

Restoring Hózhó: Building Bio-Cultural Resilience on the Navajo Nation

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In 2005, the Quivira Coalition was approached by a group of Navajo ranchers who were running out of grass, running out of money and running out of time to reverse the trend. Fortunately, they were also running out of patience with conventional land management dogma and had the sincere desire to be stewards of their community's resources. With the support of the Ojo Encino Rancher's Committee and the Rio Puerco Alliance, Quivira's Navajo colleagues have spent the past six years laying the groundwork for resilience in their communities.

The goal of Quivira's efforts is to develop a comprehensive climate-change adaptation strategy that can be replicated in rural Native communities across the southern Colorado Plateau. Quivira has partnered with three Chapters of the Navajo Nation (Ojo Encino, Counselor, and Torreon) to establish a model for economically sustainable land restoration and management of tribal lands by connecting land-health restoration with local food production and community involvement.

Through 2013, Quivira is working to:

- 1) identify and restore areas of high ecological potential on the southern Colorado Plateau;
- 2) develop the capacity of Hasbidito as an emerging Navajo-run nonprofit community organization that is capable of planning and implementing projects that build resilience on the Colorado Plateau;
- 3) engage Navajo youth and create new avenues through which the next generation of land stewards can receive hands-on mentorship in land-health restoration techniques;
- 4) establish a formal capacity-building program within the Quivira Coalition, through which efforts can be scaled up to build resilience in other under-served communities on the Colorado Plateau;
- 5) restore traditional agricultural and stewardship traditions that will serve as building blocks in a re-emerging local food system;
- 6) gain a better understanding of how to integrate the traditions of Native American dryland agriculture with modern land management practices through research; and
- 7) improve the health of the rangeland by managing the feral horse population.

"Hózhó" is a Navajo word that means "walking in beauty" – or living in a manner that strives to create and maintain balance, harmony, beauty and order. This single word captures the essence of Navajo philosophy. This concept forms the founding principle for understanding ecological and cultural resilience on Navajo land. Hózhó is similar to, but much richer in meaning than, the term "conservation," as it implies a deep connection between people and land. One cannot be restored without the other. In essence, hózhó is Navajo for "land ethic," a term made famous by Aldo Leopold in his book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949).

BACKGROUND: The Ojo Encino, Torreon, and Counselor chapters of the Navajo Nation sit on the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau, 30 miles west of Cuba, NM, representing more than 276,000 acres. Quivira's work in this region is focused around building on traditional resilience strategies by restoring hózhó. It's about restoring land health and cultural health by reconnecting people to land. It's about creating new land and water management

systems. It's about feeding the community. It's about maintaining traditions. It's about re-engaging youth. In essence, it's about rediscovering a land ethic, and it requires building local capacity and testing strategies that make land-based activities economically viable and resilient in the face of climate change.

CHALLENGES: The challenges facing many communities in Navajo Country (the creation of permanent ranch units in the 1930s that immobilized an otherwise nomadic culture, the maze of roadways that has significantly modified surface hydrology and nutrient cycling at the landscape scale, the over-population of feral horses, etc.) are wide-ranging and daunting. Many of these institutional challenges are too highly politicized to adequately address with limited time and funding. This is not to say that these types of challenges should be ignored, because they are repeated in Native American communities across the Colorado Plateau. In order to be effective, however, Quivira has had to identify and focus on challenges where they can effect positive change at a local scale and on a realistic timeline.

Here are some of the challenges Quivira has chosen to address:

First and foremost is poverty. Many people in the communities of Ojo Encino, Counselor and Torreon live without running water or electricity, and subsist on commodity food provided by the federal government that is causing obesity, diabetes and ultimately, death. As one elder recently said, "We have known imbalance for so long, harmony feels unnatural." Finding solutions to the social, economic and political issues that plague these communities is a necessary component of restoring hózhó in these communities.

The second daunting challenge is that most Navajo people no longer depend on the local land base for sustenance. As the Navajo have gone to an increasingly cash-based economy, they have neglected the land that once sustained their ancestors. While Quivira does not expect these communities to return to subsistence agricultural economies, there are cultural practices associated with agriculture that can be reinstated that clearly sustain the health of the community and the health of the landscape. When land provides something that you need – it is natural that you would want to take good care of it.

One of the biggest factors affecting land health is a rampaging population of feral horses. Quivira is actively addressing this through the administration of the PZP (mare birth control) vaccine and a 4-H program in Ojo Encino, targeted at reconnecting rural youth with traditional horse practices.

The third challenge is getting young people involved in their communities and demonstrating that there is meaningful work to be done in the community. Said one elder, "Our youth no longer see the land, they just see the road out of here." There are few opportunities for youth to make a good living on the reservation, and a crucial element of restoring hózhó is re-engaging the imaginations and creativity of the next generation of land stewards.

Lastly, without question the challenge of a changing climate is already adversely affecting Native communities and landscapes across the Colorado Plateau. On average, the area around Ojo Encino, Torreon and Counselor gets approximately 10 inches of rain annually. Elders remember a time when a five-mile walk between the Ojo Encino Chapter House and home required making a conscious effort to stay on high ground because the lowlands were too marshy to navigate on foot. Today, that same route is a wasteland of sagebrush and bare soil. If climate change follows current predictions, the southern Colorado Plateau is going to be completely void of live water, making human existence on this iconic cultural landscape increasingly difficult.

RECENT SUCCESSES: In 2009-2010, support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation enabled Quivira to expand the program beyond Ojo Encino and begin work with the communities of Counselor and Torreon, as well. Projects included restoring abandoned floodwater farm fields for the purpose of jump-starting a local food system, and simultaneously healing vital components of an otherwise degraded landscape.

Ojo Encino has successfully developed a summer youth crew that knows more about erosion control than many engineers, a community-wide plan for land and livestock management, a strategy for managing feral horses, and a commitment to reengaging local agriculture. Perhaps the greatest success of 2010 was the emergence of Hasbidito.

Quivira's Navajo colleagues created this conservation nonprofit dedicated to building economic and ecological resilience in the region. Hasbidito is unique because it is the only Navajo-run nonprofit that has ever existed in this community, and it has positioned itself to be adaptive to its communities' changing needs. Based on the success of its first grant, the Packard Foundation made a significant commitment for support through 2013, and Quivira is sharing those funds with Hasbidito to accelerate their trajectory toward independence.

Quivira's relationship with Hasbidito has been a real partnership in that both have learned a great deal from each other. Hasbidito has taught Quivira valuable lessons about strategies for conservation in rural communities.

First, the only way to achieve durable ecological conservation in Native communities at a landscape scale is to approach people, culture and land as equal parts of the same system. You cannot go anywhere on this landscape without seeing artifacts of human presence. Land and culture are truly intertwined. To a large extent, the degradation seen on the landscape of the Eastern Checkerboard is the result of a forced separation between people, culture and land. The most effective way to achieve conservation results is to pull those pieces back together through integrated bio-cultural resource management.

Second, Quivira had learned that the project's success is dependent upon understanding the way that Native people assign value to land. In Navajo culture, the sanctity of land is directly tied to utility. The two ideas cannot be separated. Sacred places were ones that served some crucial role in the practice of religion or provided some essential resource. Flood-water farm fields are a perfect example of the type of sites that link people, land and culture, and the ecological restoration of these fields simultaneously helps to restore their utility – and therefore their sanctity. The success of the restoration efforts gives a strong indication that the holistic approach to restoring hózhó is cost-effective, produces immediate results on the land, and directly responds to the goals of the local community to build a more sustainable future by closing the cultural separation of people from the landscape through the development of a locally sustainable food system. While Quivira does not intend to provide all of the food needs of the community through this food system, it sees the production of food in a locally adapted system that depends on landscape health as critical to the success of this effort.

Creating a comprehensive climate-change adaptation strategy for rural Native communities on the Colorado Plateau that incorporates each of the elements listed above is no small undertaking. Having formed a remarkable partnership with Hasbidito, and on projects to date, Quivira has found that the combination of the organizations' individual strengths makes for a highly effective team. Communities like Ojo Encino, Torreon and Counselor are often left out on the margin of society, but in this project they are proudly representing the rest of the Navajo Nation as climate-change resilience innovators.

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