Preserving the Sacred Balance: The Zuni Tribe’s Water Adaptation Plan

"Basically, our world view is that everything is sacred, especially water," says Kirk Bemis, a Zuni tribal member and hydrologist for the northwestern New Mexico tribe’s Conservation Program of their Natural Resources Division. For nearly two decades Bemis has worked on a variety of challenges the tribe has faced in relation to water: too little, too much, water ceasing to flow where it once did or flowing into places it doesn’t belong.

The reasons are many, including overuse (or the threat thereof) by nearby communities and industrial interests, lack of resources to maintain water-control structures, off-reservation water diversions, dam construction. And, most scientists believe, climate change.

Bemis says indications of a changing climate are clearly evident at Zuni. Snowpack runoff from the nearby Zuni Mountains, he says, is diminishing and coming earlier in the season. "We did a spring inventory, and there are springs in the Nutria area, headwaters of the Zuni River, that flowed at one time but are dry now. We had geologists assist with the study, and a resulting paper shows that the timing of when springs went dry and then flowed again correlated with when the snowpack really started tapering off and then rebounded, in the mid-to-late 2000s. But even without the data, you can see the times of runoff are earlier."

"We’re not a rich tribe; we don’t have a lot of resources," he says of his 11,000-member community. "We don’t have casinos, though we do get some income from leasing rights in Arizona. We don’t have a lot of resources like oil, gas or coal, but we get by. We’ve been living through changes since ancient times, and we’ve learned to adapt, especially through climate change.

ITEP’s Supporting Role with the National Tribal Air Association

National Tribal Air Association Executive Committee Chair, Bill Thompson, says, "It’s amazing to be a part of something that can go on so well in spite of the obstacles." He’s referring to administrative and other roadblocks the tribal air policy organization has faced over the past year—and the strengths of its members that enabled them to continue their important work regardless of the challenges.

Fortunately, those challenges will be eased considerably with new funding and a support team of ITEP staff and others. A three-year cooperative agreement EPA recently signed with ITEP is providing the NTAA Executive Committee with new administrative and research support that will free the committee up to spend more of their volunteer time on direct assistance to tribes.

Air-Policy Monitors
Happy New Year. I hope your holidays were filled with loved ones and lots of rest. I wish you the best in the upcoming year—I personally am excited to tackle many of my goals this year.

As always, the ITEP staff is hard at work on a variety of efforts to support tribal environmental programs. Recently, ITEP has taken on administrative and support roles with two EPA Tribal Partnership Groups, the National Tribal Air Association (NTAA) (see accompanying article) and the National Tribal Toxics Council (NTTC). ITEP is honored to have been given the opportunity to leverage our twenty-years of service to tribes across the nation to support these two fine organizations.

Our efforts to support the work of the National Tribal Air Association (NTAA) is off to a strong start, as you will see when you read this issue’s article on our new partnership with the NTAA. The association’s Executive Committee is composed of a dedicated, hard-working group of air quality professionals who give generously of their time and expertise to keep tribes apprised on policy issues that impact them. We are happy to be partnering with such an accomplished team. I also want to welcome ITEP’s newly hired NTAA Project Director, Andy Bessler. Andy is quickly picking up momentum in his new job and promises to be an effective manager in support of the NTAA mission.

ITEP is also supporting the National Tribal Toxics Council (NTTC), another group of knowledgeable, committed individuals working to protect the health of tribal communities. Two of our staff members, Jen Williams and John Mead, will be managing our work with the Council. In our next issue of Native Voices we’ll take a closer look at the Toxics Council and our work on their behalf.

On the home front, ITEP is developing two online, non-degreed certificate courses in collaboration with Northern Arizona University. The courses are slated to come online in the Spring 2014 and will provide the audience with firm groundings in tribal water management and tribal environmental management. These on-line courses are open to anyone, domestic or international. Fees will be comparable to many online courses. In designing the curricula, our development teams consulted many tribal environmental leaders and experts. I truly am hoping these types of courses will meet the needs of environmental professionals and enhance their understanding and effectiveness as they tackle important issues that impact Indian country. ITEP will be launching the advertisements for these courses soon.

Personally, I have had a busy last few months of traveling. Some highlights: in September, I attended the first meeting of the Department of Interior’s (DOI) Advisory Committee on Climate Change and Natural Resource Science (ACCCNRS), a 25-member group that advises Secretary of the Interior, Sally Jewell, on ways that bureaus under the DOI umbrella can best address climate change and other environmental challenges. At the meeting, I partnered with Dr. Gary Morishima (another ACCCNRS Appointee), who has worked for the Quinault Nation since 1974. We developed a presentation for the Committee on “Tribes and Climate Change.” In preparation, Dr. Morishima and I held several meetings with tribal and indigenous experts on climate change, and from those conversations we presented a list of five recommendations to the Committee. The recommendations were to: 1) understand how tribes and Pacific Islanders fit in the DOI context; 2) recognize Tribal Traditional Knowledge;
Tribal air programs often struggle with limited staff and resources, leaving them little time to sift through and analyze the constant stream of policy directives and changes issued by EPA and other entities. The NTAA was formed in 2002 with the mission of advancing “air quality management policies and programs, consistent with the needs, interests, and unique legal status of American Indian Tribes and Alaska Natives.” Thompson says the NTAA’s major focus in that effort is to serve as “a conduit between the federal and tribal governments. The association offers information on policy that might impact tribes, keeping them abreast of anything on the horizon for which they might need information or help. We do policy work that others may not find particularly enjoyable. We’re policy nerds; looking at the fine details is a big thing we do.”

To accomplish their policy-support goals, the organization draws on the efforts of ten all-volunteer committee members (plus another eight alternates), composed of air program staff from nine of the ten EPA regions—Region 3 lacks tribes—and a representative for Alaska. “Each committee member,” Thompson says “is part of a round table. We’re here as representatives of the tribes in our regions. We hold monthly conference calls and meet in person twice a year. When we get together, we discuss various issues that impact tribes, develop action items, assign someone to make sure the action gets done, give it a due date, and if it isn’t done, decide where to go from there. We’re a very productive organization. That’s the reason we do this.”

An example of NTAA’s policy-related work were its efforts to keep tribes in the loop during development of the “Minor New Source Review” rule that now governs unregulated emission sources on tribal lands. During the development period, NTAA helped to educate tribes on the proposal and assisted them in relaying their thoughts and concerns to EPA staff. Their feedback significantly impacted the final shape of the rule.

**ITEP’s Support Role**

ITEP’s role with NTAA, says Andy Bessler, ITEP’s recently hired NTAA Project Director, involves three primary responsibilities: helping NTAA facilitate the flow of information between tribes and federal and other agencies; serving as NTAA’s “research arm” to provide tribes with timely information on air policy that might impact them; and assisting the association with fiduciary and administrative support.

“The meat and potatoes of our work,” Bessler says, “is providing policy analysis on air quality policy coming out of EPA along with state, local, and other agencies.” Some policy development involves a lengthy process of consultation and outreach. But sometimes, as Bessler points out, “these issues come down really fast.” That means NTAA must keep abreast of policy mandates and changes in real time and develop informational tools that tribes can draw on in short order.

To address that need, NTAA and ITEP staff are developing “policy response kits” that go out to tribes who might be impacted by a policy directive. The kits include a news release, a brief summary of the issue, template resolutions, and actions and responses for tribes to consider. ITEP Research Specialist Cristina Gonzalez-Maddux provides information and coordinates the assembly of those packets, drawing on the expertise of NTAA committee members, other ITEP staff, and a Policy Advisory Committee (see inset) composed of experts on various tribal environmental and legal issues. ITEP will soon arrange for interns at Northern Arizona University to help with research and other support.

**Building an EPA “Tribe”**

Keeping EPA staff informed on tribal air issues is an ongoing challenge, a related task the NTAA has taken on. That job might be a bit easier these days—over the past several years tribes have enjoyed strong air-management support from the highest levels of the agency, as evidenced by repeat visits by former Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation, Gina McCarthy, and her deputy, Janet McCabe, to ITEP/NTAA sponsored National Tribal Forums and out to Indian country for “listening tours.” Both officials have long encouraged staff to educate themselves on tribal environmental issues and needs and to assist where they can. For example, in her former position McCarthy issued an agency directive that air grants be structured so that tribes can more easily negotiate the application process.

Recently McCarthy stepped up to head U.S. EPA, and McCabe has moved into NTAA on page 10
ZUNI - from front page

a complex socio-religious system that deals with those changes."

That adaptability has served the tribe well through times of abundance and scarcity. However, Bemis says, "One of the biggest challenges is adapting to those entities and policies that may not be adapted to the environment. Sometimes they just don’t make sense, or they try to fit us into schemes that were adopted for other entities."

Recently Bemis compiled the results of environmental work at Zuni since the 1990s. He presented that information, with a comprehensive look at how the tribe is managing its water-related challenges, at the Biennial Conference of Science and Management on the Colorado Plateau, held in mid-September at Northern Arizona University. This article is based on his presentation at the conference.

Zuni Heaven

Bemis described adaptation work the tribe is conducting on three areas within or in proximity to the 2750-square-mile Zuni River watershed, which ranges in elevation from 5400 to 9100 feet. "Zuni Heaven" is one of three areas on which the tribe has focused its efforts. An unpopulated area of tribal land reserved strictly for cultural use, Zuni Heaven is a peaceful riparian wetland area with lakes and stunning long views in all directions.

Zunis believe the area is the home of their deities and the place where people pass on to. After losing the land for a time, a 1984 Congressional act returned the area to the Zuni people. Every four years at summer solstice, tribal groups conduct pilgrimages to Zuni Heaven, walking four days to and from the area and conducting rituals that go far back in time.

Zuni Heaven has suffered in recent years from water diversions, dam construction, groundwater pumping, and the impacts of a changing climate. Some of its springs went dry as early as the 1930s. More recently, through agreements with the Lyman Water Company, St. Johns Irrigation and Ditch Company, Salt River Project, Tucson Electric Power Company and many others, the tribe has acquired about 2000 acre feet per year (AFY) of water for Zuni Heaven. Their ultimate goal is to restore 5,500 AFY of flow to 700 acres along the river and at the site of former springs and a lake.

"The challenge now," Bemis says, "is that even with what we have—and we're still needing more—how do we get the water down there? There's been a lot of modification to the flow, as with watercourses all around the West. We did a release two years ago, and it made it all the way down. But there are a lot of alterations to the flow—beaver dams, siltation, other modifications."

A big issue now, he says, "is working with a lot of different companies to coordinate our delivery of water down through those systems, to make it there. And once it's there, we need to make sure the channels are able to spread the water naturally. That's a
Photovoltaic Workshop Covers Solar Basics

In mid-November, ITEP’s Tribal Clean Energy Resource Center conducted a two-day photovoltaic (PV) workshop for tribal participants.

The event, centered at the Native American Cultural Center on the campus of Northern Arizona University, drew 55 tribal participants, who attended plenary and lab sessions, and visited outdoor stations where they were exposed to different aspects of solar power technology and use. They also attended two field trips to local PV sites.

Training was led by Deb Tewa, a member of the TCERC team and a solar power expert. Staff from ITEP and other area institutions were on hand as well to offer information and provide hands-on opportunities for participants, who heard from solar-industry representatives and took part in hands-on sessions covering solar basics, system design, instrumentation, siting, and rooftop installations.

Along with introducing 55 tribal staff from across the Southwest to solar technology, the event resulted in a significant outcome: a commitment by three primary organizers to continue working to offer more informational events as well as advanced sessions on sustainability topics.

The workshop garnered positive reviews from participants for the quality of the training as well as requests for information and training on other sustainability issues, including master planning, weatherization, project coordination, and green-design standards.

Those unable to attend the conference can still access PowerPoints and other training material used at the conference. Visit: www4.nau.edu/itep/tcerc/tcerc_news-events.asp. At the site you can learn more about TCERC and its partners, find out about upcoming training and other events, and find out how TCERC can assist your tribe with its energy needs.

Left: Many of the attendees pose for a group shot. Below: Participants gathered in NAU’s Native American Cultural Center for one of several sessions.
Garrit Vogesser is the National Director of Tribal Partnerships for the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) and is based at the Rocky Mountain Regional Center in Boulder, Colorado. Beginning two decades ago with an effort alongside the Wind River Tribe to help preserve their river fishery from soil-flushing by area farmers and to protect Yellowstone bison, NWF has since been involved in numerous tribal partnerships, addressing a variety of environmental issues around wildlife conservation.

That work included efforts to support a tribal presence at the National Adaptation Forum in Denver, Colorado, in early April 2013, a conference that drew climate-change experts and others from across the country and beyond. At the Forum, he spoke with Native Voices editor, Dennis Wall on the work he’s done and continues to do with tribes.

NV: How did the National Wildlife Federation first get involved in working with tribes?

NWF has worked with tribes for over 20 years, beginning with some field staff in Wyoming who recognized that farmers were flushing soil into the Wind River and killing the tribal fisheries on the Wind River Reservation. The partnerships really started to grow when we began working on bison issues, also about 20 years ago. We did a lot around Yellowstone, and still do, working with tribes to restore bison. That work helped build strong relationships between us and the tribes, and we’ve continued to build on that trust, that respect. So we started working on other issues. Today we work with tribes on everything from oil and gas, coal, renewable energy, climate adaptation, to habitat restoration. And we’re still working on the bison issue.

NV: How did you get involved in tribal work?

I’ve been in my current role at NWF for nine years. I work on a lot of different conservation issues with tribes. My doctoral degree is in American Indian and Environmental History from the University of Oklahoma. After undergraduate school I worked for a mortgage company. That wasn’t too stimulating, so I went back and got a Master’s in Indian History—my thesis was on this whole Yellowstone bison issue and NWF’s partnership with tribes. And then I figured I would go and get my doctorate.

I wanted to understand tribes, their history, and their fundamental relationships, not only with the landscape and wildlife, but what’s happened between them and the federal government, with the states. To have that historical context is critical to understanding how to deal with contemporary environmental issues. So I finished that degree, there was an opening at NWF, and there we go.

NV: Please talk more about your bison-related work.

NWF has always been concerned with what happens to Yellowstone buffalo when they cross outside the boundaries of the park. [A border-crossing bison] may or may not have a disease called brucellosis, but they ended up getting shot either way. NWF always argued for sound science—let’s look at these animals, and if they don’t have the disease, instead of indiscriminately shooting them let’s find places for them, either back in the park, or if they’re outgrowing the park’s carrying capacity, let’s find other places for them. One of the obvious natural places is with the first peoples who interacted with the bison.

We partnered with the Intertribal Bison Cooperative—whose member tribes wanted to bring bison back to tribal lands and help resolve the issues around Yellowstone. Working with tribes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, we proposed a quarantine facility outside of Yellowstone—instead of killing them right away, why not test them and if they had brucellosis they would be slaughtered, but if they didn’t have the disease—they were run through several years of tests to make sure they were still clean—it was those bison that ultimately were restored to Ft. Peck Reservation in the spring of 2012.

So, we work with tribes on the idea that, “Listen, let’s manage them as wildlife—science-based—and let’s advocate on policy and natural-resource management principles.”

see NWF on page 7
NV: What other partnerships have you had with tribes?
My colleagues have specific focuses, but I have my hand in a lot of things. I’ve always played a role in the bison issue, because it’s near and dear to my heart. I do lot of work in the Southwest along the Colorado River, particularly with the Cocopah Tribe—theirs is the last before the river enters Mexico. They have a lot of issues with invasive species—salt cedar, degradation of habitat. We’ve worked with them for about ten years to restore habitat, and also to engage tribal youth on the cultural connections between them and the river.

That’s how a lot of our work is with tribes. As you know from working with ITEP, you don’t separate the cultural from the environmental. There may be on-the-ground restoration or wildlife work components, but there’s also a lot of community engagement and discussion, and youth engagement, to keep those cultural and historical connections alive.

We’ve really tried to engage elders and the community on habitat restoration, to develop documentation on what this or that tree or wildlife species has meant to the tribe, the Cocopah names of species. So we had lots of community meetings and talked with elders.

It’s always interesting. Different elders might have different interpretations of what a tree or species of wildlife means, and even the names for them might be different. Ultimately, what they did is develop brief informational booklets to educate their youth on language and the cultural connections. That’s a partnership we’ve had for a long time.

NV: You also work on larger Colorado River issues. What are you doing in that area?
I’m working with Cocopah and other tribes up and down the river. We convened a meeting several years ago to develop a tribal vision for the river. We know the Colorado River is over-allocated, diverted for agriculture, for cities, municipal use—so the question is, will there be sufficient water in the river for habitat and wildlife? If the tribes can come together on their vision, how they connect to the river and how to protect it, that might provide a gateway to talk with river managers, to say, “You can’t just manage for human uses; you have to manage for other things.”

Another question that’s being asked: Do river tribes have reasonable allotments of water? And can that water be used to restore and protect habitat? It depends on the tribe. I think the Cocopah have only 10,000 acre feet, but bigger tribes—some of the agricultural tribes like the Colorado River Indian Tribes [a collective of several river tribes]—have quite a bit. CRIT has been really active in the ‘Ahakhav Tribal Preserve, so they’ve done a lot of restoration work, too.

NV: You were instrumental in supporting tribal participation at the National Adaptation Forum (early April). How did that effort come about?
We formed a subgroup—NWF was one of the event co-sponsors, and I knew this Forum was coming—so I called Sue Wotkyns [ITEP’s Climate Change Program Coordinator], others joined in, and we agreed we should really figure how to do something here. We started talking about sessions, and I suggested it really wouldn’t make a real big difference if we have only a few tribal presenters, having these sessions if there wasn’t a good contingent of tribal attendees.

We all started thinking about who we know, which XYZ person at NOAA, USGS, Fish and Wildlife, EPA might have a little bit of discretionary funding to throw our way to support tribal participation. We knew they were interested in engaging tribes. And suddenly it was coming together, and we had over a dozen folks to help. Our little outreach effort I think funded about 15 tribal participants. The forum planners were so excited by this that they kicked in some funding, and some tribal folks came on their own. We ended up with over 40 tribal participants, out of about 500 people—a pretty good showing.
long-term effort; we’re in it for the long haul.” Drought in recent years has aggravated the problem, and the likelihood that climate change will further degrade the flow has Bemis and other scientists concerned that even more strenuous adaptations will become necessary over time to preserve this most sacred of places on Zuni land.

Zuni Salt Lake

Another area sacred to the tribe is Zuni Salt Lake, a naturally occurring lakebed linked spiritually to Zuni and other tribes. “Salt Mother used to live closer to Zuni,” Bemis explains, “at a spring. There’s an old story about how Zuni didn’t respect her, so she moved farther away—the lesson being never to take her for granted, and to treat her and the environment with respect.”

A delicate hydrological balance is required to keep the lake’s precious salt at its optimal quality. The sanctuary that surrounds it is an area respected by several area tribes. “It’s understood that the lake would not be a place where people held hostilities,” Bemis says, “a sanctuary where people could put down their issues.” The area is considered so sacred, in fact, that Bemis notes that even workers face challenges at times gaining access to the area for certain tasks.

External threats to the area include a coal mine proposed in 1990 that might have degraded the area on several levels. The tribe battled the Salt River Project, the entity behind the project, for years. By 2003 the application was withdrawn. “We’re thankful the threat is gone, for now,” he says.

However, a year later the Bureau of Land Management began issuing mineral leases, not in the sanctuary but close enough to impact the area’s aquifers and possibly the lake itself. “And then someone else submitted an application for groundwater. But that was withdrawn in 2008. The land is still vulnerable to those kinds of uses.”

Adaptation, for Zuni, is an ageless, ongoing process. For this modern-day issue, the tribe has pondered its strategies in terms of practical solutions based on current options. In that spirit, they have engaged in the federal resource-management process (through BLM), and they’ve managed to have the area declared an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern,” proscribing mining and mineral extraction within the sanctuary.

The status also mandates a review and consultation process for any potential impact, even outside the lake’s protected area. “That’s a big step in the right direction,” Bemis says.

That effort was bolstered with an executive order issued by outgoing New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, ordering state agencies to help protect the area as much as possible. Of course, executive orders can be rescinded with each change in an administration, so the area remains at some risk and vigilance is the tribe’s watchword.

The Middle Place: Zuni’s Homeland

This area of the reservation includes the town site and surroundings as well as agricultural fields that help sustain the population. The area was first carved out for the tribe from their much larger ancestral lands by a Spanish land grant in 1689 and was included as reservation land in 1877.

In 1990 the tribe settled a lawsuit against the federal government to remedy erosion caused by a variety of impacts. With the $25 million settlement, they were able to address some longstanding land and water issues.

Threats to the Zuni River headwaters and the Rio Nutria ecosystem are now under review in the Zuni River basin water-rights adjudication addressing all water uses, including livestock irrigation, agricultural and domestic water supplies. A local fish, the Zuni Bluehead Sucker, is threatened by water draw-downs, which also garners federal attention. A flurry of acts and legal challenges from the 1990s to the present have addressed water levels and allotments for tribal use in various areas of the reservation.

Bemis says, “Fortunately, our municipal needs are being met by the main aquifer, and we do have farming irrigation systems, reservoirs and springs, and some wildlife recreation supplies.” But such fortune can be ephemeral; right now the nearby city of Gallup’s proposed construction of over 50 wells for its municipal system and a new subdivision that could include over one hundred new homes with individual wells in the Zuni Mountains both would withdraw groundwater from the regional aquifer that supplies Zuni. “That may hurt us,” he says, “and...
climate change could make things even worse.”

Drought, which some scientists have tied to climate change, is a central issue within the tribal homeland, diminishing agricultural and livestock production and desiccating natural ecosystems. But the problem isn’t simply a lack of water. At times dry spells have been followed by deluges, with severe flooding that has ravaged the community.

In 1999 the rain came hard, as it did again in 2002 and 2006, damaging tribal buildings and homes. In 2013 the situation repeated itself yet again, when a dry spring and early summer were followed by torrential rains that overwhelmed some aging water-control structures and caused extensive flooding in populated areas.

Bemis says the tribe’s response to the constant ebb and flow of surface water must be “long-term mitigation rather than just emergency response.” A drought mitigation plan they developed in 2001 with a Bureau of Reclamation grant has funded water monitoring improvements in several areas of concern, which has helped. Through the BIA’s Safety of Dams program, several dams on Zuni land have undergone safety evaluations and modifications, including Black Rock Dam, which was deemed a “high hazard.” Flood monitors have been installed at several of the dams, though Bemis says more are needed in areas that lack dams but still experience flooding, such as Oak Wash and Peach Orchard Draw, which flooded in recent years.

The tribe adopted a floodplain ordinance in 1990 as part of the National Flood Insurance Program, and then in 1998 received a grant for wastewater system improvements. However, the agreement included severe restrictions on floodplain wastewater service: no new homes within the floodplain can connect to the wastewater system for the next 50 years. “That is a real challenge to deal with,” Bemis says. “It’s a new twist.”

Reams of data are being generated these days at Zuni on spring flows and groundwater levels. But with limited staff and resources, Bemis says, the trick now is to “find ways to tabulate the data more quickly and get it analyzed. We’re asking, ‘How can that data be used in the drought plan?’ Overall, we just need more resources to implement the plan.”

The People Factor

Along with challenges in terms of resources, infrastructure, drought and climate change, another variable impacting the efficacy of Zuni’s response to these issues is human beliefs and behaviors.

Part of the issue is cultural, Bemis says. “There’s a taboo in our culture about predicting bad things, especially natural disasters. That’s impacted our ability to get public involvement and even to convey information.” The taboo, and perhaps the equally serious problem of low average incomes among Zuni residents, have discouraged tribal members from purchasing flood insurance. Bemis says experts at the tribe address the issue delicately, pointing out the reality of the threats and stressing the need to prepare. “But we try to be respectful,” he says. “We try not to cross the line.” Educating community members on all aspects of the water issues has been a key strategy in their overall approach to the issue.

Despite the tribe’s floodplain ordinance, patterns of settlement on the reservation are impacted by a variety of forces and perceptions. Because upgraded dams have done a better job of preventing floods, some residents see the current risk as minimal and choose to build in the floodplain despite warnings by tribal experts. Zoning is nonexistent on Zuni, which also allows encroachment into risky areas. Limited land exists on the reservation for home-building, a situation that impels people to “build wherever they can, and sometimes that’s on the flood plain.”

Even the tribe’s sacred rituals are impacted by the tribe’s need to manage development and reduce flood risks. Each year for the Shalako ceremony, tribal members build homes, and sometimes, Bemis says, the ordinance imposes hardships. And, he says, there has been a reluctance by the tribe to enforce the ordinance in the face of resource issues that impact members of this small community.

Change is the Constant

And so the Zuni people, who have adapted to myriad challenges over many centuries, take the struggle into the modern era, where obstacles include nature, human nature, politics, economics, cultural clashes, and a worldwide assault on the climate whose impacts grow more evident each year. Their resiliency has kept the Zuni Tribe strong over the long haul, and they show no reluctance to engage assertively in the present-day fight, despite the complexity of issues and the forces arrayed against them. So far they’ve managed a reasonable level of success against stunning odds.

The wild card is climate.
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NTAA—from page 3

McCarthy’s former position (to this date on an interim basis). Having the ear of EPA’s highest officials is a welcome state of affairs for the tribal air community. But even with that kind of agency support, staff rotation and role-shifting is a constant process at EPA, and a tribal-air learning curve re-emerges each time someone steps into a position that impacts Native people.

The NTAA executive committee are continuing the process of educating EPA staff, holding one of their two annual meetings in Washington DC in January. The association’s twice-yearly sit-downs complement “lively” monthly conference calls in which they address short- and long-term NTAA business. Thompson says the face-to-face meetings are crucial for managing NTAA business and getting things done. He also points out the importance of meeting with EPA staff, “putting names to faces and getting them up to speed on tribal issues and needs, and outlining what we can do to help each other. We look at that as an opportunity to grow our ‘EPA tribe.’ The more new people we introduce into our ‘tribe,’ the better off we'll be.”

The ultimate goal, he says, is to create a web of open communication that reaches in all directions. “Any time a tribe reaches out for help, the process should be like a big net, with everything moving toward the center. So if someone were to [convey a need] to, say, Angela Benedict from Region 2, she would bring that to the executive committee meeting, and we would decide how we can help. Or a tribe might contact someone at their regional office, or an EPA person might hear about a need from somewhere. Regardless, it should be passed on to us, and we'll see what we can do to help.”

The NTAA Executive Committee works hard to keep EPA informed on tribal air needs. One mode is the association’s regional status reports presented each year to attendees at the National Tribal Forum, which agency officials attend. Another mode is through Regional Tribal Operations Committee meetings, held regularly in each EPA region. A more formalized educational approach is the NTAA’s periodic Status of Tribal Air Report document, which is due to be updated. The “STAR” offers a comprehensive look at tribal air needs within and across EPA regions. “That report has been considered a living document,” Thompson says. “It isn’t meant to suggest every issue is every tribe’s concern, and we’re definitely not trying to speak for tribes in general. This is our attempt to consolidate information, to bring something to the table that EPA can look at, showing what’s going on in the regions, and also issues that seem to be universal.”

The report consolidates not only current tribal air needs but unmet needs. Thompson explains, “When folks are evaluating what is needed, they often go by what is asked for but not received. So what happens when the tribe keeps asking for something but doesn’t get it, year after year? Well, they quit asking, and the unmet need falls off the map. The need is still there, but the tribe might just give up trying to tell everyone about it. Why go back to an empty well? So, we encourage tribes to voice their needs even when they think no one is listening. We'll sure as heck be listening.”

The NTAA addresses not only more immediate tribal air concerns but the larger picture of where tribal air management support has been and where it might be heading. For example, funding has been flat for years, which Thompson says begs the question: “How is the federal government implementing the trust relationship it has with Indian nations?” And so NTAA members ask such basic questions as, “Why is it that funding for tribes is included in the ‘petty cash’ accounts, the discretionary funding? Tribal environmental programs are responsible for helping to protect the health of tribal members—so why does that funding always seem to be stagnant? We’re certainly not trying to make EPA feel bad on this. It’s not their fault—they’ve been cut, too. It just doesn’t seem right that tribal funding should be tied up in the political process.”

By keeping such questions alive, the NTAA serves the larger purpose of encouraging the agency to remember what the tribal-federal relationship is about: the sovereignty of tribal nations, federal trust responsibilities, and the interest of all Americans in keeping our air clean and breathable. ☮

More than 75 tribes are now members of the National Tribal Air Association. All tribes are welcome and encouraged to join. For more information, please visit www.ntaatribalair.org.

NTAA’s Policy Advisory Committee (L to R): Dr. Garrit Voggesser, National Wildlife Federation; David LaRoche, Retired EPA; Ann Marie Chischilly, ITEP Executive Director; Roger Furland, retired partner with the law firm Quarles and Brady; and Dr. David Gay, scientist with the National Atmospheric Deposition Network.
NV: Please describe your work with ITEP.
We are working on a lot of different things. Sue [Wotkyns] and Mehrdad [Khatibi, ITEP’s Director] and I have explored how to influence Landscape Conservation Cooperatives, to tailor their funding so they meet the needs of tribes. That’s an ongoing dialogue we’ve had.

I’ve also been engaged with ITEP on TCERC [the Tribal Clean Energy Resource Center] issues that ITEP has been working on. Recently, ITEP also asked me to serve on the National Tribal Air Association policy advisory committee. A lot of our work has been climate based. We’ve worked on climate legislation, and I was in DC for the First Stewards conference last year. We have a tribal working group, and we’re holding an even bigger discussion on how we can look back at what we did previously to make sure tribes are fully engaged, at the table and included in climate bills. We’re trying to learn from what we did in the past and be more proactive, because we were forced to react on earlier climate bills.

I know Ann Marie [Chischilly, ITEP’s Exec. Director] has been involved, and Sue has sat in on that. I think what we’ve experienced here at the forum this week will be really informative on that process, on how we work with the administration, the agencies, Congress, to really describe the needs and values that tribes bring to the issue. That’s probably the biggest thing on the radar right now.

NV: Some tribal members are leery of working with outside groups like NWF, citing abuses of the past. How does NWF address those concerns?

That can be a challenge. The problem, of course, is the historical relationship between tribes and non-Indians. That historic mistrust has been built by the actions of the federal government, the states…I’m not saying NGOs or environmental organizations haven’t been at fault, too, because some have had sort of fly-by-night operations in their relationships with tribes. They might want to fly in and work with a tribe on a specific issue, and then they’re gone.

NWF’s tribal program, it’s foundational principles, are that we work with tribes at their request. We started having interactions with tribes on specific issues about 20 years ago. To me it’s no different than working with anyone. You have to build the relationship, come to understand each others’ values and where you share values, and where you may not. You have to build that trust and respect and that understanding that you’re in it for the long haul—an understanding that we want to help where we can, but we respect tribal sovereignty and what they want to do.

If that means there’s a place where NWF can help, we’re happy to do so. To me it’s the same if you’re working with tribes or anyone, really. It’s how you build lasting relationships. You do that by being honest and candid and recognizing where you have shared values. And where you have shared values, we can work together, and it is amazing what we can accomplish for wildlife when we work together.
3) downsize regional models and analysis tools, and upsize significant impacts on tribal decisions/actions 4) increase climate-change adaptation funding for tribes and Pacific Islanders; and 5) enhance communication with ACCECNRS tribes and Pacific Islanders. The ACCECNRS appointed Dr. Morshima and myself as co-chairs for the ACCECNRS working group titled “Tribal/Indigenous Engagement” to continue to work on these recommendations so that the entire ACCECNRS Committee will agree to endorse the recommendations to Secretary Jewell.

In November, I attended the President’s Tribal Leaders Summit in Washington DC in support of tribal interests. On that same trip, I attended Department of Energy (DOE) Secretary Ernest Moniz’s new “Minorities in Energy” Initiative at the White House. The launch of this new initiative served to highlight a commitment by the DOE to provide more support to minority communities and individuals on energy matters—good news for tribes involved in energy, and a welcome gesture for programs like ITEP’s Tribal Clean Energy Resource Center. I hope to hear more from the DOE in terms of supporting tribal energy progress.

In my concluding notes, I want to highlight some of the accomplishments of the ITEP staff. Since arriving at ITEP 2.5 years ago, I’ve found our staff to be one of the hardest working teams I’ve ever had the privilege to work with. ITEP has received some great press recently for two of our programs. One is ITEP’s Environmental Workforce Development on the Navajo Nation effort, led by Roberta Tohannie (www.nativeamericannewsnetwork.com/2013/09/03/epa-grant-funds-to-train-navajo-workers-for-environmental-cleanup-jobs.htm). The second is ITEP’s ongoing internship program through the Institute’s Environmental Education and Outreach Program, lead by Mansel Nelson (www4.nau.edu/itep/nwef/). I want to congratulate our great staff for the well-deserved media attention those programs have earned.

I would also like to congratulate three ITEP staff members for their 15 years of service at NAU/ITEP: Dennis Wall, our editor; Melinda Yaiva, ITEP’s Accountant; and Mansel Nelson, who leads our Environmental Education and Outreach Program. Congratulations to all three staff members for their long commitment to ITEP’s mission of supporting tribal environmental progress.

Finally, we’re gearing up with the National Tribal Air Association for the 2014 National Tribal Forum, to be held this spring. We’ll have more information for you soon on location, topics and presenters, and ways you can participate. We look forward to seeing you there.

As always, ITEP is here to support you and I always welcome your input. Let’s make it an amazing 2014!

PERSONNEL MATTERS

We’re sad to announce that Gary Elthie, our longtime Information Technology specialist and a familiar face at the National Tribal Forum and other events, has moved on to seek new opportunities. Gary has been an integral part of our operation for more than a decade, helping us to solve innumerable IT problems and contributing his skills as a photographer, performer on flute and drums, and talking circle facilitator at ITEP training courses. We thank Gary for his work and wish him the best in his future endeavors.

On a happier note, we would like to welcome Andy Bessler to his new role as National Tribal Air Association Project Director. Andy joined ITEP last March and previously worked with our energy program. Before that he spent more than a decade as an organizer for the Sierra Club, coordinating campaigns to protect sacred lands and fight climate change. Andy is a runner, a cyclist and a family man whose wife owns and operates a yoga studio in Flagstaff. Contact him at andy.bessler@nau.edu.

We also wish to welcome Darlene Santos to her new position as Administrative Associate for the TAMS Center in Las Vegas, NV. Darlene, a northern California native, has 30 years of experience as an administrative assistant and previously managed a healthcare office. She moved to Las Vegas in 2000 with her “high school sweetheart” whom she married 27 years ago. Darlene has three grown children and a huge extended family. She loves to travel and dance and says, “I absolutely love my new position and working with the most wonderful, amazing people, who have all been very welcoming, supportive and great to work with!” You can reach Darlene at darlene.santos@nau.edu.