

The Navajo Nation Revisited

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In this paper I will explore the relationship between the Navajo, the largest Native American tribe in the U.S.A. today, and their land. How has the land defined and sustained the Navajo over the course of history? What pressures are being placed on that land base today by population growth and development?

Decisions made in this last decade of the twentieth century on issues such as exploitation of mineral resources, resolution of land disputes, and water rights are bound to have lasting effects on the unique life style and culture of the Navajo people.

Introduction

More than five hundred years have passed since Columbus' voyages triggered the European colonization of the Americas, forever changing the lives and cultures of the native populations of North and South America and the Caribbean. In many cases, entire Native American tribes and civilizations were wiped out as the result of epidemics of European diseases, enslavement, and genocide by the conquerors.

Attempts have sometimes been made to justify European expansion and colonialism in the name of "Progress", "Manifest Destiny", or the superiority of "developed" cultures over "primitive" ones. Even if one accepts that any culture can be innately superior to another (by what objective criteria can we judge the quality of a culture or civilization?), a comparison of the development of pre-Columbian Native American civilizations with those of Europe at the same period would not necessarily show Europe to have been more technologically advanced. For example, although Columbus took advantage of the latest developments in nautical science and ship design, he needed three caravels to transport only ninety men to the shores of the New World. At that same time in history, the Haida of the Pacific Northwest were building boats that could carry one hundred people. The Incas had built a system of roads ten thousand miles long, linking Peru,

Equador, Chile and Argentina. It is also believed that the Incas practiced highly skilled brain surgery at the same time when barbers were serving as surgeons and dentists in Europe. Teotihuacan, near the present site of Mexico City, was larger than any European city of that era. Mayan astronomers in the Yucatan had developed an accurate calendar based on precise astronomical observation; whereas in Rome more than one hundred years after Columbus' voyages, Copernicus was tried by the Inquisition and forced to recant his theory that the sun was the center of our solar system.

The United Nations declared 1993 as the "Year of Indigenous Peoples." Throughout the world in the twentieth century, the land base of native peoples has been eroding. In many cases, for example in the Amazon and in the Philippines, the very existence of the original human inhabitants is being threatened by development projects, deforestation, and removal of entire tribes from their native soil. In addition, the Information Age has increased the cultural pressure on the traditional lifestyles and world views which define the identity and ensure the cultural continuity of tribal peoples. Assimilation may mean the demise of a culture even if members of the population physically survive.

In the summer of 1993, I had the opportunity to briefly revisit the Navajo Indian Reservation, home of the Navajo Nation, in the southwestern United States. Occupying 17.5 million acres¹ (roughly equivalent in size to West Virginia or Ireland) within the states of New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah, the Navajo Nation is the largest Native American tribe in North America both in terms of land base (36% of all U.S. Indian lands outside of Alaska), and population (estimated at 220,000 people,² or 13% of all Native Americans in the United States).

Since 1923, the Navajo Nation has had its own tribal government, now headquartered in Window Rock, Arizona, with a chairman and vice-chairman. There is also an elected tribal council of 88 members representing 110 communities; courts and judges; a tribal school system (in addition to Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, state schools, and private schools which also operate on and around the Navajo reservation); a tribal radio station, a power and utilities company, and other tribal businesses such as Navajo Forest Products. The tribal budget was over \$247 million dollars in 1992, including income of \$96.5 million from exploitation of natural resources.

The Navajo population is growing. In fact, the Navajo rate of population increase is twice the U.S. national average, and the median age of Navajos on the reservation is nineteen. The Navajo tribal government is engaged in ongoing negotiation and litigation with both the U.S. Government and with neighboring tribes in an effort to provide for its

population by maintaining or regaining rights to lands which have historically been occupied by Navajo people.

Like other Native Americans in the United States, Navajos legally have full citizenship rights, the same as other Americans. Although many Navajos choose to live on reservation land, they are free to live wherever they wish. (The majority of Native Americans in the U.S.A. do not live on reservations.) Navajos can vote in national and regional elections, and can and have served in the U.S. armed forces (with distinction). Yet social disparities and economic problems still exist today among the members of this most powerful and numerous of North American Indian tribes.

On my recent visit, I was interested to see how the Navajo people had fared over the past twenty years in dealing with critical issues such as education, health, housing, employment, land use, and the maintenance of their language and cultural traditions. Had a new generation of college educated Navajo professionals been able to use the skills they had learned in the Anglo³ world to help defend the rights of their people, deal with the federal bureaucracy, and improve social inequities? And what new challenges are facing the Navajo Nation (or *Dineh*, as they call themselves) as the twentieth century gives way to the twenty-first?

My strongest overall impression was that, in many ways, the basic issues had not changed substantially since the time of my university studies in the 1970's, when I had considered a career as a teacher on the Navajo reservation. The overall standard of living seemed somewhat better, particularly in reservation towns such as Gallup and Window Rock, but the Navajo people I met in 1993 were still talking about the same kinds of problems as those which existed in the 1970's:

– **A high rate of unemployment** (from 36–50%). Half of all Navajos do continue to raise livestock such as sheep, cows, and horses, and engage in traditional subsistence farming on their own family land. There are still many families, and particularly older people, who still rely primarily on this pastoral lifestyle for their economic survival. However, over the past fifty years, this traditional lifestyle has become, in most cases, a supplement to wage income rather than the primary source of income.

– **Low personal income.** Average per capita annual income for a Navajo was \$4, 106⁴ according to the 1990 census, as opposed to the national average of \$19, 082. Some sources claim it is actually as low as \$1900 per year.

– **Substandard housing** which often lacks basic modern facilities and sanitation such as plumbing (77% of homes without), running water, electricity (75% without),

kitchen facilities (72% without), or telephones (76% without).⁵

– **Inadequate education**, with a median level of 10.5 years of schooling for Navajos versus twelve years median in the U.S. as a whole. In 1991, the tribe knew of 13,500 Navajos enrolled in college, but on the average less than 27% of all Navajos who enter college complete four year degree programs. The fact that many children learn Navajo as their first language, but then must learn English when they start to attend school, further complicates the educational situation.

– **The need to balance preservation of the land with profit** from economic development. Exploitation of natural resources such as oil, coal, natural gas, uranium, timber, and grazing lands brings in millions of dollars of tribal income each year and provides jobs for some Navajos on or near the reservation. However, it has also caused pollution and destruction of the land, whereas respect and reverence for the land is at the heart of the Navajo belief system. *Water* is also an ongoing problem in the arid American southwest.

– **Preserving tradition**, the Navajo culture and philosophy, while surrounded on all sides by the very different culture, language, and values of Anglo America.

In spite of concern over these problems, the dominant attitude of the Navajo people seems positive and confident, assured of their survival as a people and the continuation of their Way. This may reflect the youthful optimism of a population where more than half the members are under twenty years of age. But perhaps a look back over Navajo history will reveal other sources of their assurance, adaptability, and endurance.

In this paper I would like to discuss the Navajo attitude towards the land, and some particular issues and conflicts which the Navajo people are facing as the twentieth century draws to an end.

A Brief History of the Navajo

According to the Navajo origin story, the *Dineh* (“The People”) came into their fourth world and present homeland, *Dinetah*, at the “Place of Emergence” from the underground third world. The previous worlds had all been successively destroyed by various calamities caused by the misbehavior of the inhabitants, who had resembled insects in the previous worlds. The Navajo, as well as the Hopi, believe it is their responsibility to protect this earth and the “sacred center” which lies in their homeland.

Linguistically, the Navajo as well as the Apache are speakers of Athapaskan lan-

guages and thus are related to the tribes of the Pacific Northwest. The Navajo are not the original inhabitants of the area they now occupy (those original people are called the Anasazi and are thought to be the ancestors of the present-day Pueblo people). The Navajo are relative newcomers who are believed to have migrated slowly into the southwest from the far north over a long period of time.

Athapaskan tribes had begun to spread out of the western Subarctic into Alaska by 5000 B.C. In 750 A.D. the eruption of a volcano in the Alaskan Yukon may have triggered the further dispersion of Athapaskans south into British Columbia and California. Their descendants are the Haida, Tlingit, Hupa and other Athapaskan speaking Pacific Northwest Coast tribes. Some Athapaskans continued to migrate east across the Plains, while others moved into the Southwest where they found other Indian peoples already living.

Scholars still do not agree as to the precise time of the arrival of the Navajo in the Southwest. Traditional dating had placed their arrival in the Southwest only a hundred years or so prior to the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors in 1540.⁶ According to another source, "About the fifteenth century A.D., some Na-Dene [Athapaskans] appeared in the Southwest. As Navajo and Apache, their arrival caused disruption among well-established Southwestern cultures about the time of first European contact."⁷

However, some scholars are finding evidence that the Navajo may have been in the area much earlier, perhaps since sometime around A.D. 1000. Josephy says the Navajo "reached the Southwest sometime between 1000 and 1550 A.D."⁸ Hodge and Schroeder believe that this migration may have continued as late as 1600.⁹ Recent tree-ring dating of old hogan-type dwellings in western Colorado similar to those made exclusively today by Navajos has resulted in dates around 1000 A.D., and a Navajo homesite near Gallup has been dated at 1380 A.D.¹⁰ Another piece of evidence to support this claim is the finding of Athapaskan type pottery in association with Governor Canyon sites which themselves have been dated at 710–875.¹¹ The Navajo's own oral tradition says the *Dineh* arrived in the area of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, while the great pueblos there were still being constructed by the Anasazi people (that would be between 900–1130 A.D.).

Such evidence is important politically because it would give the Navajo an even stronger claim to their ancestral homeland. The fact that they have been regarded at latecomers to the Southwest both by whites and by their Pueblo and Hopi neighbors has sometimes weakened their case for ownership of their traditional territory. Some people even consider the Navajo to be "land-greedy" because of their attempts to acquire (or recover, depending on your point of view) more land to support their growing population,

because the Navajo already have more land than any other tribe.

According to anthropologist R.F.Locke, “evidence indicates that the Navajos and Pueblos generally enjoyed a live-and-let-live relationship prior to the arrival of the Spaniards into the Southwest.”¹² By 1630 the Navajo occupied northern New Mexico and were named “Apaches de Navajos” by the Spaniards, for an abandoned Pueblo site called “Navajo” which was then occupied by *Dineh*.¹³ (Locke claims that the name “Navajo” meant “great planted fields” in the Tewa language of the Pueblo, and refers to the Navajo’s recently acquired prowess at farming, but that meaning could also be a reference to the original Pueblo occupants of the site rather than to the *Dineh*.)¹⁴

Although the Navajo culture may at one time have been very similar to that of their Apache relatives, both the Navajo and the Apache absorbed cultural elements from the older inhabitants of the Southwest in the particular areas where each group resided. In the case of the Navajo, the influences came from the Pueblo people and from the Hopi. The nomadic Navajo learned farming and weaving from the Pueblos¹⁵ and adopted certain elements of Pueblo religious ceremonies and ritual. They also acquired sheep, goats, cattle and horses from the Spaniards; the sheep in particular became essential to the Navajo economy and lifestyle, and are considered gifts from the Holy People. Fruit trees, especially peaches, in addition to oats and wheat, were also acquired from the Spaniards, and Canyon de Chelly was at one time filled with Navajo fields and peach orchards, until the depredations of Kit Carson during his 1863-64 campaign to subdue the Navajo by starving them out of their canyon stronghold.

After the Pueblo Indians revolted against the Spaniards in 1680, the Spanish influence in the Southwest never extended much beyond the Rio Grande Valley area of New Mexico. The Apache and the Navajo were too warlike, and their territories were remote enough that the Spaniards did not attempt to establish settlements among them. Thus there were few white settlements in the area when Navajo country came under U.S. control in 1848. However, the Navajo had been quite eager to acquire Spanish sheep and horses, if not European culture or religion, and it was during the Spanish-Mexican period that the Navajo got their reputation as raiders.

The United States claimed the land where the Navajos lived as a result of the U.S. defeat of Mexico in 1848 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. (Nobody questioned whether the Mexicans or their Spanish predecessors were themselves the rightful owners of the land concerned, or asked the Navajo or other Native American inhabitants of the territory if they wanted to be part of the U.S.A.)

Most American children remember Kit Carson as a famous scout and frontiersman, but his reputation in Navajoland is far from positive. Both he and Brigadier General James H. Carleton, the Commander of the U.S. Army in New Mexico, openly and unashamedly advocated genocide. In Carleton's words, "By the colonization and subjugation of the Navajo tribe, we gain for civilization their whole country. There is evidence of gold fields, of veins of silver, and the richest copper ... I have come to kill Indians, and I believe it is right and honorable to use any means ..."¹⁶

On August 3, 1863, General Carleton's official orders to his troops were: "Kill every male Navajo and Apache you can find."¹⁷ In 1863-64, Colonel Carson and his army troops burned the Navajos' cornfields and orchards in Canyon de Chelly. Captured Navajos were sold to Mexico as slaves, or given to the Ute Indians who fought with the U.S. army (meanwhile, the Northern and Southern states were fighting a civil war, partly over the issue of black slavery). U.S. soldiers under Carson committed unspeakable atrocities against Navajos of all ages and sexes; the same type of atrocities against an "alien" people were unfortunately also committed by American soldiers in the wars against the Plains Indians, and a hundred years later in Vietnamese villages such as Mi Lai.

In the winter of 1864, the eight thousand surviving Navajos (perhaps some 4,000 others had escaped into the western mountains) were marched out of their homeland and east four hundred miles to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and imprisoned there at the Bosque Redondo with no proper shelter and only meager rations of inferior meat, flour, and coffee (the starving Navajo boiled the unfamiliar coffee beans and ate them). Not surprisingly, hundreds of Navajos died of hunger, thirst, and disease during "The Long Walk" and during their imprisonment. Government records show 7,300 Navajo held in government prisons in 1867.¹⁸

In 1868 the *Dineh* were finally allowed to return to a portion of their former homeland, partly because it had become too expensive (one million dollars a year) to maintain them in their captivity. A 3.5 million acre reservation, about 10% of the territory they formerly inhabited, was set aside for the Navajo in northeastern Arizona. The treaty land included all of Canyon de Chelly but did not include the best eastern grazing lands, and excluded most of the water sources.

In a treaty signed by twenty-nine Navajo headmen on June 1, 1868 and ratified by the U.S. Congress on August 12, the tribe agreed never again to fight the U.S., and to send their children between the ages of six and sixteen to the white man's schools. The U.S. government in turn promised to provide a teacher "who will reside among the Indians"¹⁹

and a school house for every thirty Navajo children. (The way this treaty clause was later carried out became a matter of great contention, because Navajo children were rounded up, taken to far away boarding schools, and separated from their families for many years, not unlike the enslaved captives of earlier times.)

Each Navajo family had the right to select a tract of 160 acres within the reservation to use as its farming or grazing land. This allotted amount of land was determined by the Homestead Act, which had been developed for settlers in the eastern Plains and the fertile farmlands of the Midwest. No one stopped to consider that in arid Arizona desert land, a larger amount of land was needed to support each family. Even more important, the idea of family-owned parcels of land did not fit into the Navajo cultural tradition of communal ownership.²⁰

The U.S. promised to give the Navajo seeds, agricultural implements, clothing and some other supplies, and also sheep to replace the Navajo herds which had been confiscated or destroyed, but it took some time before these sheep reached the Navajo, and the supplies were never adequate or as promised.

On July 6, 1868, the returning Navajos came in sight of one of the sacred mountains, Mt. Taylor, and some of them fell to their knees and cried with joy at the sight of a familiar landmark. Their U.S. Army escorts were so moved that some celebrated along with the Navajo.²¹

However, the first two winters on the reservation were very hard times for the *Dineh*. They had no sheep to provide food and wool, and their former hogans and fields had also been destroyed by the soldiers in the campaign against them. Many of the seeds and food supplies promised by the government never arrived; graft in the Indian Bureau was rampant in those days and fraudulent contracts for goods were often issued to friends of officials, who instead delivered shipments of surplus furniture castors, umbrellas or silk hats. "For the next two decades, almost everyone had their hand in the Navajo pie except the Navajo."²² In desperation, a few Navajo turned to raiding for livestock in order to survive, incurring the wrath of Anglo settlers and the U.S. Army. The situation improved somewhat after the sheep promised by the government began to arrive in late 1869, although not in the numbers agreed.

Once on the reservation, many Navajo ignored the boundaries, which to them were only meaningless imaginary lines drawn on a paper by some white people. The *Dineh* in many cases went back to live where they always had lived, including chief Ganado Mucho, who returned with his followers to his traditional home in the Ganado Valley, outside the

reservation boundary.²³ Others returned to Black Mesa, near the Hopi villages. "The Hopi accepted the return of their Navajo neighbors as long as the Navajo didn't take the land the Hopi themselves were using."²⁴

Somehow, once back home, the Navajo managed to survive and even prosper in spite of the government's many unfulfilled treaty promises. The official government census of 1875 showed a reservation population of 11,768 (the actual total Navajo population was estimated at around 16,000 in 1878).²⁵ By 1886, Navajo herds were producing one million pounds of wool per year, which was shipped by train to mills in the East.²⁶ By 1906, the Navajo population had increased to 28,000.²⁷ In 1970 it was 97,000 and by 1990 it had grown to 200,000.

Meanwhile the Navajo managed to acquire legal rights to some additional lands, although they also lost much to the Santa Fe Railroad and to white settlers. In 1878, President Grant gave the Navajo a 911,257 acre strip along the western edge of the reservation in compensation for grazing lands given over to the railroad between Albuquerque and Flagstaff.²⁸ In 1880, they got 1.2 million acres of land to the west, east, and south, and in 1882 President Arthur established a 2.4 million acre reservation to the west of the Navajos for the use of "the Moki (Hopi) and *other Indians* there."²⁹ Since the Navajo had been living in this area for a long time, they believed themselves to be the "other Indians." This is one source of the present Hopi-Navajo land dispute which may soon cause the forced relocation of ten thousand Navajo, more than the number who were taken away to the Bosque Redondo in 1864.

The Navajo also gained additional reservation lands in 1884, 1886, 1900, 1901, 1905, 1908, 1913, 1930, 1933, and 1934, to make up the present land base of 24,000 square miles in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. This is about one third of the land which was claimed by the Navajo at the time when the Americans took control of the Southwest.³⁰

The Department of the Interior created a tribal council for the Navajo in the 1920's. This was the precursor of the present day tribal council, but originally its main function was merely to conduct the tribe's business affairs, including the granting of land leases to outside companies, under the direction of the Commissioner of the Navajos, who had virtual control of the decisions of the non-elected council.³¹

In the 1930's, the U.S. government carried out severe reductions of Navajo herds in order to prevent overgrazing, which had been blamed for loss of vegetation and subsequent soil erosion. Some believe that the government was also motivated by the need to reduce silt in the newly built Boulder Dam.³² In many cases, sheep and horses were taken

away from Navajo families without explanation, then shot and left to rot. Over half a million animals were destroyed by the government during the stock reduction program, which lasted into the mid-1940's. Without meat from their sheep, many Navajo families went hungry. Some people were forced to leave their homes and go to the border towns in search of jobs in hotels and restaurants, in the mines, or with the railroads.

Of course the stock reduction programs were extremely unpopular with Navajos and led to the tribe's rejection of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (two thirds of the other Native American tribes in the U.S. approved this act).³³ As a result, the Navajo have no tribal constitution to this day. Bad feeling and suspicion of the government over the issue of stock reduction still endures,³⁴ and government limits on the size of herds are again being enforced. Some say that the grass did not improve as a result of the herd reductions,³⁵ that it is lack of water that is the main problem in the area. Moreover, some people accuse the government of deliberately reducing Navajo herds to below the number required for subsistence in order to drive Navajo families off their land and into wage labor in the towns, in order to force their acculturation into the "mainstream". (The government itself estimates that a Navajo family of four needs thirty-five sheep to provide sufficient meat and other income for survival.)³⁶ In some cases the government has then claimed that people renting houses in town no longer have rights to their traditional family lands.

World War II opened up more jobs for Navajos in munitions factories, uranium mines, on the railroads, and growing sugar beets, and forever changed the social and economic structure of the reservation. The traditional agricultural base of herding and dry farming became a supplement rather than the primary source of Navajo people's income.³⁷ The war also opened new horizons beyond Navajoland, as 3600 Navajo soldiers saw the world outside the reservation and discovered new options. These World War II veterans learned more about how the white world worked. And after the war, they had the G.I. Bill to help pay educational expenses. (For example, renowned Navajo painter Carl Gorman went to art school in California after serving in the army as a Code Talker during in the Pacific War, and there were many others like him who used their military service to finance their education, then took something of the Anglo world back with them to their Navajo homeland. Inevitably, many veterans also carried back the emotional and physical scars of war.)

The shift to a wage economy intensified after the war when a few more industries came to the reservation area. But there was severe famine on the reservation during the

winter blizzards of 1947.³⁸ Many returning veterans could not find jobs, and some Navajos questioned what benefit they were receiving for having served the United States—their country—in the war.

Navajo society at the end of the twentieth century is in transition. Many Navajo continue to live largely in the traditional way as pastoralists, and are able to subsist frugally on the meat from their sheep, the sale of wool and Navajo rugs made from that wool, and the sale of cattle and other livestock. By dry farming and in some places careful irrigation of the arid land, they can also grow corn, beans, squash and pumpkins to supplement their diet. Many Navajo prefer to live in this traditional way. “Elders don’t need *money* to live,” says Louise Benally, a young Navajo woman. “They say, ‘Money to us is nothing’. They don’t care for modern things ... because they know that those won’t last long.”³⁹

As a high school student in 1967, Carol Bitsui described her traditional Navajo childhood:

“I was raised on the reservation in a hogan with neither running water, nor a button to press for warm heat. My bed was a cradleboard, a sheepskin, and the earth. My food was my mother’s breast, goat’s milk, berries, mutton, and corn meal. My play partners were puppies, the lamb and the lizards. I ate with my fingers. I went barefoot most of the time ... I had to rise early. I herded sheep in the blazing desert of Coyote Canyon. I carried water from the water pit. I ground corn for my food. I sometimes went without eating because there was no food ... I prayed to the Great Spirit of my people. I respected nature because it was sacred to me ... I did not speak English, for it was a strange language to me.”⁴⁰

The Relationship of the Navajo to the Land

The very success of the Navajo people in surviving and in fact increasing in number despite the harsh and demanding environment of the Southwest is now causing a strain on the land. The amount of land which the tribe holds is no longer sufficient to support its expanding population of over 200,000. According to one source, the present land base is sufficient to support no more than 35,000 people.⁴¹

Meanwhile, there is increasing pressure both from outside and from elements within

the tribe to exploit the great mineral wealth which lies below the surface of the land. Yet strip mining of coal and uranium has already resulted in severe pollution and destruction of the environment on and around the reservation, including the dumping of thousands of tons of radioactive wastes. (In some cases, the U.S. government Department of the Interior, which is supposed to protect the environment, has waived its own safety restrictions in order to facilitate mining on the reservation.)⁴²

Electric power plants which supply the distant cities of Tucson, Phoenix and Los Angeles put lead, sulphuric acid, and mercury dioxide into the air. The mines and power plants also consume huge amounts of water, a scarce and precious commodity in this land of low rainfall. One power plant alone loses twenty million gallons of fresh water each day to evaporation. Water is also used to carry coal slurry from mines to far away electric power plants. Some environmentalists fear that the current draining of the underground aquifer will have disastrous effects on the ecology of the whole region.⁴³

Ironically, while monstrous metal towers carry electricity across Navajoland to distant cities, the majority (75% by one estimate) of Navajo homes on the reservation do not even have electricity. Yet the health of the Navajo people is suffering to some extent from the environmental effects of mining and the power plants. Cancer, black lung and other occupational diseases have become prevalent among Navajos working in the mines on the reservation, particularly those who worked in the uranium mines in the 1940's and 1950's when safety measures were lax.⁴⁴ There is a high rate of birth defects on the reservation, twice the national average, which some believe to be caused by radiation exposure from uranium mining and radioactive debris, which can remain dangerous for as long as 80,000 years.⁴⁵ Adequate safeguards have not been taken to protect miners or dispose of waste properly. In some cases, Navajo people have actually built their houses of rock debris from uranium mines. Donald Rowe lived in such a house for thirty years. No one told him it was dangerous, but eventually he and some of his family became sick. Development in Navajoland seems to be causing disharmony and imbalance both on the land and in the people.

According to one writer, the land is the integrating principle of Navajo culture.⁴⁶ The Navajo homeland, bounded by the four sacred mountains of Mt. Taylor to the south, the San Francisco Peaks on the west, Mt. Hesperus to the north, and Mt. Blanco on the east, has defined the Navajo people. If they lose their land, they have lost what is most precious to them and what defines them as individuals.

The fact that the Navajo, unlike many North American Indians, were not removed

into a different region and have managed to preserve a great deal of their original land base has been the key to their cultural and physical survival: “there is nothing more revered nor more loved by the Navajo than the land they call *Dinetah*.”⁴⁷ To them, the earth is holy, a mother who gives life to her children. Disrespect or misuse of the land is not only self-destructive but also sacreligious, because it destroys harmony. “At the heart of Navajo existence is the desire to keep one’s life in harmony with the supernatural and the universe.”⁴⁸

The Navajo universe consists of ordinary Earth Surface Beings and supernatural Holy People who can both hurt and help Earth Surface Beings, and who can restore harmony. Navajo religious ceremonials are largely concerned with the preservation or restoration of spiritual and physical harmony to either individuals or communities when something has disrupted the balance. For example, returning Navajo soldiers who fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam were usually given the Enemy Way ceremony for purification, as had been done traditionally for returning warriors.

According to Anne Wauneka, “We feel that nature is beautiful. The world is beautiful that you are living in. The blue sky, the rains that fall should all be in beauty. Every Navajo should be walking in beauty. Beautiful thinking. Beautiful image. Beautiful children. Whatever they do they must be in the sense of beauty.”⁴⁹ But these days, tribal society and technological society hardly seem to be in harmony, and development such as strip mining is leaving permanent scars upon the land.

Politics and Resources

According to a 1985 estimate, there are at least 100 million barrels of oil, 50 billion tons of coal, 25 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 80 billion pounds of uranium on the Navajo reservation.⁵⁰ With the wealth of energy and minerals on their lands, one would expect the Navajo to be rich. In fact, based on per capita income, they are one of the poorest minority groups in the United States today. Is this the result of mismanagement, exploitation, or both?

The Navajo did not have a tradition of chiefs; rather, people were loosely organized into bands. By 1846 when Americans arrived in the area, the custom had developed of choosing a band leader, or *natani*, who usually served for life, but there was no central tribal government. The U.S. government encouraged the creation of a tribal business council in 1923 so that there would be a legal entity which could sign oil leases. (The

original Treaty of 1868 had required leases to be approved by three-fourths of all adult male Indians.) The original tribal council was not even selected by the people, but rather was appointed by officials of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and largely controlled by the Commissioner of the Navajos, until that government position was abolished, and by the Secretary of the Interior. The Department of the Interior “continued to play an important role in tribal decisions well into the 1970’s.”⁵¹

As a result, some Navajos still do not completely trust the tribal council, even though its members are now elected. As in many tribes, there is a conflict between Progressives and Traditionalists. Also, some people feel that there is too much temptation for tribal council members to be swayed by bribery and kickbacks from mining companies and other business interests, since the tribe as a whole does not have to approve mineral leases. The recent imprisonment of former tribal chairman Peter MacDonald, a dominant figure in Navajo politics for two decades, on charges of conspiracy, fraud, and receiving bribes, has only added to public cynicism and suspicion.⁵²

Others question to what degree the money from mineral leases really benefits the Navajo people as a whole, or whether it even reaches them. “It [the Navajo Tribal Council] was not set up to serve the Navajo people. It was so that there would be a formal way, an official way, of having the endorsement of the development of Navajo land,” says Navajo Nancy Evans. “The Navajo Tribal Government to this day operates as a corporation. It does not have the welfare of the people as the purpose for which it exists.”⁵³

Some experts claim that the fees paid by the mining companies to the Navajo tribe are greatly below market value: “Early leases with such companies as Gulf Oil, General Electric and DuPont were grossly unfair to the Navajo people, and ... so were leases to mine the coal that lies under Black Mesa forged between the Peabody Coal Company and the Navajo and Hopi Tribal Councils between 1964 and 1966.”⁵⁴ Some examples of royalty rates are: only 4% of the value of coal extracted, 3.7% for uranium, 1.8% for natural gas, and a mere 1.3% for oil.⁵⁵ One particular lease resulted in the Navajo tribe receiving only 15 cents for every ton of coal taken from their land.⁵⁶ Another group of leases signed with Peabody Coal in the 1960’s for a term of thirty-five years paid the Navajo only 37.5 cents per ton. Out of 1980 production valued at \$311,300,000, Navajo royalties totalled only \$5,900,000.⁵⁷ If all the money received by the tribe from natural resources were distributed among tribal members, each Navajo would get only about \$200 per year.⁵⁸

As the environmental damage from strip mining and exploitation of other non-renewable resources became more evident, some Navajo began to oppose granting addi-

tional leases to mining companies, and to insist on enforcement of cleanup provisions in the existing leases. They have also protested the pollution caused by power plants which serve far away big cities but are poisoning the air around Navajoland, and the waste of water which might be better used for farming. Mineral wealth may also be an underlying cause of another serious issue now facing the Navajo, a “land dispute” with their Hopi neighbors which has been festering for twenty years.

The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute

In addition to the problem of providing for a growing population on an inadequate land base, and the conflict between protecting the land and exploiting its resources for tribal income, the Navajo are now faced with a land dispute with their Hopi neighbors which may end in the forced eviction or “relocation” of over ten thousand Navajo from an area they have occupied for more than three generations. Some say this dispute was artificially created by mining interests, with the cooperation of certain government officials, because the mining companies want easier access to the minerals lying in the area of the so-called Hopi Partition Lands (HPL).⁵⁹ Once the Navajo residents, many of whom are elderly pastoralists, are forced off these lands, the mining companies would be free to negotiate favorable leases with the Hopis and begin mining with fewer restrictions and with less concern for the environmental impact. If relocated, how will these ten thousand Navajo survive, and who will benefit?

Navajo lived near the Hopi villages long before the reservation line was drawn. When the Hopi reservation was formed in 1882, there were five hundred Navajo families known to be living there. An Indian agent wrote in 1884, “The best of good feelings generally exist between these two tribes.”⁶⁰ As the Navajo population grew, the size of their reservation was expanded until it surrounded the Hopi Reservation on all sides. But the U.S. government allowed the Navajo to stay on Hopi land, and even encouraged more Navajo to move there.

The Parker-Keam line, marked in 1891 with the acceptance of both Navajo and Hopi, designated an exclusive Hopi area of about 600, 000 acres including their mesa top villages and surrounding farmlands. The rest was considered a Joint Usage Area (JUA) for both tribes.⁶¹ Until recently, the two tribes coexisted peacefully and even complemented one another economically: “We are dependent on each other for our livelihood,” said Hopi Fermina Banyacya.⁶²

The Parker-Keam boundaries had been acceptable to both tribes until 1962, and Navajo rights to use the area had been upheld in three court decisions.⁶³ Then, in the *Healing v. Jones* decision in 1962, the court decided that the Hopi should get control of half of the Joint Use Area in addition to their existing exclusive occupation area. This took place after a lawyer named John Boydon had hired a Salt Lake City law firm and a public relations firm to carry out a “massive assault”, in the words of former Navajo Tribal Chairman Peter MacDonald.⁶⁴

John Boydon is a former Department of the Interior employee who got himself appointed by the U.S. government as lawyer to the Hopi Tribe after that tribe’s council and also the Navajo had initially rejected his services. They feared that his true purpose was to gain access to tribal land for strip mining. Mr. Boydon’s law firm also represents Peabody Coal.

Traditional Hopi leaders had lost power after after some elections which many people claim were fraudulent. Then the Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) appointed Boydon as attorney to the new Hopi Tribal Council. Boydon then tried to find a way to separate surface land use rights from sub-surface mineral rights on Navajo grazing lands.⁶⁵

1964, the Hopi tribe was paid three million dollars for mining leases which it signed with Peabody Coal, but one third of this money (one million dollars) went to John Boydon for his legal services. Around the same time, Peabody Coal, the largest coal producer in the U.S.A., signed leases with the Navajo to strip mine coal at Black Mesa, and three hundred Navajo families were removed from the area.

In the wake of the *Healing v. Jones* decision, Boydon continued the public relations campaign in an attempt to establish the “myth” of a Navajo-Hopi land battle. The Navajo were portrayed as bullies of their defenseless Hopi neighbors, who were said to need the Joint Usage Area for religious reasons. “Meanwhile, the Navajos did hardly anything to present their side of the story”⁶⁶ and no one paid any attention to the traditional Hopi leaders who opposed the mining at Black Mesa and elsewhere on Hopi land.

In the “Red Power” years of the early 1970’s, militant Navajos picketed and briefly occupied Peabody Coal’s facility. There were also protests against plans for additional uranium mining on Navajo land. The Navajo living in the shared land area with the Hopi had joint control over mineral resources, and perhaps companies feared that it would be more difficult for them to negotiate future leases there.⁶⁷

Then John Boydon proposed to formally divide the Joint Use Area (JUA) of the reservation between the two tribes. A public relations firm was hired by the Hopi Tribal

Council, then under Boydon's control, to persuade Congress to divide the Navajo-Hopi Joint Use Area. In the following public relations and media campaign, Congress was made to believe that the Navajo and Hopi were on the verge of warfare over the JUA, and that Congress needed to act at once to resolve the dispute and prevent bloodshed. The result was the Relocation Act, which is still being resisted in spite of a 1986 government deadline for Navajo relocation.

Public Law #393-531 was pushed through the U.S. Congress in 1974 and signed by President Gerald Ford in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Opponents of the law claim that some of the local Senators and Representatives who encouraged the passage of the bill were either misinformed, or that they deliberately distorted the issues.⁶⁸ When one examines the background of the law and the individuals involved in its creation and passage, there are potential cases of conflict of interest or questionable professional ethics.

⁶⁹

Most of the Navajo affected by the Relocation Act have refused to move to new homes, which are usually government houses in border towns up to hundreds of miles away. Mae Horseson testified to the Senate Select Committee:

“I make a living with the sheep. This is how I live. I will not relocate. If I were offered a new home, I would be a stranger in such a place. I wouldn't know how to operate the heating or the lighting system. And the expense! I'm sure it would be tremendous. How would I pay for these utilities? I have no income [other than the sheep] and I have never been to any school.”⁷⁰

Some relocated Navajo have lost their new houses because they have been unable to pay taxes or utility bills, and their houses have been repossessed, leaving homeless as well as landless.⁷¹ But for many elderly Navajo accustomed to life on the open land, rehousing in government bungalows in townships far from their ancestral homes has caused more than just economic hardship. It has meant spiritual death and the loss of the will to survive. Of the few hundred Navajo who were forced to relocate immediately after the law was signed, one third had died by 1986.⁷² “If you take away the Indian's religion and his tribal community, you destroy him as an Indian. And as an individual.”⁷³ One elder Navajo woman said that living in the BIA tract house was “like being in jail.”⁷⁴

Some people see relocation as one more attempt by the government to destroy Indian culture: “Washington does not recognise these ways ... Washington says, ‘Go away, go

someplace else. Walk among people and places you do not know.' We are not hard enough to survive in places that we are unfamiliar with. We'll grieve for our homeland and it will kill us."⁷⁵

In order to force the removal of Navajo families from the HPL, the U.S. government has spent 700 million dollars of American taxpayers' money,⁷⁶ and used it in some shocking ways. Immediately after the passage of the law, a fence was built through what has always been open rangeland, preventing the movement of both people and their livestock. It cost the U.S. government four thousand dollars per mile. Even worse, in a variation on the "scorched earth" policy, whole areas of land in the JUA have been scraped clean of all vegetation in an effort to prevent Navajo residents from grazing their animals or farming there, and some Navajo homes have been intentionally burned.

Since the passage of the Relocation Act, there have been several court contests, mass protests, and Congressional hearings where the Navajo have appealed their case to the Federal Government, thus delaying the removal of the majority of the Navajo from the disputed area. The Navajo people say, "This land must not be stolen from our coming generations."⁷⁷ A report from traditional Hopi religious leaders says: "It is the Hopi Tribal Council who have created this so-called problem among the Navajo and Hopi people ... It is they who are trying to divide the traditional Hopi land area and reduce it for their own reasons ... We, the Hopi traditional people, do not support these unfortunate measures of the council ... "⁷⁸

A recent attempt at finding a compromise between the Hopi and Navajo tribes broke down in August 1993.⁷⁹ Navajo Chairman Peterson Zah had offered to compensate the Hopi with private land purchased by the Navajo, and some additional public lands, in exchange for 75-year leases for the Navajo families on the wrong side of the fence, but as the mediation effort dragged on, some of the private land involved was withdrawn from the market. The Hopi refuse to take money in compensation for land. "We cannot buy or sell land ... We are prohibited by our teachings," says Hopi chairman Vernon Masayevsa.⁸⁰ The Navajo remaining on the disputed lands now face the imminent prospect of confiscation of their livestock, and eviction without compensation or rehousing from the government because they resisted the original relocation order.

Conclusion

Only about five percent of the Navajo people are directly affected by the Relocation

Act. However, this dispute is related to a broader issue— the Navajo people's need to maintain a connection with the land, and to preserve and protect that land. Regardless of the outcome of the land dispute, there are critical choices which the Navajo tribe and its individual members will have to make concerning how their land is to be used in the future, and how each family will maintain the special relationship with the land which has been the key to the tribe's spiritual and cultural survival throughout its history.

The issue of land use is pressing: how much mining should be allowed and under what restrictions? And how can more jobs be created on the reservation so that Navajos won't have to leave the land? The present tribal chairman, Peterson Zah, is trying to encourage clean, light industry to locate in the reservation area as an alternative to mining of non-renewable resources.

The land has always been a source of strength and continuity for the Navajo people. They have shown remarkable tenacity, endurance, and adaptability in the past, as they migrated from the far north into the American Southwest, changing from nomadic hunters to farmers and herders, and adopting elements of neighboring cultures on the way. Experts who have studied the Navajo all believe that they will continue to endure into the next century. For advice on how to they might best do that, listen to the words of a young Navajo woman, Louise Benally: "The way for us to have our culture keep on going is not to forget what our ancestors have brought to us."⁸¹ An essential element of that ancestral heritage is the need for the Navajo to remain connected with the land which has nurtured them.

Notes

- 1) This and the other statistics which follow were supplied by the Navajo Tribal Government, Window Rock, Arizona in their publication "Navajo Nation Fact Sheet," revised May 2, 1993.
- 2) In order to be legally enrolled as a member of the Navajo or of any other Indian tribe in the U.S.A., an individual must have at least one quarter Navajo blood quantum. ("Navajo Nation Fact Sheet.")
- 3) The term "Anglo" is often used by Indians to refer to the mainstream European-influenced U.S. culture, or to a (white) member of that culture.
- 4) When considering per capita income, it should be recognized that the Navajo are provided with a variety of free services and allowances such as medical care and subsidized housing both by the Navajo tribe, and by the U.S. government as a result of its treaty obligations. Therefore many people's basic subsistence needs are met by government contributions which are not included in

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the calculation of annual per capita income.

- 5) These statistics may be somewhat misleading, since many Navajo families preserve the tradition of using two or more residences, including a summer “camp” for when livestock are moved to pastures in the back country. Today, a family may elect to live in a town or in government provided housing, while at the same time maintaining a traditional “hogan” for seasonal use and for ceremonial purposes. The latter are for the most part without “modern facilities.” However, traditional ceremonies can only be performed in a hogan, so most Navajo families will maintain a hogan even if living in town.
- 6) Raymond Friday Locke, *The Book of the Navajo*, p. 8.
- 7) *The Smithsonian Book of North American Indians*, p. 121.
- 8) Alvin M. Josephy, *The Indian Heritage of America*, p. 161.
- 9) Locke, p. 8.
- 10) Locke, p. 8.
- 11) Locke, p. 8.
- 12) Locke, p. xi.
- 13) Josephy, p. 172.
- 14) Locke, p. 163–4.
- 15) Josephy, p. 172.
- 16) Maria Florio and Victoria Mudd, “Broken Rainbow.”
- 17) Stan Steiner, *The New Indians*, p. 80.
- 18) Locke, p. 3.
- 19) Locke, p. 385–6.
- 20) Locke, p. 396.
- 21) Locke, p. 387.
- 22) Locke, p. 391.
- 23) Locke, p. 392.
- 24) “Broken Rainbow.”
- 25) Locke, p. 401.
- 26) Museum of Northern Arizona, “Navajo.”
- 27) Locke, p. 3.
- 28) Locke, p. 401.
- 29) Locke, p. 465.
- 30) Locke, p. 402.
- 31) Locke, p. 462.
- 32) Peter Iverson, *The Navajos*, p. 63.
- 33) Kenneth R. Philp, Ed., *Indian Self-rule*, p. 18.
- 34) Kenneth R. Philp, Ed., *Indian Self-rule*, p. 10.
- 35) “Broken Rainbow.”
- 36) “Broken Rainbow.”
- 37) Steiner, p. 22.
- 38) Steiner, p. 24.

- 39) "Broken Rainbow."
- 40) Steiner, p. 29-30.
- 41) Josephy, p. 173.
- 42) "Broken Rainbow."
- 43) "Broken Rainbow."
- 44) Iverson, p. 97; Locke, p. 463. A 1990 law granted compensation to uranium miners who worked for the U.S. government, but so far only 56 Navajo claims out of 143 filed have been approved. See also "Zah: Uranium payments too slow," *Navajo Nation Messenger*, June 23, 1993, p. 1.
- 45) "Broken Rainbow."
- 46) Interview with Jerry Kammer, author of *The Second Long Walk*, in "Broken Rainbow."
- 47) Locke, p. 5.
- 48) Josephy, p. 194.
- 49) Steiner, p. 155.
- 50) "Broken Rainbow."
- 51) Locke, p. 462.
- 52) Locke, p. 473; Iverson, p. 103.
- 53) "Broken Rainbow."
- 54) Locke, p. 462.
- 55) "Broken Rainbow."
- 56) "Broken Rainbow."
- 57) Locke, p. 462.
- 58) Locke, p. 473.
- 59) "Broken Rainbow."
- 60) "Broken Rainbow."
- 61) Locke, p. 465-6.
- 62) "Broken Rainbow."
- 63) Locke, p. 466.
- 64) Locke, p. 468.
- 65) Locke, p. 468.
- 66) Locke, p. 468-9.
- 67) Iverson, p. 79, 100; "Broken Rainbow."
- 68) "Broken Rainbow."
- 69) In addition to John Boydon's simultaneous relationship with Peabody Coal, Herman Loesch, who was Assistant Secretary of the Interior during the inception and passage of the law, later left government service to become president of Peabody Coal.
- 70) "Broken Rainbow."
- 71) Locke, p. 468.
- 72) Locke, p. 468.
- 73) Steiner, p. 139.
- 74) "Broken Rainbow."
- 75) "Broken Rainbow."

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- 76) Locke, p. 470.
- 77) Interview with Navajo Jan Biakeddy in "Broken Rainbow."
- 78) Locke, p. 470.
- 79) "Navajo-Hopi dispute settlement collapses," *Navajo Nation Messenger*, Aug. 11, 1993.
- 80) "No More War Forever," *Newsweek*, March 8, 1993.
- 81) "Broken Rainbow."

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