

Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world, indigenous people stand up for their traditional sacred lands in defense of cultural survival, human rights and the environment.

Where the River Begins

BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

PILGRIMS on a winding trail, we made our way in silence beneath the disturbingly snow-free mass of Mt. Shasta. Thirty wounded warriors in need of healing arrived at *sauwel mem*, the sacred spring that is the origin place of both the Winnemem Wintu people and the river they call “the middle water,” now known as the McCloud River. This vibrant spring usually bubbles when the people arrive once each year to sing to it. Today, there were no bubbles.

When the Winnemem celebrated their successful campaign to stop a new ski resort on Mt. Shasta in the 1990s, they knew the victory came at a price. To save their place of creation—which is also the portal through which their spirits pass after death on a journey back through the mountain to the Milky Way—they broke an ancient

taboo and identified the spring as “sacred.” It was the best word they could find to describe its profound cultural importance. In California, this was like erecting a billboard at a New Age convention, and sure enough, those who felt called came in droves.

For many years, the problem was crystals. Crystals were everywhere. Such offerings are an offense. When left in the spring, crystals required careful removal by hands that then needed doctoring, and prayers to cleanse the waters. The Winnemem view the spring as a living being, a powerful, helping friend. Under traditional protocols, no objects should ever be placed into the spring. No artifacts should be left there.

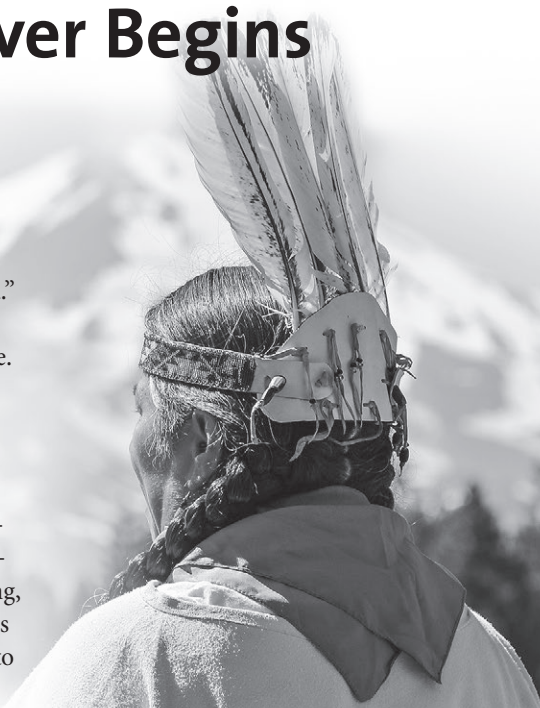
Today, the problem is cremation ashes. A mobile American culture with few roots connecting to place of birth, family history

and ancestors’ graves, increasingly lacks traditional places to inter, honor and remember the dead; so ashes are scattered anyplace that seems special. Forest Service employees who care for Mt. Shasta are deeply distressed by the dumping of cremation remains into a pristine mountain spring. For the Winnemem, it is a desecration and a horror.

Rather than arriving, settling in and starting to sing to the spring—and watching joyfully as the churning sands generate bubbles of blessing—on this day, a young Winnemem man had to spend hours reaching into frigid water, sifting through sand for bone fragments. Over and over, as the waters cleared, more white bone chips emerged up through the brown, swirling sands. The people waited patiently, breathing in pain.



When the ceremony finally begins, Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk, cannot hold back her tears. She feels that the spring is sick and unhappy, like the Earth. She feels she has failed her obligation to protect the place. As she cries, we all cry. None of us are



Jesse Sisk removes cremation remains from the spring.

doing enough. We can't comprehend the insensitivity and spiritual arrogance that do such harm. If only they knew.

One by one, each pilgrim steps up to the spring to pray aloud or offer a song. The love and appreciation reflected back on both Caleen and the spring are beautiful expressions of each person's urgent determination to heal and restore balance through ceremony.

My 17-year-old daughter, Fiona, has grown up hearing about this spring, watching our film footage, listening to the stories—but she has never been here. According to Winnemem protocol, the spring is too powerful for humans to visit until they're at least 16 years old and have received essential teachings. This was Fiona's first visit to the spring, two weeks before leaving home and heading off to college. She joined the chorus expressing gratitude and affection for Caleen, her leadership and determination, her humor in the face of staggering odds, and for the inspiring example she sets for young women.

Tears streamed down my face as Fiona recalled our 2013 family pilgrimage with Caleen to the sacred lake at the base of Uch Enmek Mountain in the Altai Republic of Russia. With an injured leg, Caleen walked

high above treeline to gather water to bring back to this spring, connecting the sacred mountains, uniting the waters and the two peoples. I am proud of my daughter for standing with Caleen and speaking with such heart.



It has been a year of completion and reflection. The full *Standing on Sacred Ground* series was broadcast 850 times on public television stations around the country in May and June. At the same time, major media virtually ignored our stories, with one NPR producer asking, "Where's the news?" No matter that the U.S. Congress is poised to fund a \$1.3 billion construction project to enlarge Shasta Dam to benefit a handful of desert farms, as the Winnemem battle to protect the viability of salmon in what was once the greatest salmon state. Not news, the revelations of the moral and ecological bankruptcy of the Keystone XL pipeline and American reliance on tar sands oil. Not important that Peru's glaciers are melting away because of coal-fired power plants in the U.S., or that the mainstream media still overlook the indigenous leaders around the world building an inspiring resistance movement to what Pope Francis

calls "predatory capitalism." This lack of media attention was disappointing, but it made me appreciate how indigenous people have felt for many years: "When will they wake up?"

When confronted with the many critical problems we face, I try to remember that we are having a continual impact. Here is the biggest lesson I have learned: When indigenous elders lead the way, collaborating with effective allies, it is a partnership that wins. We've filmed this story at Devils Tower and Kaho'olawe. Our films helped with victories at Zuni Salt Lake and Black Mesa.

At a 2014 screening in Altai, Russia, for a group of Central Asian shamans, one of the shamans commented: "When I see the common struggles being fought by other indigenous people, it gives me strength. It makes me realize that we cannot be defeated. We are strong when we are united and we have this information. Thank you for capturing and sharing these stories."

I was humbled at a Dartmouth College screening hosted by Terry Tempest Williams earlier this year. Terry recalled our first meeting in 1983, when we showed my first

▼ **Mt. Shasta pilgrims rejuvenated after the ceremony at the spring.**



ALL PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

film, *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?*, at Utah's Museum of Natural History. A thousand people showed up to see the film and as Terry told her Dartmouth students, "That screening altered the path of the environmental movement in Utah, and perhaps the world. For the first time, the voice of Native Americans was heard, acknowledged, and recognized as important. Utah has never been the same."



Back at the spring, the sun sank behind Mt. Shasta. Pua Case and her daughter Hawane Rios, Native Hawaiians who are fighting to stop construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on their mother mountain, Mauna Kea, chanted to help bring the spring back to life. Elders from Arizona, Mexico and Guatemala, who traveled far to support Caleen and unite their struggles in solidarity, offered beautiful songs and prayers. Love and praise showered Caleen

and the spring, and laughter replaced the tears.

Watching the pure water flow out of the mountain is an ongoing miracle, bubbles or no. It has been a long, dry, hot afternoon, and everyone is parched. The ceremony concluded, we depart, stopping to drink where the path crosses the stream, further down. The chill water calls each of us to appreciate this moment, to feel this water, here and now, giving us life. ≈ ≈ ≈



The Sacred Land Film

Project has been around for 31 years, collecting thousands of hours of film from around the world. Toby McLeod and the crew have filmed places and events that indigenous people have shared with us, trusting we would keep locations secret and protect ceremonial footage with care. Not all of this priceless and historic footage has made its way into our films.

Each time we revisit the boxes of film canisters, tapes and digital images, we find rare and beautiful scenes of enormous value—to the communities they depict, to scholars and to other filmmakers. This year, we provided images of the late Winnemem Wintu leader Florence Jones (above) to biog-

rapher Claire Cummings, and enjoyed seeing filmmaker ML Lincoln make good use of both Toby's and Jessica Abbe's historic interviews of the late author Edward Abbey. Toby filmed a new

ceremonial dance, which emerged as the result of spiritual visions and dreams, for the exclusive use of a tribe.

With this year-end appeal, we are launching an initiative to fund the Sacred Land Film Archive, and begin the detailed work of reorganizing our footage for its value as a long-term legacy of decades of work and generations of trust.

Along the way, we know we will find gems to edit into short films that capture wisdom and insights to guide our own relationship to nature. Stay tuned.

Coming in 2016: the Sacred Land Film Archive!

We know that four hours of documentary film is a lot to watch in an era when attention spans are shrinking, so we edited a number of short films this year and posted them on YouTube.

We hope you will check out and enjoy some of our favorites:

OREN LYONS: "We Are Part of the Earth"

What Good is an Apology?

Indigenous Reflections on Christianity

Detained in Papua New Guinea

Sacred Sites and Biodiversity

SATISH KUMAR: "What is a Sacred Place?"

www.youtube.com/sacredlandfilm