



# Just Environmental and Climate Pathways: Knowledge Exchange among Community Organizers, Scholar-Activists, Citizen-Scientists and Artists

Tuesday, March 28, 2017  
Drury Plaza Hotel in Santa Fe, New Mexico



# FAIR DATA FOR ALL!

## Organizers

**Julie K. Maldonado**, PhD, Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN)

**Dana E. Powell**, PhD, Appalachian State University, Department of Anthropology

## Speakers

**Theron Begay**, Oceti Sakowin (NoDAPL) Camp

**Mike Eisenfeld**, San Juan Citizens Alliance

**Lori Goodman**, Diné CARE

**Lyla June Johnston**, New Energy Economy

**Kendra Pinto**, Greater Chaco Coalition/Twin Pines Community

**Kathy Sanchez**, Tewa Women United

Communities around the globe are already experiencing the effects of a changing climate, many far more impacted than others. Accelerating rates of fossil fuel extraction and production are locking in enough carbon emissions to break international agreements on climate goals (such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, a compact now under threat in the U.S. and elsewhere).

In this context, residents in New Mexico and the greater Southwest are experiencing these impacts through changing weather patterns, increased sand dunes, drought, intensification of airborne contaminants, legacies of mineral extraction and processing, as well as increasingly scarce and contested water resources. However, New Mexico residents are not only feeling climate and environmental change impacts, they are expressing and organizing toward solutions: indeed, many argue for fundamental paradigm shifts. Their leadership raises crucial questions: *What kinds of resources are needed to advance just pathways? What key issues, actions, and new media can we create, across different disciplines, knowledge systems, modes of social justice, and visual representations?*

To address some of these questions, anthropologists from the Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN, Julie Maldonado) and Appalachian State University (Dana Powell) organized a workshop to bring together a group of colleagues on the frontlines of climate justice work. The session, **Just Environmental and Climate Pathways: Knowledge Exchange Among Community Organizers, Scholar-Activists, Citizen-Scientists and Artists**, was held on the “New Mexico Day” of the 2017 Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) Annual Meeting,<sup>1</sup> which took place in Santa Fe from March 28-April 1. Maldonado and Powell then brought together a panel of New Mexico-based policy, environmental justice, and other community-based leaders to think together about the challenges specific to the region and to identify particularly impacted areas and strategic points for positive change.

### Developing Pathways to Advance Local Insights to the National Platform

As this workshop was being organized, scientists from around the United States were coming together to develop the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. National Climate Assessment (NCA4). The 1990 Global Change Research Act legally mandated the U.S. Global Change Research Program to lead an assessment every four years which:

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<sup>1</sup> The first day of the SfAA Annual Meeting is free and open to the public, designed to engage in panels, workshops, and dialogues around issues pertinent to the Meeting’s locale. For more on the SfAA, see [www.sfaa.net](http://www.sfaa.net).

- **Informs the Nation** about observed changes, the current status of the climate, and anticipated trends for the future;
- **Integrates scientific information** from multiple sources and sectors to highlight key findings and significant gaps in knowledge;
- **Establishes consistent methods** for evaluating climate impacts in the United States in the context of broader global change; and
- **Is used by the U.S. Government, citizens, communities, and businesses** as they create more sustainable and environmentally sound plans for the future.<sup>2</sup>

The third and most recent NCA was released in May 2014.<sup>3</sup> With the NCA4 process already underway,<sup>4</sup> this workshop was, in part, envisioned to provide local, community-level input into that process and to advance local insights and experiences about climate and environmental change into the national-level platform.

This workshop was also organized in the context of a changing political landscape: over the weeks and months leading up to the workshop we witnessed – all around the world – growing threats to our public lands, air, water, and health. Yet we have also witnessed increased levels of resistance, organized uprisings, and broad-based campaigns determined to protect our most basic, vital, life-giving resources. Now, it is more important than ever that we hear the voices of people who hold key knowledge and expertise on how to resist injustice, and how to build movements to protect waters, lands, and life.

A group of organizations and scientists from around the country have come together to form a science-to-action coalition to proactively address some of these emerging and unfolding concerns. Thus, a second distinct pathway emerged to elevate local voices and provide local insight into the national-scope. It is with these two pathways in mind – the NCA4 and science-to-action coalition – that the workshop took place. Although the workshop was organized and facilitated by non-local scholars, it was intended to be a community-based conversation geared toward identifying particular needs and generating specific outcomes. Recognizing that sensitive information could be shared during the workshop, the organizers asked all invited speakers to review this document. The report's authors designed this to be shared, particularly with the participants and their organizations, to contribute to and support their ongoing work.

## Knowledge Exchange: Sharing and Learning Together

The workshop was designed to hear from a truly remarkable group of people who are leaders in community-based work and critical insight into environmental and climate issues impacting frontline communities in New Mexico and elsewhere. More than fifty people attended the

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the NCA: <http://www.globalchange.gov/what-we-do/assessment>

<sup>3</sup> To read NCA3: <http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/>

<sup>4</sup> For more information on NCA4: <http://www.globalchange.gov/nca4>

workshop, mostly from Santa Fe and the surrounding communities, as well as a few anthropologists in Santa Fe for the SfAA Meeting: there was a remarkably strong degree of legal, cultural, environmental, and policy-related expertise assembled.

Each person made a brief introduction, following the opening prayer offered by Kathy Sanchez (Tewa Women United). In what follows, we offer a condensed summary of remarks by each of the six speakers,<sup>5</sup> highlighting two central themes each.

### Kathy Sanchez (San Ildefonso Pueblo), Tewa Women United

#### *Theme 1: colliding and interlocking systems of knowingness and knowledge*

Kathy Sanchez emphasized the strengths of having two different ways of gaining wisdom. There is the Native ways of knowingness (epistemologies) and Western ways of knowledge. She spoke to the way in which Western, Euro-American ways of knowing continually try to understand Native epistemologies by dichotomizing and taking it apart to see the separation of it from the whole but Native epistemologies are holistic and operates with tools of land-human relational thinking. This leads to resilient of inclusiveness by redefining or reaffirming relations. She



demonstrated all this with a strip of white paper, using the concept of the Mobius strip. This illustrates the journey in life to understanding our purpose in life. One comes to having two different yet interconnected relational-tivity to the tools a Native person possesses. The knowledges themselves become separated but in the end, the two sides become one. They are interlinked in complex and interdependent ways. She twisted the paper in a way that some would call a “twist of fate” and others would describe as a “twist of faith.”

<sup>5</sup> We were joined by Theron Begay, Mike Eisenfeld, Lori Goodman, Lyla June Johnston, Kendra Pinto, and Kathy Sanchez. Venaya Yazzie (Diné/Hopi Multimedia Artist) and Bianca Sopoci-Belknap (New Energy Economy) were also invited but unable to participate.

Her paper and scissors demonstration showed how the deepening of these entanglements can also result in beautiful and unexpected re-combinations, like an interlinked circle with a “complex yet well laid out purposeful intersection” flanked by two open wings. The visual of the butterfly embodies the simultaneous separateness and interconnectedness of these sometimes-clashing, sometimes interlocking, epistemologies. She stressed that in understanding climate change and resulting impacts, we need both kinds of knowledge: their entanglements in practice produce a strong, vibrant, capable mode of understanding (exemplified by the paper butterfly, with interlocking wings).

### *Theme 2: critical appraisal of the underlying conditions shaping our current problems*

Sanchez repeatedly drew on Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s emphasis on the three core components of contemporary injustice: racism, consumerism, and militarism. This triad has created the conditions that alienate us from our lands and from each other, creating conditions of violence. This is perhaps most visible in the geography of Los Alamos. Sanchez showed a map of the Los Alamos terrain, just outside of Santa Fe, where atop a fault line, nuclear weapons science has shaped the landscape. This pursuit has produced synthetic materials that change the very constitution of the environment and of human bodies. We are “synthetizing ourselves,” she stressed, and our landscapes and bodies are fundamentally changed. This mentality is connected to a certain way of thinking about power, which Sanchez demonstrated through the object of a glass pyramid, which she held up and pointing to the tip, discussed how the distancing of sites of power from their base (some humans from other humans) creates an imbalance.



Her recommendations for restoring health and justice lie in the objects arranged on the altar or symbolic center she assembled in our room: ears of organic corn, an earthen pot that holds water, small bundles of lavender and sage, and other sacred objects that orient us toward things that truly matter. She challenged the community to collectively think of a new model, one in which it is understood that everyone is indigenous to the land from where they are from, in which we know how to be centered in that land, and in which we work together based on a “relational culture.”

### Kendra Pinto (Diné), Greater Chaco Coalition/Twin Lakes Community

#### *Theme 1: health impacts of fracking in the Twin Lakes and surrounding communities (Navajo Nation)*

“I’m just a small girl from Twin Lakes,” Kendra Pinto said of herself, but she is clearly a thoughtful, emerging leader who understands the connections between oil and gas industries and the increasing health and social insecurities of members of her community. She discussed the resistance she often faces in the Twin Lakes, New Mexico area, when educating her neighbors about the reality of methane gas contamination and other airborne contaminants that result from the new energy extraction projects in their region and being located in a “checkerboard of fracked lands.”



Almost 400 hydraulic fracturing (fracking) permits have been issued near her community, without any environmental impact statement. Locals are faced with gag orders by the industry and companies squelch local protest actions, such as sandblasting off “water is life” that someone wrote on a wall. Living with the spike in violence since the fracking boom came to her community, Pinto asked the audience, “Why aren’t more people awake?”

Many people don’t want to believe this is going on, she said, and if they do know about it, don’t want to accept that there is potentially a connection to their poor health. Many people are very fearful to stand up or speak out against the extractive energy industry in their area – people are threatened with the loss of jobs, bonuses, or forms of security, and thus go along with the status quo. She discussed the difficulty of convincing people about the dangers of methane gas, in particular. “The air is changing,” she said, and people can see and feel that; her own family members often remark of a “certain smell” or the haze or having sore throats, but don’t always make the connection between those discomforting experiences and the oil and gas industry that is all around them. Working through the local chapter house (a communal Navajo meeting place), she is finding ways to connect with community members, especially many elders, to educate on the dangers of these industries and present the evidence against the “myth of the economic boost.”

*Theme 2: linking local and global struggles*

Pinto linked her work in understanding and educating others on the impacts of extractive energy industry and its effects on climate, with her work at the national scale. She witnessed the Nageezi, New Mexico oil fire in July 2016,<sup>6</sup> during which six new and 30 temporary storage tanks owned by WPX Energy, the company fracking near her home, caught fire and forced dozens of families to evacuate, leaving them with only 30 minutes to gather whatever they could. Immediately following, she was involved in the Protect Our Public Lands Tour, which documented the lived experience of frontline community members working hard to transition from toxic energy industries to a just and renewable energy future.<sup>7</sup>

On September 15, 2016, Pinto was arrested at the Department of the Interior in Washington, DC during a “Keep it in the Ground” protest action. She followed this activism with a trip to support the water protectors at Standing Rock, in North Dakota, resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline, where she spent time with members from Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment (Diné CARE), including Lori Goodman, in a small camp within Oceti Sakowing being supported by the organizers of Oglala Kitchen. Powell, one of this report’s authors, was also part of that October delegation. “I couldn’t get arrested and I couldn’t leave the camp,” Pinto recalled, due to her pending court case from the Washington, DC action. Although her activism in this regard felt constrained, she noted seeing more and more clearly the connections across different sites of struggle in climate and energy development impacts. Pinto reflected on feeling the connections between the health and environmental risks facing the Southwest and those facing the Sioux; she was energized by the DC and North Dakota work, and took those insights back to her home community on the Navajo reservation, to show locals there how their experience is connected with much broader processes, impacts and struggles of indigenous peoples.

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<sup>6</sup> To read Pinto’s eyewitness account of the Nageezi, NM oil fire: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-are-our-lives-not-important-an-eyewitness-describes\\_us\\_579251cde4b0a1917a6e8725](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-are-our-lives-not-important-an-eyewitness-describes_us_579251cde4b0a1917a6e8725)

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the Protect Our Public Lands Tour: <http://likenknowledge.org/programs/r2r-program/#Just-Climate-Knowledge-Exchange-Networks>



Mike Eisenfeld, San Juan Citizens Alliance, Farmington, NM

*Theme 1: understanding climate impacts in Four Corners requires understanding the longstanding “energy complex” defining the region*

The Southwest has been confirmed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and others as one of most impacted/fragile areas for climate change.<sup>8</sup> The yellow blanket of haze from the energy industry obscures iconic images of the Four Corners region, like the Shiprock formation. The region has over 40,000 existing natural gas wells and associated infrastructure, and two large coal plants (Four Corners Power Plant and San Juan Generating Station). A third coal plant was proposed in the early 2000s – the Desert Rock Power Plant – but community members and citizen alliance groups came together to oppose the Plant and after continued resistance, successfully blocked the Plant from being built.



The impacts of coal and natural gas facility pollution are balanced with needed electricity/energy. The degradation of visual quality, air, land and water resources from air pollution imposes high economic costs on the Four Corners region and adversely impacts the public health of people who live here. Eisenfeld implored, how do we balance energy development with proper protection of people, communities and resources? Eisenfeld showed aerial photography images that reveal the impact on the landscape of these more than 40,000 gas wells and other facilities. Since the takeoff of this energy development in the 1950s, and an area that in 1972 President Richard Nixon called “an energy export sacrifice zone”, there has been an utter lack of long-range planning in this infrastructure, and a lot of this is on our own federal lands.

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<sup>8</sup> Romero-Lankao, P., J.B. Smith, D.J. Davidson, N.S. Diffenbaugh, P.L. Kinney, P. Kirshen, P. Kovacs, and L. Villers Ruiz, 2014: North America. In: Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part B: Regional Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, USA, pp. 1439-1498.

### *Theme 2: the myths of natural gas*

In January 2009, San Juan Citizens Alliance and WildEarth Guardians, represented by Earthjustice, sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, alleging that the Agency had failed to review the New Source Performance Standards and National Emissions Standards for Hazardous Air Pollutants for the oil and natural gas industry on this mandated schedule.<sup>9</sup> This legal challenge resulted in a commitment to strengthen the Clean Air Act regulations for oil and gas production sector -- which was declared in 1985 and never updated. The 2011 settlement of this case acknowledges the large contribution of toxic air pollution from the oil and gas sector, insures that performance standards and technologies are used throughout the oil and gas industry, and strengthens public health safeguards.

The EPA has identified the oil and natural gas sector as accounting for 33% of U.S. methane emissions.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, the marketable product, such as methane, is being lost through leaks and fugitive emissions. Other pollutants emanating from and/or present at natural gas facilities, including hydrogen sulfide and benzene, represent clear dangers to public health. As industry campaigns to portray natural gas as the “clean/bridge fossil fuel” march on and issues such as fracking are now part of the national dialogue on energy, San Juan Citizens Alliance’s work has contributed to holding the oil and gas industry to more responsible practices, performances and controls.

As one example, Eisenfeld cited the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Settlement in Farmington, New Mexico, leasing comments on BLM Tres Rios Field Office, region-wide potential for shale oil and gas development as future threats – the Four Corners region has the single largest shale deposit in the western United States. Eisenfeld also cited the Mancos Shale legal challenge in Northwest New Mexico focusing on lack of planning documentation. A recent field study in the Uinta Basin of Utah by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the University of Colorado-Boulder suggest high rates of methane leakage in natural gas fields – an eye-popping 9% of the total production. Methane is 23 times more potent than carbon dioxide. The methane hotspot in the San Juan Basin is approximately the size of the state of Delaware. Other emissions found at natural gas facilities include volatile organic compounds (VOCs), including BTEX (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylenes) and Hydrogen sulfide.

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<sup>9</sup> See Federal Register Notice: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2011/08/23/2011-19899/oil-and-natural-gas-sector-new-source-performance-standards-and-national-emission-standards-for#footnote-3-p52743>

<sup>10</sup> For more information, <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/overview-greenhouse-gases#methane>

Eisenfeld discussed the fact that he lives in a fairly well-off, “nice neighborhood” on the edge of Farmington, and even he only has to walk one hundred yards or so out on his land to come across a well pad. “They are everywhere.” He showed numerous pictures of the oil, gas and coal landscape that cuts through and surrounds Farmington and greater northern New Mexico, including an image of a natural gas tank with a side-by-side photo of that same tank with an infrared camera, showing all of the normally invisible release of methane gas.

### *Theme 3: coal and the energy-water nexus*

The fifty-year-old Four Corners Power Plant (FCPP) and the forty-year-old San Juan Generating Station (SJGS), just east of Shiprock, serve utilities in California, Texas, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico. These utilities and coal companies now face the reality of expensive, coal-derived electricity when externalities enter the picture (that is, the cost that society pays for air pollution, water quality degradation, health impacts, climate change, and more). Both FCPP and SJGS, notorious for their pollution, are required to reduce emissions that have plagued the region for decades. San Juan Citizens Alliance has been at the forefront of holding these facilities accountable.

San Juan County, New Mexico was identified as the sixth highest carbon dioxide emitting county in the U.S., utilizing 2002 data (Vulcan Project, 2008). The most prominent local analysis concerns greenhouse gases (GHG, e.g., carbon dioxide, methane) where the emissions inventory specific to La Plata County in recent years (with industry data and industry calculation) showed that approximately 80% of all the GHGs produced in La Plata County are directly attributable to the gas industry. At the coal plant, people can be found boating, fishing or recreating on “Morgan Lake,” the cooling pond for the Four Corners Power Plant.

In all of this, Eisenfeld reminded us, we have to consider the energy-water nexus. This is perhaps most clear in coal production. According to the US Geological Survey, 53% of all surface water use in the U.S. in 2005 was connected to the electrical grid. A recent report by River Network, *Burning our Rivers: the Water Footprint of Electricity*, estimates that the average person in the U.S. uses up to five times more water through his or her electricity usage than through his or her more direct water consumption (cooking, toilets, washing car or watering lawn).<sup>11</sup> As we embark on further discussions concerning the future of the FCPP and SJGS, natural gas and proposed alternative energy technologies, San Juan Citizens Alliance will focus, by necessity, on water scarcity as an important component of energy decisions. Continued reliance on fossil fuels for energy, including coal, natural gas and nuclear take a tremendous toll on natural water systems, particularly given extended drought conditions.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://climateandcapitalism.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2012/06/Burning-Our-Water.pdf>

Going forward, Eisenfeld emphasized legal/regulatory elements impacting this include the Clean Air Act (Regional Haze Program/Best Available Retrofit Technology, Mercury and Air Toxics, Greenhouse Gases), Coal Combustion Waste, Leases (power plants and coal mines), National Environmental Policy Act, departures of California utilities and retirement scenarios. The San Juan Citizens Alliance is working to get the impacts of multiple facilities considered together in an Environmental Impact Statement.

Eisenfeld added:

**“We are now fighting shale oil and gas and we are faced with balancing national energy demand with proper stewardship of our communities. The time is now to increase the dialogue on what economic diversification and sustainability means for our region. This includes community vision to seek innovative solutions to energy decisions.”**

### Lori Goodman (Diné), Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment, Navajo Nation

#### *Theme 1: the rise of Navajo environmental justice movements*

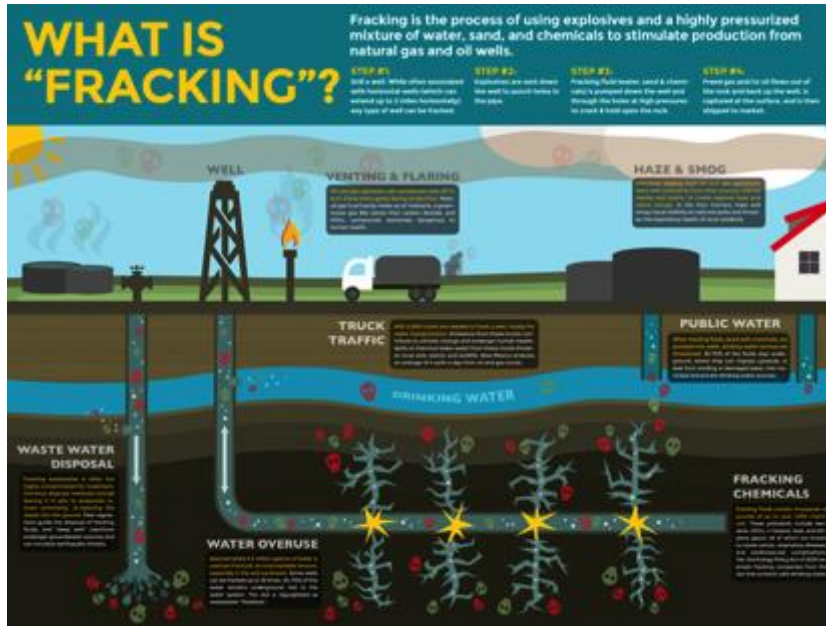
Lori Goodman discussed the formation of her organization, Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment (Diné CARE), in the late 1980s as community members in Dilkon, Arizona resisted and succeeded in stopping a toxic waste facility in their community. This launched decades of work – from toxic waste struggles to stopping the over-harvesting of timber in the Navajo Nation (of which only 2% is forested, to begin with), and onto work to amend the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) to benefit Navajo uranium miners, many of whom held IOU notes on their death beds.

Since the 1990s, their work has focused heavily on impacts of intensive energy extraction, especially coal. Goodman showed several cartoons and other graphic images that speak to these various stages of the environmental justice struggle and the organization’s responses to these urgent matters. In many cases, these were images and cartoons created by Navajo artists for a Navajo public: one striking image compares the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs “BIA clearcut” (shaving a Navajo person’s hair off when they arrived at mandatory boarding school) as a precondition of the later “clear cuts” of Navajo forests. It reads, “1950s – The BIA mentality starts with a clean cut!” and “1990s – Now that style seems to be everywhere.” The image shows a timber worker looking out on a clear-cut mountain, saying, “Looks good boys. Real good.”



### Theme 2: public education on the impacts of energy projects

Recent work by Diné CARE includes producing (through the help of an artist with San Juan Citizens Alliance) vivid and clear graphic posters for public education on fracking, explaining the



Poster by Diné CARE for public education on fracking. Artist credit: Emily Bowie, San Juan Citizens Alliance

life cycle process and impacts of fracking. Many of our community members aren't aware of what these processes are, Goodman emphasized, so we have to find clear and appropriate ways (through images and in the Navajo language) to communicate these issues and their dangers. Other images stress the urgency of Navajo water rights, critiquing leadership for signing away tribal water rights, which will "hold hostage" Diné people "for the next century."

In all of this, Goodman discussed the effectiveness of communicating with community members about climate change and energy production and extraction, through powerful images that tell a story. Another image showed how much one acre-foot of water amounts to, in comparison to 990-gallon trucks and 55 gallon barrels. This is important, she said, in showing people what it means that the Navajo Generating Station (near Page, Utah) uses 28,000 acre-feet of water per year from the Colorado River. The Navajo Generating Station provides water to urban centers such as Phoenix and Tucson, while Navajo communities right next to the Station do not have running water. A final image demonstrated this transfer of "life" and of "energy" out of reservation resources to urban centers like Phoenix. This is one of the core problems in the current energy arrangement, with serious social impacts.

Goodman discussed Diné CARE's current work focused on the upcoming 2019 closure of the Navajo Generating Station (NGS) and what this will mean for Navajo people. She reminded everyone that the 2012 Navajo Hopi Water Rights Settlement was specifically to secure water for energy – so in many cases, the controversial questions of land and water rights are tied to energy extraction. Goodman helped organize a group of Diné CARE members from Navajo Nation and other friends from northern New Mexico to travel and offer support at the Standing Rock encampments in October 2016 and discussed how that struggle was taking off at the same time as the Piñon Pipeline struggle in the Southwest, and then the emerging issue of the NGS closure.

### Lyla June Johnston (Diné), New Energy Economy

#### *Theme 1: we must connect climate change to colonization*

Lyla June Johnston emphasized the need for a critical understanding of history to understand the present impacts and future solutions to climate change. An understanding of Diné history reminds us of the historical trauma of The Long Walk – not taught widely in history text books – and what it meant for nearly two-thirds of Diné people to perish in the concentration camps at Bosque Redondo, near Albuquerque, from 1864-1868. The 2,000 Diné that survived and were able to return to their home between the four sacred mountains carried that historical trauma with them, which has been transferred to subsequent generations. These effects of colonization include the violence of forced removal and also the problems of alcoholism and drug abuse, which many people commonly, mistakenly stereotype as being some kind of “genetic weakness” in Navajo people, but in Johnston's estimation and experience, manifests as an understandable response to the pain of colonization.



Johnston shared some of her own personal struggles with these issues and journey of self-realization that enable her to make these connections between her own experience and longer histories of exploitation and risk. She attended Stanford University where, after exploring different ways of thinking and understanding, she decided to go back to her people.

Colonization and its resulting historical traumas must be held in mind when we consider the new and emerging impacts of climate change. She referred to what Winona LaDuke has described as “predator economics,”<sup>12</sup> in which the greatest negative impacts of our economic system is wrought on places where people have the least resources and legal knowledge to resist. Johnston proposed that we need partnerships and more intermingling between those who have resources (legal, media, art, material) to support those who are on the receiving end of predatory economics. She posed the question to us all, how do we work together in a way that doesn’t perpetuate old patterns of colonization?

***Theme 2: climate solutions are not only mechanical and technical***

Johnston emphasized, “de-secularizing” our solutions, so that we rediscover the power of prayer (non-institutional, non-denominational) in strengthening our communities and finding lasting solutions. Climate change is not just about parts per million of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere; it is also about the spiritual, historical and social dimensions. This gathering is a manifestation of what is needed. She emphasized the current disconnect between humanity today and seven generations from now, between our actions and the consequences, between ourselves and connection to all living things. What we’re facing is not an issue of atmospheric science; it is a spiritual crisis. The solution to climate change is not a mechanical fix; it is primarily a spiritual and cultural solution.

Johnston reminded us, “The illness is a gift, giving you a signal something is out of balance. Climate change is a gift. The Earth is telling us something’s not right. She’s giving us the courage to change. Climate change is a messenger helping us remember what the path of life means.” She attributed much of her learning and knowledge to her grandmother, who accompanied Johnston to the meeting and sat quietly in the back of the room, and the teachings that she passed on to the grandchildren. She closed her remarks with a prayer, in the Navajo language.

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<sup>12</sup> Winona LaDuke (2013) 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Sheinberg Lecture on “Predator Economics, Human Rights, and Indigenous Peoples.” New York University. 13 November. <http://www.law.nyu.edu/news/winona-laduke-delivers-the-20th-annual-sheinberg-lecture>

## Theron Begay (Diné), head of construction, Oceti Sakowin/NoDAPL

### *Theme 1: an unlikely climate activist*

Theron Begay shared the details of his personal story, in finding his way from the Navajo Nation community of Sheep Springs, New Mexico, to the movement to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) at Standing Rock, North Dakota. He had just lost his job and rose to meet a challenge from his mother, to go to Standing Rock to “see what was really going on.” As a rodeo bullfighter and self-proclaimed “Navajo cowboy,” Begay had not previously been engaged in climate change, environmental or treaty rights issues, but was taken by the videos, photos and testimonies about Standing Rock he saw posted on Facebook. Following the tear gas and dog attacks on protestors in early September 2016, he made the trip to Standing Rock. He recalled that he meant only to “stay for a weekend and get a few good selfies,” but ended up remaining for the duration of the Oceti Sakowin encampment (until eviction by federal agents in late February 2017).



The event that “changed his life” occurred in the first week or so that he was in the Oceti Sakowin encampment, when he was at a camp meeting and heard a grandmother express the need for a stove in her tent. Begay was able to assemble a stove, relying upon the resourcefulness he had learned growing up on the reservation – herding sheep, hauling water and building things with “duct tape and wire.” The grandmother was so happy with her stove that “she gave me the biggest smile, and the biggest hug,” and Begay attributed that

hug to changing his life. “I hadn’t felt that feeling since my own grandmother had passed,” he said, and I also saw the true joy and gratefulness for something I had done for her – for someone I had never met before.”

Begay quickly became known as the stove-builder, and was called upon to build other things until soon being recognized as the “head of construction” for Oceti Sakowin Camp. He described the labor process of finding materials, managing donations of cash and lumber, listening to peoples’ needs for housing and making plans for those needs. He rose quickly to become a recognized leader within the camp and a crucial member of a core team of supporters that maintained the camp until the end.



Since the eviction in late February – which Begay described with notable grief and stress over the memory – he has been traveling all over the country, offering construction and planning support at other pipeline resistance camps. He has been working among a network of “super water protectors” who are mobilizing their skills, expertise and resources to respond to calls for encampments all across the country. He has given lectures at colleges and has invitations to go to Pakistan, New Zealand and other countries later this year. “Standing Rock is not over,” he said several times, “our work goes on and on in new places.”

### ***Theme 2: building Camp Southwest within Oceti Sakowin***

Begay described his desire to “take care of my people, Diné people” within the camp, and how this prompted him as head of construction to focus on building first a small Hogan (customary Navajo dwelling), and then a much larger Hogan, to be used for community meetings and a kitchen and food storage area. Construction was largely modular and officially “temporary,” with removable components. He described how Camp Southwest grew – as a gathering of Diné water protectors and then many others, including other Native people and non-Natives.

Many trips up to Bismarck, North Dakota to Lowe’s and other places to purchase lumber required traveling with Anglo friends, in order to be sure he would get service or not be outright mistreated. He was struck by the discrimination he experienced and by the ever-present sense of possible violence, including at least two actual encounters with non-Native locals, one of which landed him in the hospital for a couple days.

At Camp Southwest, he described morning prayers over the fire, the labor of producing meals and the ongoing demands of meeting the housing needs of people flowing into the camp – including and especially a large percentage of homeless people from Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, who “came into Oceti Sakowin to find stable housing for the first time.” The deep grief he experienced during and after the February 2017 eviction was tied not so much to the granting of the DAPL easement or failure of the movement to stop the pipeline, but rather the impact of seeing people lose “the best housing they had ever had,” the model sustainable community they had built and this unique sense of community support.

On the days prior to and during the February 2017 eviction (by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), he was busy moving housing components out of Oceti Sakowin in a U-Haul and over onto the reservation, at Eagle Butte, to establish a “transition camp” where some people could remain in housing and many could work to develop their next plans. On that final day, “the military came in – not the police or state patrol – but this was Humvees and other military vehicles, and full military operation.” He was not allowed back into camp to gather the remaining supplies and materials.

Begay stressed the power in the dispersion of the NoDAPL movement, onto other sites of climate impact and energy infrastructure. He remains connected with key people through

Facebook and expects to spend the coming weeks and months “on the road,” traveling to support and build camps “wherever I am needed.”

### Conclusion

Following a short break to allow attendees to prepare questions for the panelists, an open discussion ensued, raising a few additional, urgent points: the whole fossil fuel system is broken, along with the economy it supports and produces, but most importantly, public health measures and services fail to match the dire risks at hand. The complexity of the energy industry is vast and is not one in which it is ‘us vs. them,’ as we are all interconnected in complicated ways, though only few truly profit and many bear the human subsidy of these export-driven infrastructures. In many ways, climate struggles facing communities in the Southwest resonated with struggles in indigenous nations worldwide as well as with other “national sacrifice zones” like southern Appalachia.<sup>13</sup>

Often, community organizers and workers have to resist against their own local (or tribal) governments and representatives who are working in line with industry, and these internal complexities that entangle tribal sovereignty and settler colonialism must be reckoned with. The people advocating on the front lines often feel isolated from broader networks and resources; while at other times, they are part of global circuits of climate activism and knowledge. Through alliance-building inroads are made, contributing to a growing commons of information, expertise, strategic organizing.



While the speakers’ stories were often ones of hardship, they were also stories of resilience, critical reflection, and hope, which provide powerful indicators and guidance for the types of actions and policies needed to overcome the challenges of a changing climate. Kathy Sanchez reminded us that forty years ago people in the area were talking about climate change and the severe swings in weather. “We are in a vortex of change,” she urged. It is time to be brave enough to address this change across all the contexts in which we work. Our aim in coming together in

these conversations is to take one more step towards collective action. Sanchez led us in a closing prayer, reminding us of the center to which it is time for all of us to look towards and return.

<sup>13</sup> We are thankful to Suzanne Benally, Executive Director of Cultural Survival, and Betsy Taylor, Director of Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN), for these critical insights into other impacted places.