

# Epilogue

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## Challenges: Collaborating with Tribal Nations

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### INTRODUCTION

If scientific research is to be conducted successfully in collaboration with American Indian tribal nations, some essential cultural obstacles must be recognized. Too often, research projects start with *a priori* judgments, theories, or biases about the importance of their specific agendas and do not take into consideration the lived realities of American Indian communities. It is crucial for researchers to first understand some of the larger cultural contexts if they truly want to include tribal nations' concerns in the construction of meaningful data on environmental issues that are beneficial to both tribes and the scientific and academic communities at large.

This epilogue was based on ethnographic data and the collaboration between the Cocopah Indian Tribal Nation and Arizona State University's (ASU) Center for Indian Education (CIE). The project was titled "The Cocopah Indian Tribal Environmental Education Project."

Of the projects under the umbrella of the Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy's (SCERP) Tribal Environmental Program (STEP), "The Cocopah Indian Tribal Environmental Education Project" was unique: It was the only project not specifically seeking scientific data in the form of a study. Rather, it was intended to construct and develop an environmental education pro-

gram for the entire Cocopah community. The largely ambiguous parameters involved in constructing this environmental education program were both frustrating and rewarding. The frustration of not having a definitive research agenda was offset by the freedom to construct a collaborative relationship that could actually adjust to dynamic obstacles.

Over the course of approximately three years, this project successfully accomplished its main objective: To construct a viable project that will continue into the future as a meaningful and permanent structure useful to both the Cocopah Tribal Nation and SCERP, ASU, and CIE. It also successfully acknowledges tribal self-determination. The end result of SCERP's collaboration with the Cocopah Nation was the bridging of applied research that achieved a legitimate intercultural bond between a university and a tribal nation—a research project that did not circumscribe or perpetuate historical paternalism toward a sovereign nation's ability to voice its own concerns within the United States. This point of recognition is the project's greatest achievement.

In addition to establishing a meaningful working relationship, ASU was able to provide the tribe with invaluable assistance in developing a means to communicate and expand its own ability to educate its community using its own voice. The university provided the Cocopah Museum with various technological information and equipment that staff there use in the production of their community newsletter, which is received by their tribal members and distributed to various allies and friends of the tribe. The working relationship between ASU and the tribe has resulted in the matriculation of one of the tribe's members to a Native Teacher Training Program at the university. The collaboration between the university and the tribe has constructed a line of communication that can be used by both academia and the tribe.

## COCOPAH HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Cocopah Indian Reservation is located in southwestern Arizona's Yuma County on the Colorado River border with Sonora and California. The Cocopah Tribe has 879 enrolled members, roughly 475 of whom live on the reservation.

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The ancient Cocopah homeland was divided by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which created a distinction between American Cocopah and Mexican Cuapá. The American Cocopah received an allotment of 446 acres in 1917 and were left virtually alone for the next 39 years. In 1986, the Cocopah acquired 4,500 acres by an act of Congress and purchased an additional 78 acres. Currently, reservation lands consist of 6,156 acres in three separate locations about 10 miles apart: the East Reservation (1,641 acres), the North Reservation (634 acres), and the West Reservation (3,881 acres). The area around the reservation is rural and agriculture is the main industry.

Through the 1960s, Cocopah families lived in traditional arrowweed thatched huts or in automobile shells abandoned on their land. In 1968, there were a few houses and roads, but no utilities. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of expansion and progress. In addition to land acquisition, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) homes were constructed, utilities and infrastructure installed, and economic development initiated. The tribe improved agricultural lands for lease to area farmers, established business enterprises (an RV park and resort, a convenience store, and a landfill), and operated a successful bingo parlor and casino.

In 1964, the Cocopah ratified their constitution, which established the five-member Tribal Council as the governing body. The council consists of the chairperson, vice-chairperson, and three council members elected by popular vote every two years. The council is supported by the tribal administrator, 20 department directors, and 120 staff and other employees.

## BEGINNING STAGES

“The Cocopah Environmental Education Project” began with positive ideals that appeared to be tangible and achievable goals on paper. The initial research agenda involved the implementation of an environmental education curriculum for the community. However, the actual logistical agenda of who was to oversee and coordinate the project was not fully conceptualized.

## Tribal Environmental Issues of the Border Region

Some of the initial plans for the environmental education curriculum involved camping out on tribal lands with children from the community who could be immersed in their tribe's actual natural environment. The motivation behind immersion sounded logical and meaningful—it would provide a holistic learning activity incorporating multiple sensory perceptions and make for a greater cognitive experience when learning about the environment. The goals were to learn about the traditional flora, fauna, and habitat from both a contemporary and traditional perspective. The concepts and strategies were innovative and ambitious, but lacked one crucial element—knowledge of the day-to-day lived reality of the community.<sup>1</sup>

The present-day reality of the international border with Mexico, including drug trafficking, illegal border crossings, and policing by the Immigration and Naturalization Service made the immersion experience impossible. The tribal members already knew it would be, although the researcher believed otherwise. This situation awakened an old frustration with non-Indian society: They have negated the voices of tribal people. This frustration is legitimized by history as well as the findings of this project during this initial phase.

This denial of voice in participating in the process of producing knowledge in research situations has been equated to the Marxist term alienation:

[alienation] ... has emerged as one of the most important themes in the analysis of knowledge production in the context of late imperialism in Indian/non-Indian relations. Marx's concept of alienation applies—metaphorically, if not technically—to the experience of Indian peoples in the scholarly modes of knowledge production. Alienation for Marx involved the process by which the product of labor became an external thing, existing independently of the producer and even confronting the producer as a hostile force (Deloria Jr. 1997).

One of the last research experiences the Cocopah had was with an anthropologist involved in the construction of the tribal museum who had extracted tribal oral histories that she promised to leave with the tribe. Copyright issues and cultural differences over the role and purpose of knowledge somehow soured this relationship, further

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perpetuating the tension between tribal communities and the world of academia and research. Given this experience, the tribe proceeds with caution when implementing any new community initiative.

During the course of ethnographic work with the Cocopah, there was additional exposure to ecological anthropological literature that helps ground some of the issues experienced. Two terms help circumscribe some of the obstacles confronted while working with the Cocopah—environmentalism and developmentalism. Environmentalism is best defined as a political and social concern about the depletion of natural resources. This concern is the polar opposite of developmentalism, which is best described as the ideals of industrialism, progress, and (over)consumption. Both of these concerns are problematic when dealing with indigenous people, including the Cocopah. As much literature in various anthropological studies demonstrates, “countries and cultures may resist interventionist philosophies aimed at either development or globally oriented environmentalism” (Kottak 1993). In this same article, Kottak (1993) captures one of the main initiatives: “One research-and-development role for today’s ecological anthropologist is to assess the extent and nature of ecological awareness and activity in various groups and to harness parts of native ethnoecological models to enhance environmental preservation and amelioration.”

## BRIDGING REALITY TO GOOD INTENTIONS

Implementing this project in an indigenous community wrestling with the larger constructs of environmentalism and developmentalism within its own definitions of what it means to be a sovereign nation is a challenging endeavor. In other words, to see groundbreaking results and progress in a project like “The Cocopah Environmental Education Project” is often not easy. The working relationship between the tribe and university requires a delicate approach. It is an ongoing process that requires a commitment between recognizing and allowing the tribal nation to voice and assert its own decisions, while simultaneously trying to communicate and work with the dominant culture’s institutions of academic and scientific research.

Environmental education is not a commodity package that can be distributed to the tribe via academia. And conversely, the traditional knowledge embedded within a tribe cannot be extracted and put on display for other cultures. Trust and an effective working relationship must exist if a knowledge exchange is to occur and a valuable research project is to succeed. In the anthropological world, this recognition of indigenous property rights has arisen in an attempt to conserve each society's cultural base—its core beliefs and principles, including its ethnoecological knowledge of the environment. The history of the dominant culture intervening and imposing its cultural values and assumptions onto the lives and cultures of tribal people is no longer a viable option in a globalized world that seeks to move beyond imperialism and colonialism.

## FINDINGS

As a tribal nation, the Cocopah are well aware of the myriad problems that exist in their environment. They demonstrated in discussions the day-to-day realities of how their lives and culture have transformed since the time when they used the Colorado River as a subsistence mechanism. They also spoke of the current state of defining their status as a sovereign nation within the United States.

One of the tribal museum workers described the pollution and some of the realities of living along the international border today. Billy White told how he used to fish and walk the river as a boy. He mentioned how Cocopah relatives from the Mexican side of the border used to visit, but now it is too big a hassle. One day he showed a restaurant's plumbing emptying directly into the river on the Mexican side. He spoke of his patrolling tribal lands and finding garbage dumped by various agricultural companies' workers. The tribe is not ignorant of the need for environmental education and intervention. However, mitigating the multiple environmental problems is one of the many dilemmas—all of which are intertwined with complex economic and political realities—that confront the tribe.

The acknowledgement and understanding of some fundamental issues must occur within academia if it is to truly establish a viable relationship with American Indian nations. To be an American Indian is to be a member of a collective entity first and an American

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individual second. The notions of tribal identity and politics are inseparable when trying to work with a tribal nation. To enter an indigenous community and try to extract data or information from community members as though they conceptualize themselves as American individuals is to not recognize tribal identity. The tribal identity and culture takes primacy in such situations.

In Cocopah, one simply has to enter the museum and ask a question about culture or traditions. The immediate response will be something to the extent of, "Why are you asking, what do you want?" The history of being exploited for research is visible in these responses from tribal members, as is the recognition of the positive value of reconstructing traditional concepts for the younger generations. The elders see the need to preserve and pass on their knowledge of the environment and language to the youth. However, governmental policies and historical realities that have affected all indigenous groups globally and within the United States provide a large obstacle to overcome. To address the multitude of cultural problems and issues is an almost overwhelming task, and resolving them will take time. The expectations of universities and the dominant culture, which devote partial time to what communities and entire cultures have been forced to deal with as a result of cultural domination and colonization, is something that must factor into the complex sociopolitical and historical realities of tribal nations.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> For a good discussion and further inquiry into this notion of the gap between research and tribal communities, see Vine Deloria Jr.'s and Elizabeth Grobsmith's chapters in *Indians and Anthropologists* (1997, University of Arizona Press). The following passage speaks to this gap while citing the specific goals and intentions of anthropology as "...an entire genre of social science that dealt extensively with community planning, community review of outsiders' research, principles of bottom-up (rather than top-down) grass-roots development, conflicts between priorities of funding agencies and of the local community, the uselessness of model building for its own sake, tribal autonomy, and the development of legal codes governing review of researchers' proposals" (Grobsmith 1997).

## REFERENCES

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