

Citizens Working Together - Some Barriers to be Overcome

An Essay by the members of Dine' Citizens Against Ruining our Environment

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The theme of this anniversary issue of The Workbook is "citizen action", citizens working together. In this essay, we explore some barriers that still prevent cooperation from reaching its most effective level. We will discuss these barriers as they present themselves in situations of Native American communities defending the double threat posed by environmental degradation on our land and culture.

Dine' Citizens Against Ruining our Environment is an all-Navajo environmental group, based within the Navajo homeland. We seek to empower, provide a voice for, and protect the interests of community-based and traditional people. We started as a small, community based organization in 1988 to prevent the location of a toxic waste incinerator and dump in the Navajo community of Dilkon, Arizona. After our successful defense there, we received considerable regional attention, and soon we were called upon by other Navajo groups to assist in similar situations. We have thus grown into a multi-issue, Reservation-wide organization.

Our growth has permitted us the chance to share among ourselves many experiences and struggles, and to see a distressing pattern in the way that the system of funding and supporting environmental activism fails to work in Native lands.

The biggest barrier to real cooperation are different notions of "accountability" between the world of the Reservation and the outside world. This comes from two basic approaches towards working together: an approach based on trust fostered in human relationships, and an approach based on documentation, requiring the presence of an infrastructure that many of our people lack.

Who really does the work of environmental defense on Reservation lands? Most of our most dedicated activists are traditional people. These are the people who actually live on the land, whose umbilical cords are buried where they live. These are the people who are directly affected by mining, logging, dumping and burning. Many of them don't even have electricity, telephones or typewriters - forget about lap-top computers or fax machines. Prior to their involvement as activists, why should they have these things? These people have no experience writing grants, filing reimbursement requests, keeping account records. Most of them don't even have checking accounts. Such people are thus all but invisible to the people who control the funding sources. Even when they are "discovered", they are not recognized for what they are. Most of our activists have heard this at least several times: "Wow! The work you do here is great! Just send us a 10 page proposal, along with last year's financial statements and next year's budget, a copy of your IRS letter of exemption, and a diagram of your organizational structure, and we'll be glad to fund your work." The funders want our people to be "accountable." That is, they want them to produce the type of documentation and reporting that they consider "accountable." But, lacking the funds to acquire the equipment to produce

the documents and communications, our people are stuck.

So, we shake our heads and continue to do the work the best we can. Then, along come the urban environmental groups. They live a little closer to the reservation. They know who our activists are. Once or twice they'll send a representative out to our sites and ask us what's going on, and then maybe help out with a press release. They bring our elders to the cities and sit them in front of panels to tell their stories. "We were glad to be of assistance to you," they tell us, "Now could you please give us a letter for our files, officially requesting our help. It's just a formality." We give them what they want. Then nothing happens. We don't see them for weeks. Then they call us. "We're having another panel. We want you to come and tell your story again." We go tell our story again. Nothing happens - again. While we are telling our story over and over they are writing the proposals and submitting the reports that the funders like to see. All of it nice evidence to the funders of "accountability". They tell the funders back in New York and Washington that they are doing the work, and they have the reports to "prove" it. It's easy money for them, nothing for us. Pretty soon, they are fighting over us and dividing us. "Don't work with that community," they tell us. "That community is sponsored by the group from Santa Fe. And that community, they're sponsored by the group from San Francisco. Don't work with them, either. Just work with us. We'll take care of you."

Meanwhile, another mine is being dug, another forest is being cut. And we are becoming divided among ourselves.

Some of our people do make it into the funding loop. Then another show begins. They ask us, "How can we heal Mother Earth?" They apologize for being white. They want us to explain to them what motivates us to work for free in defending our land - is it our "spirituality"? They are looking for that nostalgic connection with the noble savage, trivializing our spirituality. Of course, some of our own people play the part willingly, and give them what they want for a price. This, too, is a barrier towards really bringing people together in genuine cooperation.

At some point, the big break happens: the organization becomes "recognized." When you are recognized as an organization, other organizations want to "network" with you. This is when the larger groups get in touch - the regional planning groups and the major national lobbying groups. They like to do studies. They invite us to conferences in the cities. Pretty soon we are spending all of our time, and mostly our own money, attending conferences and hearing about studies. "We're going to persuade people to consume less electricity, to stop driving their large cars, or to oppose NAFTA. And we want your help." That is fine. We support all of these ideas. But many of our people don't have electricity, so how can they consume less? And they only need to drive their pickup truck for hauling water and hay. Studies are fine, but worthless if they don't lead to real action. The kind of real action we need are alternatives to the coal plants that dirty our skies, or the outmoded mill that is consuming all of our trees. We don't need pie-in-the-sky diagrams of solar farms, we need working solutions, on the ground, of alternative energy sources and industries. When we run out of money for travel or childcare and stop attending the conferences, people think we're troublemakers. We don't cooperate, we don't play the game. The fact is, no one has bothered to ask what we'd like to get out of these conferences, what our problems are on the

Reservation.

And all the while, the work is still not getting done.

So this is the pattern we have seen, the pattern that all of our local groups have gone through. It is the same one we have seen now for many years. It is a pattern of colonialism, of imperialism, and it is being perpetrated by the very system everyone thinks is trying to "help" us.

Therefore, we'd like to make a few suggestions:

1) Problems on indigenous people's lands require indigenous people's solutions. Outside groups, no matter how well intentioned, cannot understand our language, our culture, the vagueries of Tribal politics, or the local relationships that are all essential ingredients to true solutions.

2) We need the help of the funding organizations. And we believe that many funders sincerely want to help us. But the bureaucratic, document based way funds and other resources are currently dispersed is completely out of touch with the way we do our work. Our activists may not be grant writers, but they know what it takes to get the work done. They live here. Funders therefore need to make a greater effort to establish relationships with local communities themselves, rather than allowing regional urban groups to mediate this process.

3) Rather than allowing sponsors to divide communities, funders must trust the recommendations and referrals of one community regarding the needs of other communities. For instance, the people from Red Valley who are fighting for the victims of uranium mining know about and respect the struggle against forced relocation by the people from Black Mesa. Both groups know about the people trying to save the forests of the sacred Chuska Mountains. If funders had a good working relationship with any one of these groups, they would be led to the others.

4) Working relationships, not divisions, must be promoted among the communities of activists within Native lands. While most local communities are aware of other communities' struggles, they are all so overburdened with their own work that they could never hope to work together. Only through considerable time and effort has Dine' CARE begun to facilitate such cooperation. If funders were more willing to work with networks of local activists, through a process of one local community referring others for funding, rather than relying on "accountable" urban representatives of regions, the funding process itself would build regional relationships of cooperation. This certainly requires more work at human contact in place of documents, but it will form the basis for groundswells of true, lasting change.

5) Finally, we ask that all institutions take a second look at the way they approach the many environmental problems facing this world. Many elegant solutions seem to flow from the textbooks and marbled hallways in our big cities, yet they never seem to work for the local, indigenous and rural activists who are struggling to pay their phone bills and keep their cattle from being impounded. We therefore ask that some of our colleagues consider a shift in the way we go about producing the knowledge for defending Mother Earth. Why not invest in these local people for the long term, let them produce solutions based on their own local knowledge, their cultural wisdom and their enthusiasm, then take a close look at what they come up with. Perhaps the people who write the textbooks in the cities might even learn something.