working on a film about the U.S. government's plans to build a high-level nuclear waste dump next to Canyonlands National Park in southern Utah's redrock country—a revered landscape to many a desert rat. Earth Firsters were preparing for battle.

But my path was leading into the Rocky Mountains.

That night, after a standing room only



Student Academy Award Ceremony in 1983 (from left) Glenn Switkes, Christopher “Toby” McLeod, award presenter Charles Durning, and Randy Hayes



at Chaco Canyon in 1996

Four Corners screening, environmental Archdruid David Brower stood and told the crowd that the Sierra Club hadn't paid for my travel. He passed a paper bag around the room. It came back bursting with \$440 in cash. Embarrassed, I stuffed the wad of money into my blue jean pockets as I answered questions.

Aspen biologist Bob Lewis approached me and asked if I would be interested in making a film about the acid rain falling in the high country's pristine watersheds from all the coal burning. With 23,000 abandoned metal mines bleeding acidic water into mountain streams and new ski resorts crowding into ecologically sensitive valleys, *Poison in the Rockies* was born. Seven years later, the PBS science series *NOVA* broadcast the film four times.

By then, I could see that the films were helping. In the *Four Corners*, radioactive uranium tailings were being cleaned up. Navajo uranium miners who had contracted lung cancer were finally being compensated by a negligent government. Public opposition had scuttled the Canyonlands nuclear waste repository. Clean Air Act amendments in the early 1990s led to controls on nitrous oxide emissions and reduction of acid rain. Unregulated coal-fired power plants were being reined in. Renewable wind and solar energy began to replace fossil fuels and nuclear power as climate change accelerated and public awareness grew.

But a new issue had arisen that pulled me back into the realm of the indigenous.

Native Americans had used the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 to try to protect five important cultural landscapes

"We're part of this earth. We're no different from this earth, because everything comes from this earth. We're linked to it. The spirit of living being has something to do with controlling and keeping things in balance. Through man's prayer and ceremonies and meditation we keep this land in balance. We want to show that we are respecting nature and the spirit that is within everything."

—THOMAS BANYACYA (Hopi)

during the 1980s. They lost every case.

In 1992, I was invited to a conference on "Endangered Native American Holy Places" in Tucson. I witnessed a spirited argument about what to do. Did sacred places need a public education campaign? Gary Kimble, a Gros Ventre elder from Montana, warned, "Sacred places don't need a PR campaign. They need ceremonies." Lakota author Vine Deloria, Jr. countered, "This society won't believe us because we're Indians. We badly need non-Indians to take up our cause." Pawnee attorney Walter Echo-Hawk of the Native American Rights Fund agreed: "We need a broad-based coalition between Indians, environmentalists, human rights advocates and church groups to educate the federal government and the public about what's at stake."

At one point when the word "film" came up all eyes fell on me. I insisted that I was not the right person to make a film about Native American sacred places. Looking at my friend and advisor, Santa Clara elder José Lucero, I said, "A young native person should make the film."

José didn't hesitate. He shook his head. "No, you should do it. But it will take a long time."

He had that right. *In the Light of Reverence* was ten years in the making.



My first meeting with Winnemem Wintu "top doctor" Florence Jones was at the International House of Pancakes in Redding, California. Sitting in a vinyl IHOP booth, looking across a well-worn linoleum tabletop, I faced a potent matriarch—an 84-year-old medicine woman, supported by her assistant and great-niece Caleen Sisk and attorney Claire Cummings.

I told Florence we shared the mutual goal of protecting sacred places and that I was hoping to film her story. At the time, the Winnemem were fighting a proposed ski resort on Mt. Shasta as they simultaneously tried to fend off waves of New Age pilgrims seeking spiritual enlightenment at a bubbling spring that is the Winnemem place of origin.

Florence sat quietly. She was looking me over. Caleen Sisk and Claire Cummings grilled me with questions. The mood shifted when I said we had started filming with the Hopi, to protect pilgrimage shrines and sacred springs threatened by mining. I mentioned Thomas Banyacya and gave Florence a VHS tape of *Four Corners* with a photo of Thomas on the cover.

Florence's face brightened. "I've met



"Go back to nature. The most important thing of a human being is go back to nature. Nature takes care of your mind and your heart and soul."

—FLORENCE JONES (Winnemem)

him. I took Thomas to the spring on Mt. Shasta when he visited with Phillip Deere (a Muscogee spiritual leader and activist). My spring erupted with bubbles. It was like a water spout and they jumped back. I told Thomas not to be afraid. The spring was greeting them."

As we filmed with the Hopi and Winnemem, we were looking for a third story to round out the film. A controversy at Devils Tower National Monument drew our attention. The National Park Service had asked rock climbers to refrain from climbing the tower in June out of respect for Sun Dances, vision quests and ceremonies held by a number of tribes at the tower around the

summer solstice. When the government banned commercial climbing in June, the right-wing Mountain States Legal Foundation and a handful of climbers sued the Park Service claiming this was government endorsement of religion.

In our first meeting, Lakota elder Elaine Quiver told a beautiful story that illuminates the essence of our mission as filmmakers. The National Park Service had convened a meeting with Sierra Club members, climbers, park rangers and native elders so each could explain their point of view about humans scaling a spiritually powerful cultural site. Everyone was in listening mode. The Lakota elders went home for community discussions. When they returned they reported that they did not want a total climbing ban issued as a government edict. Rather, they wanted to help develop a public education campaign, so individual climbers could each make a personal decision, from the heart, about whether or not to climb. It should be a collaborative effort that would build respect for the place along with public understanding of the cultural traditions and values of the tribes. Our film was welcomed as part of that effort.

The stories of Hopi, Winnemem and Lakota sacred places aired in 2001 on the PBS documentary series *P.O.V.* (Point of View). We screened *In the Light of Reverence* in Washington, D.C.—at the Department of the Interior and the Pentagon. Senators Barbara Boxer and John McCain sponsored a Congressional screening. The film is still in distribution.

Lakota elder Vine Deloria, Jr. spoke after the film screenings, at one point



“We have a cultural obligation to perform ceremonies and to maintain a spiritual relationship with sacred sites that have the capacity to change the physical nature of Mother Earth and to heal and enhance biodiversity.”

—DANIL MAMYEV (Altai)

telling a full auditorium at the Department of Interior: “Identify the sacred places that are threatened and get to work protecting them.” Those have been our marching orders ever since—for the last 20 years.



By 2006, the world was finally ready to support our vision of producing a global film series about indigenous people around the world protecting sacred places against all manner of threats: government megaprojects (a gas pipeline in Russia’s Altai Republic, the raising of Shasta Dam in California, nickel-cobalt mining in Papua New Guinea); anti-pagan Christian intolerance (in the Andes of Peru and the Gamo Highlands of Ethiopia); corporate destruction of sacred landscapes (the tar sands in Canada and zinc mining in Australia); and military desecration (on the island of Kaho’olawe in Hawai’i.)

Our four-hour series, *Standing on Sacred Ground*, was headed for national PBS broadcast when I got a troubling

.....
Vine Deloria, Jr. at Department of Interior, in 2002



phone call from a soon-to-retire PBS attorney in Washington, D.C. He asserted that it was unacceptable that Earth Island Institute and the Altai Project were funders. No, I replied, he had that all wrong. Earth Island is our fiscal sponsor. The Altai Project helped with travel arrangements and translation in Russia. No matter. In the end, said the cultural gatekeeper, “it’s an activist film.” So, in spite of the fact that the PBS staff was recommending a national broadcast, one man shot us down. I recalled Florence Jones warning me that “People will be jealous that you’re helping the Indian people.” We were relegated to PBS World Channel, which broadcast the films at all hours of the day and night in a hard-to-find location.

Still, we celebrate the victories that come from grassroots organizing and good communication strategy: Native Hawaiians stopped U.S. Navy bombing on Kaho’olawe and are restoring ceremony, language, culture and ecology. There is no gas pipeline bisecting the sacred Ukok Plateau in Altai. Shasta Dam has not been raised higher and the Winnemem thwarted the proposed ski resort on Mt. Shasta. There are now 87 Indigenous Protected Areas in Australia, managed by Aboriginal people.

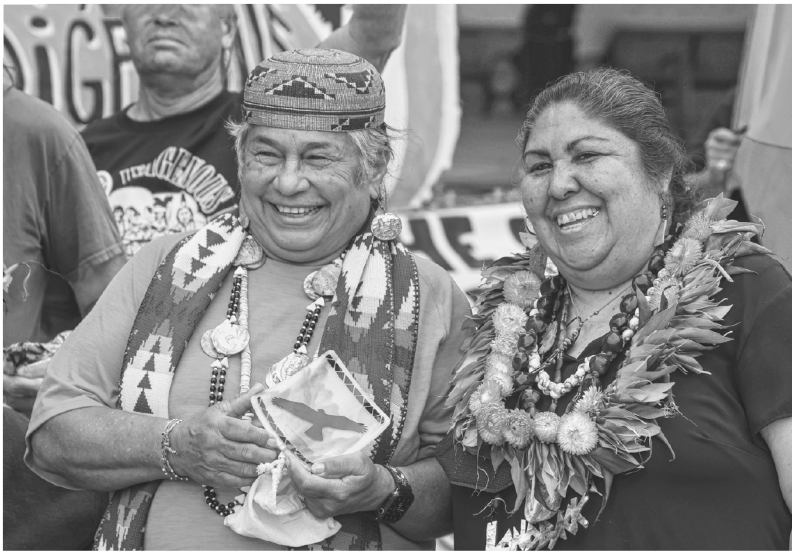
By the time Caleen Sisk and I travelled to Standing Rock in 2016 to show films, the world had changed a bit more. The outpouring of international support for the pipeline resistance and water protector movement was remarkable. Allies were following the leadership of native women and learning about treaty rights. Youth activism and cross-cultural collaboration were flourishing. Mainstream and social media carried stories by a new generation of native filmmakers and journalists.

It was time to step back. We’d made our films.



Returning to my home in Berkeley after screenings in Australia and Papua New Guinea in March 2016, the phone rang and my life changed as I was challenged to walk my talk.

Only recently had I come up with my best response yet to the common



Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk and Lisjan Ohlone leader Corrina Gould celebrate the Land Back victory at the West Berkeley Shellmound on July 13, 2024

audience question: “What can I do?” The answer: “Work under the leadership of native people to protect or restore a sacred site near where you live.”

The zoning board member on the phone described a new threat to the West Berkeley Shellmound and Village Site, which was the first human settlement on San Francisco Bay. Ohlone ancestors lived for 5,700 years in a maritime village where Strawberry Creek flows into the bay. The 2.2-acre site, now a parking lot, was landmarked by the city of Berkeley in 2003. Though its massive shellmound had been leveled by settlers, many burials remained underground. The cultural significance of the ancestral village was demonstrated by ongoing prayer ceremonies held by living descendants who never left the area in spite of their ancestors’ imprisonment in Catholic missions and the killing campaigns of the Gold Rush era. I could see the site from my living room window.

A five-story condominium project that would dig down 11 feet into the ground for a parking garage was not an appropriate use of a historic sacred site in Berkeley, California.

I was thrilled to be able to support the shellmound protection campaign established years earlier by local Lisjan Ohlone leader Corrina Gould. Corrina assembled two committees of supporters—the activist youth we called the “outsiders” (night work, logo painting, event planning), and the strategic elders, the “insiders” (media strategy, political organizing, mapping an alternative vision for the site, litigation,

website development and fundraising). Our insiders’ group met 42 times in the David Brower Center conference room and 17 times on Zoom during the pandemic.

Together, we built a movement. We educated the public. Corrina met with City Council members and the mayor. We generated 1,700 letters against the project and chased the first devel-

oper away. When the landowner revived the project, Corrina’s Confederated Villages of Lisjan joined in a lawsuit with the City of Berkeley and we generated legal and amicus briefs and press releases. Corrina held a dozen prayer ceremonies at the site. Thousands of people came to sing and pray and dance at the site. The Sacred Land Film Project made 15 short films and posted them on YouTube.

In the end, after four years of litigation delayed the project, a settlement was reached on March 8, 2024. With a \$20 million donation from Kataly Foundation, \$1.5 million from the City of Berkeley and hundreds of other donations, land that was originally stolen was purchased for \$27 million and returned to indigenous stewardship.

After an epic eight-year battle, the West Berkeley Shellmound and Village Site was protected. Under Corrina Gould’s determined leadership, a community of hundreds worked with the City of Berkeley to resist the desecration of a sacred site and by a unanimous 7-0 vote the City Council transferred title to the indigenous-women-led Sogorea Te’ Land Trust. This was an enormous Land Back victory—with national and international significance—a case study that illustrates many valuable lessons.

Lessons learned for allies? Collaboration. Listening. Litigation. Prayer. Perseverance. Faith in the ancestors. Effective storytelling. And most important: indigenous leadership, values, perspective and pacing.



Local writer and shellmound supporter Rebecca Solnit finds hope in “alliance-building” and “people-powered movements around the globe.” She writes: “Part of how we are going to thrive in this imperfect moment is through élan, esprit de corps, fierce hope and generous hearts...” and by being “heroic in your spirit and generous in your gestures.”

This aptly describes the eight-year collaboration, the spiritually grounded effort to protect the West Berkeley Shellmound, where hundreds of people were guided by creativity and compassion to achieve a historic victory.

It was an honor to play a role, serve the matriarchy, and help tell an inspiring story.

In the final days of the battle last spring, I asked the campaign’s leading light, Corrina Gould, if we should win against such long odds, what is the message of this long struggle?

“Things can change in this world,” she replied. “It is trust that makes things right. Partnering has made this dream a reality. Thousands of people—funders, native people and allies—the West Berkeley Shellmound brings people together. Before, resources were unavailable to help native people protect sacred sites and the resting places of our ancestors. Now we see what happens when resources are made available. Powerful prayers have been laid down at the West Berkeley Shellmound by people from all over the world. That has changed the energy of the place and helped make this happen.”

The night the settlement was reached, my wife and filmmaking partner Jessica and I drove down the hill to the parking lot that is the once and future West Berkeley Shellmound. A handful of supporters showed up to shout, laugh, cry, hug and give thanks. Sometimes there’s a win, a healing, and a gentle cessation of grief—the other side of shock.



“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

—MARGARET MEAD