

Uranium, Navajos and National Sacrifice Zones

By Scott Perez

This is the third in a series on Native Americans, the environment, and activism that has its roots in the social movements of the late 1960's to mid 1970's. These three articles barely scratch the surface of an important issue facing us today. Perhaps it is more important than ever to remember the old ways as we struggle to balance protection of our mother the Earth and the need for economic independence. I hope that these articles have raised awareness of these things.

It has been well documented that the American Indian reservations in this country have been environmentally abused since the very first days of their existence. In the West, when the Native people showed little inclination to plant or raise livestock, the land was leased by the Indian agents to white ranchers who quite often overgrazed it and left. To add insult to injury, lease payments often didn't make it to the Indians themselves, but got lost in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) maze or got pocketed by corrupt Indian agents. The leasing fiasco is in the headlines today as in the "individual trust fund account" scandal.

Grazing was not the only issue. Mineral leases from gas and oil drilling, mining leases and leases of forest lands were also involved. The general procedure was to blast, drill, cut and mine leaving the mess where it lay. Had this all happened in the nineteenth century, it would be somewhat understandable given the conquest mentality of the era. Not forgivable, but understandable. The worst of the abuses, however, took place during the twentieth century, particularly the time from World War II until the present. On reservations across the country, these abuses, along with others such as the dumping of toxic waste on the land and in the water, were rampant. The Navajo reservation suffered from all of them.

In an article written in 1993 by Timothy Benally, Sr., director of the Office of Navajo Uranium Workers, he gives a brief history of uranium mining on the reservation and in the Four Corners area. He states that mining started around 1918 in the Carrizo Mountains when companies were mining vanadium. Uranium was an accidental discovery. The miners and processors didn't know exactly what it was so they just kept it around, often in gunnysacks.

Around WWII, the government realized what it was for and the search was on. People were prospecting and digging all over the area. By the 1950's, the Vanadium Corporation of America and

Kerr-McGee were the principal mine owners. Jobs were scarce on the reservation and Navajo men, particularly those just back from the armed services, jumped at the chance to work in the mines, even though they were paid at a rate below what was acceptable in the rest of the country.

Defenders of the industry claim that neither the mining companies nor the government knew of the dangers involved with the mining and processing of uranium have argued it. Others have argued that there was plenty of evidence of the danger around at the time. Experiments had been run, and after all, the uranium was used to create the deadliest weapon known to man. There should have been some clue of the dangers. Some, such as Mr. Benally, feel that the miners were used as human guinea pigs. No matter which side of the argument one takes, the fact remains that people and the land were poisoned and the pollution of the land has not changed to this day.

Uranium was stored in houses, hogans and trading posts. Dirt and rock from the mine tailings were used in home building and repairs, to pave roads and parking lots, and to cover playgrounds. Until very recently, children played on the tailing piles. There are still many unsealed mines on the reservation and uncovered tailings. Whenever the wind blows, which is more often than not in this country, radioactive dust becomes airborne.

In the book *Ecocide of Native America*, the authors Donald Grinde and Bruce Johansen talk about the largest nuclear accident in the United States. Most people would assume that it would be the incident at Three Mile Island, which, due to its location near Washington, D. C. and New York City, got a lot of publicity. That incident, serious though it was, didn't even come close to the scope of an accident on July 16, 1978.

At 5:00 A. M. on that day, more than 1,100 tons of uranium mine tailings and 100 million gallons of radioactive water shot out of a crack in the mud of a dam near Church Rock, New Mexico, on the reservation. The contamination entered the Rio Puerco and in three hours was monitored 50 miles away in Gallup. The river is the main source of water for the area. Very few newspapers carried the story and those that did stated that since the area was "sparsely populated" there was no "immediate health hazard." Health officials issued press releases warning people not to use the water. Many of the people in the area could not read English and didn't have electricity for radios or TV's. Livestock sickened and died. Workers were sent to the area with buckets and shovels. After several weeks, only 50 tons of the tailings were cleaned up. There never has been adequate accounting of or compensation for this accident.

Other assaults were taking place on Navajo lands. The growing cities of the Southwest such as Phoenix, Tucson, Las Vegas and Albuquerque needed a source of electricity. Water is scarce in this part of the country so hydroelectric will not supply all of the needs. Nuclear power, supplied by the mines on the reservation provided part of the answer. Coal, too, was plentiful and could be mined cheaply, even if the process devastated the environment.

In the early 1960's, the Four Corners Power Plant was built near Shiprock to take advantage of this cheap source of fuel. Grinde and Johansen go into great detail on the effects of this plant in their book. They also cover the coal mining on Black Mesa that has had environmental, spiritual and social effects. Anyone interested in this specific issue can also find information in the archives of the newspaper *The Arizona Republic*.

The sacred Chuska Mountains were being logged, a continuation of a practice that had started in the 1880's. In the early 1960's the Tribal sawmill enterprise, Navajo Forest Products Industries (NFPI) began operations. It was formed at the advice of and in consultation with officials of the United States Department of the Interior. Once viewed as the model for Native-run business, NFPI eventually amassed nearly \$20 million in debt and the tribe's forests were pillaged.

Against all of this devastation, people began to speak out. Various groups were organized around the health and environmental effects of the uranium mining, among them the Coalition for Navajo Liberation. As on many reservations, the early protestors were often silenced through bribes, threats and violence. As was the case throughout Indian country at this time, many people persisted in speaking out. Traditional people joined forces with college educated environmental activists. Young people made their voices heard and a few former members of the American Indian Movement joined the fray. The Indigenous Environmental Network web talks about the growth of the modern movement.

The largest of these groups continues today as Dine' Citizens Against Ruining our environment or Dine' CARE. According to their website, Dine' CARE is an all-Navajo environmental organization with its main office located in Dilkon, AZ. Funded mostly by foundation grants, the organization's members come from all walks of life having in common a commitment to maintaining a relationship to Mother Earth based on balance and harmony and honoring the traditions handed down from the ancestors.

According to Lori Goodman of Dine' CARE, the organization began in 1988 to stop a proposed toxic waste incinerator and dump near Dilkon on the

reservation. The tribal leadership at the time not only supported the proposal put forward by a division of Amoco, they actively lobbied for it and chose the location. Dine CARE organized in order to educate the community about the health dangers of the proposal. They worked with Native and non-Native environmental groups in fighting the project and stopped it in March of 1989.

Ms. Goodman, in a paper presented to the Navajo Studies Conference in 1992, states that the group did not intend to continue after that victory. At the time, they did not realize that these same types of battles were taking place all across the country on Native lands. Other Native groups had watched the battle and noted that a grassroots organization had helped defeat a major corporation. They also saw that Native people everywhere had sacrificed greatly for America in the name of progress. She notes in her report the many wrongs perpetrated on the Navajo people and the continuing move to, as she says, "add insult to injury" by dumping the toxic and radioactive waste of the modern society on the reservation. The realization that most of corporate America has no conscience and does not care about the health and well being of either the people or the land, led the group to continue.

Since that time, Dine' CARE has had a good run of successes, though not without a cost. Earl Tulley then President of Navajos in Action and before Dine' CARE's existence led. (Earl then became Dine' CARE president). Also in the march was Ms. Anna Fraizer (now Dine' CARE Coordinator and staff in Dilkon, AZ) They led a march in the late 1980's on the New Mexico capitol to fight for the reform of alcohol sales in reservation border towns, gaining some regulation. They remain active in substance abuse counseling and reform efforts. In 1990, they co-founded the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) that I wrote about in the last article. The following year they rallied community opposition in the Huerfano, N. M area to stop a proposed asbestos dump on one of the tribe's sacred mountains.

One of the best-known battles was the struggle to end the rapid logging in the Chuska Mountains. Adelle Begaye and her husband Leroy Jackson led this effort. Leroy Jackson became a symbol for the movement. He fought not only against the corporate structure and the U. S. government, he also challenged the tribal leaders whom he saw as leading the assault on the environment and traditional way of life. In 1993, he made three suggestions in regard to the people and the environment. First, sovereign governments of tribes should be responsible for protection of sacred sites, honoring the needs of traditional people, and managing the natural resources in the traditions of the ancestors. Second,

he wanted to see a system in place that insured that spiritual values provide a basis for activities that have an environmental or cultural impact. Finally, Mr. Jackson also believed that the tribal government should always consult traditional people before doing anything that could alter the sacred sites.

The reckless cutting was stopped after a bitter four-year struggle. There were hard feelings and violence on the reservation. As in many places, there are people who are considered to be “economic hostages.” Their only source of income derived from the industry in question. Leroy Jackson died under mysterious circumstances and was found at a roadside rest stop one night. Many people feel that the botched investigation of his death was part of a cover-up. What really happened will probably never be known.

Dine Care has continued on. After stopping the logging, they took on an innovative and extensive mapping project with the goal of the reforestation of the Chuska Mountains. Since 1998, they have been very actively involved in the issue of radiation mitigation in Navajo country. They have worked to bring relief to the victims of radiation exposure, to force cleanup of existing sites and to prevent future mining. The biggest victory was the reform of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

As Ms. Goodman says in her paper, Navajos have “fundamental principles that are taught daily from childhood on. These teachings instruct us to look after our people, our land, our animal relatives. The land becomes a part of our person and of our religion. Therefore, when you separate native people from their lands, it is the equivalent to taking away their will to live.” Dine’ CARE will continue as guardians of the health of the people and the Mother Earth.

Thanks to Lori Goodman for the papers she provided for this article. Dine’ CARE can be reached at Anna Frazier: frazierann1@hotmail.com, or kiyaani@frontier.net, website: dinecare.indigenoussnative.org] 970-259-0199. More information can also be found by searching the archives of Indian Country Today and High Country News.

The lesson to be learned from these articles is that we must take responsibility for our own land and our own health. Many corporations and governments, often including tribal government, do not take into account how their acts will affect the people, land or culture. Do not remain silent. Speak out.