

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?

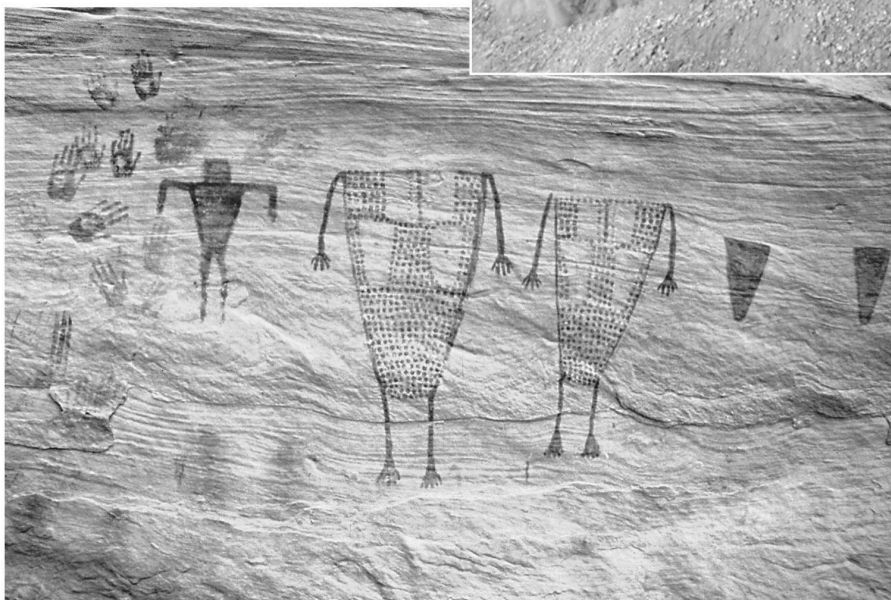
As the evening screening approached, I looked back over 20 years and recalled a motivating moment that I immediately identified as *The Shock*.

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