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Shana Harming

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Environmental Racism on Native Lands

Social science research has amassed a large body of evidence that there are widespread racial health disparities in the US (White and Borrell 2011). Ever since the 1980’s, researchers have increasingly begun to focus on the concept of environmental racism as part of the explanation for these disparities. Environmental racism is the unequal distribution of environmental hazards by race and minority status (Sze and London 2008). The concept of environmental racism gained prominence with the release of a report by the Commission for Racial Justice that found race had been a deciding factor in the location of hazardous waste facilities (Hamilton 1995). American Indians also struggle against environmental racism. Reservations tend to be placed near nuclear waste facilities as well as near military
weapons testing sites (Hooks and Smith 2004). Environmental racism has implications not only for the health of American Indians, but also negatively effects American Indian sovereignty and cultural practices.

While the concept of environmental racism is relatively new in social science research, American Indians have been exposed to environmental racism for a long time. During the settlement of the west in the 1800s, the US government sold the most valuable land to corporate interests and white settlers while retaining the least economically viable land as federal property. It was on these lands that the government often placed reservations. This meant that federal lands and reservations shared borders with each other. As the U.S. became an increasingly powerful military force in the 20th century, much of this “useless” federal land found a new purpose: testing bombs and nuclear weapons. It is because of this history that many reservations tend to be heavily impacted by the environmental consequences of nuclear bomb testing and are near polluted and dangerous areas (Hooks and Smith 2004). The community organization, Women of All Red Nations (WARN), has suspected links between Lakota health issues and the history of uranium mining around the Pine Ridge region. WARN has cited the high rates of miscarriage and reproductive cancers among Lakota women as evidence of the adverse effects of uranium contamination (Hoover 2012).

In addition to the negative health consequences of exposure to contaminants, nuclear waste, and industrial pollution, environmental racism is also a significant threat to native peoples' ability to practice their cultures. When traditional food sources like fish and wildlife as well as soil for gardening becomes contaminated, reliance on traditional food is significantly disrupted. In many native cultures, food is about much more than nourishment. The ability to engage in traditional farming and hunting is deeply connected to culture and spiritual systems. For American Indians along the Columbia river in Oregon and Washington, salmon was not only a food source, but a significant part of culture, governance and spirituality that was disrupted by industrial overfishing and dam construction (Cantzler and Huynh 2016). Disrupting traditional foods threatens the vitality of cultures, food sovereignty, and the intergenerational
transmission of knowledge that is often a part of harvesting and catching food (Hoover 2012).

Furthermore, environmental degradation undermines traditional governance structures. In an article on the #NoDAPL movement, Kyle Powys White (2017) argues that Lakota/Nakota/Dakota governance structures are highly attuned to the ecological processes of their homeland and that the protection and sustainability of these ecological practices informs moral systems and moral responsibilities both to the land and to each other. For the water protectors at Standing Rock, protection of the environment is part of their motivation, but they are also acting on a moral obligation to protect land that is part of a long tradition of Lakota/Dakota/Nakota governance systems. Therefore, environmental racism is more than just an environmental threat, it is also a settler colonial threat to native forms of governance, morality and self-determination.

Ultimately, environmental racism needs to be fought with the related concept of environmental justice. Environmental justice entails distributive justice (equal sharing of the benefits of the environment and the assumed risks of our activities), procedural justice (equal distribution of power in decision making about the environment across all social groups), and justice as recognition (undoing the cultural processes that devalue certain groups and make them targets of environmental racism) (Cantzler and Huynh 2016.)


Tribal Spotlight: Rosebud

The Rosebud Sioux Tribe reservation is located in the southern part of South Dakota along the Nebraska border in Todd county. The reservation is home to the Sicangu
Oyate, or the Upper Brule Sioux tribe. There are just over 20,000 enrolled members living on the reservation. The capital of the reservation is the town of Rosebud and other major towns on the reservation include Mission, Antelope and Saint Francis.

The reservation was established in 1889 after the federal government partitioned the Great Sioux Reservation established by the 1868 Fort Laramie treaty into several smaller reservations dispersed around the state. The Great Sioux Reservation encompassed what is now the west river region of South Dakota.

Some notable Sicangu Lakota from the Rosebud reservation include Sinte Gleska (Chief Spotted Tail), a prominent warrior and statesmen who traveled to negotiate for education and other rights for the Lakota in Washington DC. The reservation is home to Sinte Gleska University in his honor. Ben Reifel was the first Lakota congressman and served five terms in the U.S. House of Representatives working to end educational segregation, Indian boarding schools and support civil rights legislation.

The Wizipan Leadership and Sustainability Program
The Wizipan Leadership and Sustainability Program of The Indian University of North America® at Crazy Horse Memorial® is a semester long experience through a partnership between the Crazy Horse Memorial® Foundation and South Dakota State University. Wachante Hecha Wizipan in Lakota implies the Heart of Everything that Is, but Wizipan on its own, according to the late Lakota leader Albert White Hat, references the Black Hills as a container of all resources; any person that goes into the Black Hills starving can be nourished, both physically and spiritually. The program will begin on August 31st and end on December 16th. The experience is focused on Care of Self, Care of Community, Care of Environment, and Care of Culture.

The courses offered are designed to provide students with the skill sets needed to understand the role of leadership in their communities. Sustainability affords students the opportunity to ensure the well-being of their communities and future generations. The Wizipan Program is equivalent to a study abroad program, but offered at The Indian University of North America® at the Crazy Horse Memorial®. Students will
have the opportunity to earn 15 credits and think critically about what sustainability and leadership in action can look like in their communities.

If you have advisees or know students who might qualify for this program, you can find more information and application instructions here.

Wokini Spotlight: Morgan Catlett-Ausborn

Morgan Catlett-Ausborn is the American Indian Student Academic Advisor and Student Success Advisor at the American Indian Student Center. In this role, she advises American Indian freshman students during their first year and later, transitions to being an important part of their advising team until they graduate.

Morgan began her career with a graduate assistantship at USD in the Office for Diversity and had additional experience during her undergrad education in jobs that led her to work to support native students. She later went on to work for the Indian University of North America Summer Program, where she worked as housing personnel for four summers. She also spend a summer as a faculty member for the program. In addition, she served as the Assistant Director of Education at Crazy Horse Memorial for 2 years.
In her current position at SDSU, she is passionate about working with college age students and seeing the value they bring to SDSU's campus. She also enjoys the highly collaborative work environment of the AISC and her supportive supervisor and colleagues.

Book of the Month: The River Is In Us

In connection with this month’s main article on Environmental Racism, the book of the month for April is Elizabeth Hoover's "The River is In Us: Fighting Toxics in a Mohawk Community." This book is a sweeping survey of environmental contamination in the Haudenosaunee Mohawk community of Akwesasne in upstate New York. The Saint Lawrence River, which the Mohawk historically used for fishing and farming activities, has been polluted by various industries and dump sites located near the reservation.

These polluting industries are far more than just a pressing health concern, they have significantly disrupted traditional gardening, fishing and subsistence practices of the Mohawk people, causing traditional diets to be replaced by a heavy reliance on processed foods. This book covers many important themes including: environmental justice, environmental racism, the connection between food and culture, traditional versus colonial diets, as well as the importance of community based participatory research as a methodology to use within native communities.

Lakota Word of the Month

Pñeží Tȟó Wí (April)- The moon of green grass

Wokini Initiative, South Dakota State University, Morrill Hall 119, Brookings, SD 57007, 605-688-4030

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