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Jocelyn Catterson

jocelyn.catterson@umontana.edu

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MAY YOU WALK IN BEAUTY: THE DECLINE OF NAVAJO LAND AND CULTURE

By

JOCELYN MARIE CATTERSON

Undergraduate Thesis

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Approved by:

James C. McKusick, Dean
The Davidson Honors College

Keith Bosak, Faculty Mentor
Parks, Tourism, & Recreation Management

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May You Walk in Beauty: The Decline of Navajo Land and Culture

Faculty Mentor: Keith Bosak

The Navajo homeland, Dinétah, is bordered by four mountains that are sacred to the Navajo people: two in Colorado, one in New Mexico, and one in Arizona. Historically, Navajo medicine men have traveled to these mountains to renew prayers and collect medicinal herbs. Today, the mountains, which exist outside of the reservation boundaries, are used for resource extraction and various recreational pursuits. While many Navajo are fighting for the protection of these sacred lands and their traditional culture, others are disinterested. Traditional practices and beliefs are slowly disappearing within the Navajo Nation. The land-use issues associated with these sacred mountains illustrate that the decline of Dinétah and the decline of the Navajo culture are inextricably connected.

May You Walk in Beauty: The Decline of Navajo Land and Culture

“Because of the immense cultural and religious significance of land in Indian life, the power to destroy Indian land rights carries with it the power to destroy Indian identity.”

Robert T. Coulter and Steven M. Tulberg¹

◆ “WELL, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?” AVERY DENNY, A NAVAJO MEDICINE man and professor at Dine College, sits petting his wife’s brown chihuahua, drinking a cup of coffee, and waiting for me to answer. His house is built in the style of the Navajo hogan with a modern twist: round and cone-shaped, with the door facing east, but made out of red bricks instead of the traditional wood. The only light in the room seeps through the cracks in the window curtains. A ‘God bless our home’ sign hangs in the kitchen and the radio plays country songs about Jesus.

“I want to know about the sacred mountains,” I reply. He begins telling me stories of how power lines have changed the Navajo way of life, about the cultural division of his people, and about the white-man’s misguided ideas of sacredness and land.

Two weeks ago, during the heat of summer, I arrived down in New Mexico and the Navajo Nation. Since then I had discovered more about the deterioration of a culture than about the sacred-land issues I had hoped to write about. It appears that the decline of Dinétah, the Navajo homeland, and the decline of the Navajo culture are inextricably connected.

◆ I HAD TRAVELED DOWN TO THE NAVAJO NATION IN ORDER TO STUDY FOUR mountains that have a particularly strong significance to the Navajo people: Blanca Peak in the East, Mount Taylor in the South, the San Francisco Peaks in the West, and Mount Hesperus in the North. When the Holy People entered this world, the fourth and final world according to the Navajo people, they created the four sacred mountains from pinches of soil brought from these mountains in the lower worlds. The mountains, aligned with the four cardinal directions, act as the boundary to the traditional Navajo homeland and serve as the energy source for all things.

¹ Quoted in “American Sacred Spaces,” an anthology of essays edited by David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal and published by Indiana University Press in 1995.

Many Navajo medicine men, like Avery Denny, travel to at least one of these mountains about four times a year to tap into these energies, collect plants and soil, renew prayers, and pray for relief from drought. Medicine men and women “possess the formulas and symbols for restoring balance in their patients by putting them back into harmony with the world.”² They are healers and their powers are embodied in medicine bundles full of dirt from each of the four sacred mountains. But the Navajo people lost control over these mountains after the Navajo reservation boundaries were drawn. Since then, the mountains, and the healing powers associated with them, have suffered.

The Navajo reservation is the largest reservation in the United States. Crossing the reservation, from Bloomfield, New Mexico, to Page, Arizona, takes about 4 hours of interstate driving. The boundary encircles a swath of desert about the size of West Virginia.³ But this expanse of desert does not encompass the entirety of the Navajo homeland nor the four mountains that the culture holds most sacred.

All four of the sacred mountains are now located outside of the Navajo reservation on federal land. Navajo symbolism has, at times, been considered in the management plans of these four mountains but the Navajo’s input historically hasn’t been top priority. The Forest Service seems set on ignoring many of the issues that the tribe has with public and private use of the lands.

South: Mount Taylor

◆ BEFORE SETTING OUT TO VISIT ALL FOUR OF THE SACRED MOUNTAINS, I meet with Robert Johnson, a Navajo medicine man and cultural specialist from the Navajo Nation Museum, in order to receive some guidance for my travels. I meet Robert at the museum, which sits in the capitol of the nation, Window Rock, Arizona, less than a mile from the border of New Mexico. Robert leads me into a traditional hogan that has been built outside of the museum for educational purposes. The darkness of the hogan and the cold dirt floor are a relief

² Michaelson, Robert S. “Dirt in the Court Room: Indian Land Claims and American Property Rights.” *American Sacred Spaces*. Ed. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 44.

³ Jett, Stephen C. “Navajo Sacred Places: Management and Interpretation of Mythic History.” *The Public Historian* 17.2 (1995): 39-47.

from the scorching summer temperatures outside. A beam of light shoots through the hole made to let the smoke out of the middle of the hogan. Robert looks like many of the men that I have seen so far in the reservation: faded blue jeans, flannel shirt, cowboy boots, turquoise and silver jewelry, and long, greying hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“You should go and observe the beauty of nature as seen by the Holy People at one time,” Robert tells me. “When you get to the sacred mountain, before climbing, locate a young, growing, healthy tree and grab a hold on a branch and talk to it. Tell the tree your purpose and reasons of your visit. Observe and listen carefully for it will talk to you if sincere.” This is the only guidance he gives me.

◆ FROM MY HOTEL IN GALLUP, NEW MEXICO, I DRIVE ABOUT AN HOUR TO Grants, New Mexico, and the base of Mount Taylor, the sacred mountain of the south. The Navajo associate the mountain with turquoise and dark mist, and they believe that, when created, the mountain was covered with blue sky and fastened to the ground with a great stone knife. As I drive towards the mountain, the sky isn't blue, but an ominous grey color that suggests another afternoon of summer monsoon rains.

I pass by a correctional facility, a shooting range, the Mount Taylor Hot Shot crew cutting down trees for fire mitigation, and at least a dozen cars on my way to the base of the mountain. There are roads everywhere, criss-crossing up and around the sides of the San Mateo Mountains. Signs in the area guide visitors up the Forest Service road to the lookout on top of La Mosca, another high point in the massif. Mount Taylor seems to be an off-road-vehicle mecca, not the sacred mountain that I had envisioned. And the heavy visitor use, as well as off-road-vehicle recreation, are not the only land issues that have occurred around Mount Taylor.

Mount Taylor and the town of Grants, New Mexico, sit on top of the Grants Mineral Belt. According to an article by Kari Lydersen published in *The Washington Post* in 2009, the Grants Mineral Belt holds three hundred pounds of extractable uranium and the country's largest single deposit, weighing in at one hundred million pounds. Chevron operated a uranium mine near

Mount Taylor that yielded eight million pounds of uranium from 1986 to 1989.⁴ As recently as the summer of 2013, resource companies such as Roca Honda Resources and Rio Grande Resources have submitted plans to the Cibola National Forest to reopen former Mount Taylor uranium mines.⁵ In 2009, according to the article, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Mount Taylor one of the nation's eleven most endangered places because of the cultural significance of the area to the Navajo, Zuni, and Pueblo people.

The Federal government has passed laws with the intention of protecting sacred places such as Mount Taylor and the other Navajo sacred mountains from exploitation. In 1978, Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), which was enacted to protect the traditional religious and cultural practices of Native Americans within the United States.⁶ AIRFA is supposed to mandate access to sacred places, such as the Navajo sacred mountains, and the considerations of these sites in federal land-use directives. In reality, many communities have not seen the hoped for protection because the law lacks the procedural requirements and provisions for enforcement. The law simply lacks teeth. Native American sacred places throughout the United States such as Mount Taylor continue to be exploited despite laws that are meant to protect them.

Before heading up Mount Taylor, I pull off of the side of the road, and hike into the woods in search of a young sapling, just as Robert had instructed me to. Five minutes after I continue my drive up the mountain, the dark clouds open up and it begins to pour. The monsoon rains in New Mexico are like nothing I have ever experienced: buckets of water fall from the sky and tear down the dry washes. Heavy summer rains create what the locals call *caliche*, a red clay-like mud that traps cars in the soil after it rains. My car wheels spin in the red muck and the rain shows no sign of stopping. I take it as a sign that the Holy People don't want me here and turn back towards Grants along with swarms of other cars winding down the mountain.

⁴ Lydersen, Kari. "A new demand for uranium power brings concern for Navajo groups." *Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 2009.

⁵ Bitsoi, Alastair Lee. "Protestors oppose uranium minding (sic) on Mt. Taylor." *Navajo Times*, (Window Rock, AZ), October 25, 2009.

⁶ Blake, Kevin S. "Contested Landscapes of Navajo Sacred Mountains." *The North American Geographer* 3.1 (2001): 29-62.

West: San Francisco Peaks

◆ IN THE FARTHEST WEST PORTION OF DINETAH, ABOUT 250 MILES WEST OF Grants, New Mexico, and less than 50 miles outside the Navajo Nation boundary, sits the city of Flagstaff, Arizona. Flagstaff claims to be the largest city between Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Los Angeles, California, with a population of 68,667, which is about one fourth the size of the whole population of the Navajo Nation.⁷

As I cross over the Navajo Nation boundary towards the city, billboards cover the sides of the roads enticing tourists to stop at authentic Navajo trading posts with authentic Navajo handicrafts and fry bread at authentically low prices. But after stopping at a few, I find that each trading post has the same postcards, the same turquoise jewelry, and the same Navajo rugs. I have my doubts about their authenticity.

Just outside of the city tower the San Francisco Peaks, the sacred mountain of the west. The tallest mountain in Arizona, Humphreys Peak, at 12,637 feet above sea level and 5,600 feet above the city floor sits in this massif.⁸ The San Francisco Peaks are the most well-known of the four sacred mountains because of their close proximity to the reservation and the city of Flagstaff. Tourists and locals both travel to the San Francisco Peaks in order to climb the tallest mountain in Arizona and enjoy skiing at the ski resort in the foothills of the mountains.

Many of these trading posts and roadside attractions utilize the sacredness of the San Francisco Peaks as an advertising strategy: Sacred Mountain Trading Post, Sacred Mountain Trail. These sacred peaks are the area's claim to fame. I ask a friend who used to live in the area what I should do while visiting Flagstaff. His first response: "You should definitely check out Humphreys and the San Francisco Peaks."

Though the San Francisco Peaks are predominately associated with the Hopi in the area, the peaks are sacred to 13 different Native American tribes, including the Navajo.⁹ The Navajo believe that the Holy People covered the sacred mountain of the west with yellow clouds and evening twilight and fastened it to the ground with a sunbeam. But the mountains have an

⁷ "Flagstaff (city)." *QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau*. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

⁸ Blake, Kevin S. "In search of a Navajo sacred geography." *The Geographical Review* 91.4 (2001): 715-724.

⁹ *Ibid.* 2011.

ominous association to the Navajo as well: if a medicine man wants evil to occur, for example the death of an enemy, they travel to these mountains.

Clouds loom over the San Francisco Peaks the entire day that I am in Flagstaff and I can't help but think about the evil that the Navajo associate with this place as I sit at camp in the foothills. Currently, these peaks are the most threatened out of the four Navajo sacred mountains. The Holy People on these peaks must have a lot of enemies including the National Forest Service, Arizona Snowbowl, and even the city of Flagstaff itself.

Since 1938, Arizona Snowbowl has operated a ski resort on the west slope of the peak. A population boom coupled with a growing popularity of outdoor recreation in the 1970s led to the addition of two lodges, thirty two trails, and five chairlifts.¹⁰ In 1997, Snowbowl yet again tried to expand their operating permit through Coconino National Forest by adding 66 acres of trail, however, their request was denied and they were asked to present an Environmental Assessment for the plan.¹¹

Despite the few successful attempts to block further expansion of the resort, conflicts associated with the Arizona Snowbowl and the sacred San Francisco Peaks continue. In February of 2012, a federal appeals court ruled in favor of Arizona Snowbowl's upgrade plans, which included clear-cutting 74 acres of forest and piping treated sewage from Flagstaff onto the mountain to make snow.¹² During the 2012 ski season, the resort became the first ski resort in the world to use 100 percent sewage waste to make artificial snow.¹³

While sewage waste is being pumped up onto the San Francisco Peaks to make snow for eager skiers, the city of Flagstaff is piping over 400 million gallons of water each year down from the Inner Basin of the mountains.¹⁴ The amount of water pumped out of the sacred

¹⁰ Blake, Kevin S. "Contested Landscapes of Navajo Sacred Mountains." *The North American Geographer* 3.1 (2001): 29-62.

¹¹ Ibid. 2001.

¹² Macmillan, Leslie. "Resort's Snow Won't Be Pure This Year; It'll Be Sewage." *New York Times*, (September 26, 2012).

¹³ Ibid. 2012.

¹⁴ Ibid 2001.

mountains each year is expected to continue to increase in order to provide enough water for the quickly growing city.

Avery Denny, Navajo medicine man and professor at Dine College, calls it disgusting. The Navajo believe in the sun, water, earth, and air instead of God or Jesus. “These things are all divine,” Denny says. The activities taking place on the San Francisco Peaks, as well as throughout Dinetah, are harming the very energies that help to keep all things in balance. “It is really painful,” he says.

In the Navajo Nation Museum, a Save the Peaks! bumper sticker is pasted to the main office desk. Klee Benally, a local Flagstaff resident, travels in and around the Navajo Nation performing with his Navajo metal band Blackfire to foster awareness of the various desecrations of the San Francisco Peaks. The Native Americans, environmental activists, and concerned citizens seem to be losing the battle to protect the sacred peaks. But they have yet to give up the fight.

North: Blanca Peak

◆ BLANCA PEAK RISES 14,345 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL AND 6,400 FEET ABOVE the San Luis Valley in Colorado. While driving through the San Luis Valley, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains demand my absolute attention. I have been driving through this valley since I was a child to camp at the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve near the base of the mountains with my family. The valley and the surrounding mountains have a strange energy about them that attract some interesting characters. The UFO Watchtower, Colorado Gators Reptile Park, and various Buddhist retreat centers dot the entire stretch of the Sangre de Cristos.

To the Navajo, the valley and the Sangre de Cristos hold a different kind of energy. Blanca Peak is the northernmost boundary of the Navajo homeland and the sacred mountain of the north. The Holy People covered the mountain in daylight and dawn and fastened it to the ground with a lightning bolt. The Colorado Rockies are famous for their sudden summer afternoon thunderstorms and many people trying to climb to the top of Blanca Peak are turned back by lightning. While talking to Navajo Times reporter Cindy Yurth about the sacred mountains, she warns me about her experiences traveling to Blanca Peak. While attempting to

hike to the summit, she was turned back by lightning. Yurth took this as a sign that the deities of the mountain did not want her there.

Because of Blanca Peak's status as one of Colorado's fifty three 14,000 foot peaks, many people attempt to hike to the summit. Historically, the ruggedness and long distance associated with climbing the summits within the Sangre de Cristos kept public visitation and, in turn, land-use issues to a minimum. However, as the popularity of "bagging" all fifty three of Colorado's fourteeners has increased, the visitation to the sacred mountain has as well.

Many of the traditional Navajo believe that climbing the sacred mountains in an incorrect way has the same effect on the power of these places as say mining or the Arizona Snowbowl. If the mountain is not climbed in a proper way, climbing will lead to personal harm or loss of power of the place. Yet each year more and more people continue to climb to the summit in order to check the mountain off of their list of fifty three fourteeners.

Yurth thinks that this is simply because most people in Colorado don't know that Blanca Peak is sacred to the Navajo. But Avery Denny thinks that the issues associated with recreation on the sacred mountains stem from a stark contrast in the way that Navajo view sacred places compared to Western culture. He explains that to the Navajo, sacred means something that you can't mess with, that you need to stay away from. Every square inch of the mountain is sacred to the Navajo, not just the summit or a special spring. "Tell a Western white that a mountain is sacred," says Denny, "And the first thing they say is 'Where?'" People want to go and experience the awe of standing on top of a mountain, especially one that holds spiritual value. But this is exactly the opposite of how a sacred place should be treated according to the Navajo.

East: Mount Hesperus

◆ CAMPED IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE LA PLATAS, I AM SURROUNDED BY COWS and piles of cow dung. The air smells of a mix of mud from the recent rains and the potent smells of the animals. But the aspen in the area are beautiful and I find myself transfixed by the sun setting over the strange mountain that I have come to visit.

When the Holy People created Mount Hesperus, the sacred mountain of the east, they covered it in darkness and fastened it to the ground with a rainbow. The mountain now stands at

13,232 feet nearby the town of Mancos in the La Plata Mountains of Colorado. Mount Hesperus is covered in stripes created by different layers of rock within the mountain. Even from far away, these stripes are visible and seem to have been painted on the side of the mountain long ago. In the dusk light, the stripes take on a red and purple glow. Cows moo loudly in the distance.

Historically, this area has received relatively light recreational use because of the remote access from the main cities in the area such as Cortez and Durango. The West Mancos Trail, the main trailhead in the area, is officially closed to motor vehicles but the area still shows signs of extensive off-road vehicle use. Noises from OHV use echo around the base of the mountain where Navajo come to collect ceremonial soil and plants.

Most Navajo do not attempt the difficult summit and are content with connecting to the mountain at the lower elevations. But in the late 1990s, the San Juan National Forest “received a request from a Navajo group that wanted to operate an outfitter service for Navajos who seek access to the upper reaches of Hesperus for ceremonies.”¹⁵ The group wanted to build various high elevation structures in order to help bring Navajo to the summit of the sacred mountain.

The Forest Service denied their request since no other outfitter was allowed to maintain private facilities on the mountain, but what if the request had been granted? What if this Navajo outfitter built facilities along the slopes of Mount Hesperus and shuttled people up to the top of the mountain?

After learning about how climbing a sacred mountain in an improper way will lead to personal harm or loss of power of the place, I find myself wondering why a group of Navajo would be wanting to set up an outfitter service on the sacred mountain. Does this Navajo outfitter group believe in this loss of power the same way as many traditional Navajo do?

The reality is that many Navajo don't even know where all four of the mountains are and aren't at all interested in the old ways. Robert Johnson, the medicine man from the Navajo Nation Museum, talks about how the Navajo culture is changing. “Gradually the old ways have died out,” he says. “Every day our land, our way of life, and our culture is fading. But this is happening everywhere, even outside the Nation.”

¹⁵ Blake, Kevin S. “Contested Landscapes of Navajo Sacred Mountains.” *The North American Geographer* 3.1 (2001): 50.

Robert stresses the connection between the deterioration of the Navajo culture and the deterioration of the land. “It’s who we are,” he says. He believes that in 35 to 50 years, there will no longer be traditional medicine men to travel to the sacred mountains and properly collect soil. “Soon,” he says, “we will only exist back at the museum, behind the museum glass. People will come and look at us and say, ‘Oh, they used to look this way. They used to live that way.’” Only a few people, like Robert, his parents, and Avery Denny still travel to the mountains.

According to Avery Denny, about 70 percent of Navajo still believe in the sacredness of land, however, those speaking about the sacred mountains from a world of ancient Navajo knowledge have an incredibly different view than a modern Navajo. “From the traditional side, it is emotional and it is sad,” says Denny. He believes modern Navajo do not feel that same emotional attachment to the sacred land, modern culture is separate from traditional Navajo ways, and the public school system is a big part of the problem.

Today, most of the children who grow up in the Navajo Nation attend formal public school instead of obtaining knowledge passed down from their parents. In Gallup, New Mexico, I meet Carmen Moffett, Director of Indian Education for Gallup McKinley County Schools, at the Support Center to ask her if children are taught about traditional beliefs or the mountains in the public school system. Moffett hands me a copy of the official Dine Content Standards approved on September 7, 2012 by the Board of Education of the Navajo Nation.

The standards include a list of statements for each age group promoting understanding of Navajo culture, government, history, and language. Some of the standards seem to include information about the Navajo sacred mountains: I will use my cultural teachings about how to take care of earth and sky; I will identify symbols of the Navajo Nation; I will research sacred sites within my community. But according to Moffett, there is currently no assessment of the standards within the schools, and, therefore, no way of knowing whether students are actually being taught the material.

Moffett also explains that many of the students within the schools are now Christian, so the schools are not allowed to teach traditional beliefs. Any important traditional stories are taught as just that. Stories. Children are not taught that these stories are founded in a strong belief system of the traditional Navajo culture. Children are taught to “know their own history,” says

Moffett. But they are not taught any ceremonies or prayers. Avery Denny argues that this system of education is separating modern Navajo from true traditional beliefs. How are Navajo supposed to know how to properly climb a sacred mountain or how to properly treat the land if they have never been taught how to do so according to the traditional ways?

Navajo Mountain

◆ NAVAJO MOUNTAIN WAS ONE OF THE FIRST AREAS SETTLED AFTER THE Navajo came into this world and is also considered sacred to the Navajo. The mountain sits right on the border of Arizona and Utah within the Navajo Nation boundaries. In the early 1960s, the Navajo tribe authorized construction of a communications tower on the top of the sacred mountain.¹⁶ The more modern members of the tribe have either been ignorant or insensitive to many of the traditional Navajo beliefs and continued to allow the Navajo homeland to be harmed. Today, the tower still stands and maintenance roads snake up the side of the mountain.

The four Navajo sacred mountains featured in the origin story all exist outside of the Navajo Nation boundary, out of the total control of the Navajo people. If these mountains were within the boundary, would they be better protected from deterioration? Or would they end up the same as Navajo Mountain?

Alastair Bitsoi is a young reporter for the Navajo Times. He attended Gonzaga University in Washington before returning to his hometown of Naschitti, New Mexico in the Navajo Nation. We sit in the Dine Restaurant at the Quality Inn, one of the only restaurants in Window Rock, Arizona, for lunch. Bitsoi wears black, square-rimmed glasses, jeans, and a t-shirt. He texts on his iPhone and stuffs his face with salad during most of our conversation. Bitsoi is the epitome of what Avery Denny would call the modern Navajo culture.

“I don’t speak Navajo,” says Bitsoi. “But I am starting to understand it more.” Even though he doesn’t speak the language, he still has respect for the culture and tries to follow the Navajo way of life. “I mean, it just makes sense,” he says. “The balance.”

¹⁶ Jett, Stephen C. “Navajo Sacred Places: Management and Interpretation of Mythic History.” *The Public Historian* 17.2 (1995): 39-47.

Balance may be key to the Navajo way of life, but many argue that that balance has been thrown off. Some Navajo attribute current environmental, social, and political problems to the desecration of the Navajo homeland, especially the Navajo sacred places. People are no longer in harmony with the environment. People are no longer in harmony with other people. As the sacred mountains continue to be harmed, more of the power for medicine men to put everything back in balance is fading. The decline of the Navajo homeland is inextricably tied to the decline of the Navajo culture.

May You Walk in Beauty

◆ THE NAVAJO'S CURE FOR THIS LACK OF BALANCE IS A CEREMONY CALLED Beautyway. The ceremony focuses on reestablishing a connection to and harmony with the natural world. To walk in beauty means to be in harmony with all things, to be right with the world.

Avery Denny believes that before the 1970s, there was utter chaos for the Navajo. But since 1975, people have made a huge effort to sustain the Navajo language and culture. "There are a lot of young practitioners [medicine men] out there today," says Denny. "In 75 years, we will be alright." Despite all of his thoughts on the diminishing Navajo culture, he believes that the balance, and with it the land and the culture, will return to the Navajo Nation soon enough.

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