

In the Light of Reverence—Production Notes and Background
by Producer/Director Christopher “Toby” McLeod

From 1978 to 1983 I produced an hour-long documentary film on the cultural and ecological impacts of coal stripmining and uranium mining in Hopi and Navajo country, *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* I spent hours listening to the concerns of elderly religious practitioners with deep personal and ancestral connections to specific places that were being destroyed. They spoke of these places as “sacred” and I could feel the profound importance of their stories in relation to everything from individual health and cultural survival to the wider environmental crisis. Their message: connection to land gives meaning to life; the values of respect and responsibility sprout from place; harming nature is a spiritually-rooted problem; and taking care of the natural world is the essence of being human.

When *Four Corners* was finished we toured the Southwest for six weeks, screening the film in chapter houses, trailer homes, Tribal Council chambers, schools and community centers. We then traveled with native elders to urban theaters where they spoke before and after the film in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Taos, Denver, Boulder, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., New York and Boston. The film then aired nationally on PBS (1983). Attorney Steve Tullberg of the Indian Law Resource Center said of *Four Corners*, “Had this movie been available a decade earlier, the Indian public would have been much better armed to resist the damage that they have suffered.”

Four Corners hinted at the meaning of “sacred land” but our film was essentially about the history of industrial development in Indian country. We left an important story untold. In hundreds of meetings and personal conversations over twenty years in dozens of Indian communities, I have since come to understand that the highest priority for traditional native people is protection of sacred sites, free access to ceremonial places, and deeper understanding on the part of non-natives as to their needs for privacy, solitude and secrecy as they seek to spiritually care for the earth. Meanwhile, activists seek basic legal protection for free religious practice where the religions are based on specific places in the landscape.

In response to these needs and concerns we developed a film advisory board consisting of native activists with whom I have worked for many years. Chris Peters (Pohlik-lah/Karuk), Executive Director of the Seventh Generation Fund, and U.C.L.A. anthropologist Peter Nabokov are two advisors who have been particularly helpful in our attempts to tell this story. Research for *In the Light of Reverence* began in 1990, and in 1993 I began meeting with members of the Wintu and Hopi tribes to discuss a film aimed at protecting sacred sites.

Because we are filming a sensitive, often secret subject, we are providing copies of all interviews for community and family archives, donating copies of the finished film to each of the individuals and communities we work with, and reviewing

edited footage with participants to ensure accurate interpretation. In over twenty years of working with media and indigenous peoples, I have often encountered distrust of my motives as a filmmaker and journalist—as much from non-Indians as Indians. I am drawn to this subject matter out of a desire to see it honestly addressed by a society that often ignores not only the values of the first Americans, but its own values of tolerance, free expression and equal justice.

We began filming in 1994. In May 1997, Native American filmmaker Malinda Maynor joined the project as co-producer, adding a valuable perspective to the project and making my long-standing collaboration with native peoples into a day-to-day exchange of ideas. We started assembling our footage in late 1998 to identify our final production needs, and received completion funding from the Independent Television Service (ITVS) and Native American Telecommunications (NAPT) in October, 1999. We completed production in the fall of 1999, edited the film in 2000, and completed it in January 2001. The 72-minute film will be broadcast nationally on PBS as a POV special in late 2001 or early 2002.

We intend this film to be useful as an educational tool within native communities and also for the education of the wider public, hungry for the experience of a sense of place and a deeper understanding of spiritual connection to nature.

Native Americans are perhaps this country's most underserved public television audience. Having these concerns addressed on television will inspire hope and action. There have been a few recent television shows that have dealt with native issues in a new way, some produced by native filmmakers, some by outsiders. There has yet to be a major piece focusing on the issue of sacred places from a national perspective. Because there is a blind spot in western law, the Constitution, American history books and the public consciousness with regard to places of spiritual significance in the landscape, indigenous peoples' perspectives on our shared past and future have not been adequately considered. And this story is perfect for television: few Americans are aware of the profound impact these issues have on how our environmental public policy is implemented, how our "sacred" First Amendment rights are protected, or how our multiple communities and cultures relate to one another. This program will address the complex questions that arise when cultural worldviews collide. Moreover, Americans' concerns about our spiritual direction have not been articulated in relation to land use. This program will draw audiences who have these concerns but may not think of themselves as "preservationists" or "seekers."

We are aiming for a broad public television audience. Our target audience includes Americans whose lives have been touched by encounters with spirituality and the natural world, and those who are concerned with environmental and cultural preservation, social justice and the use and enjoyment of public lands. This includes National Park tourists, public land managers, property owners, indigenous people working to protect sacred sites, members of Congress, scholars, environmentalists, outdoor enthusiasts, and students of Native American issues,

land use conflicts and American history. Viewers will see and hear things they have never witnessed, and yet emerge discussing ancient concepts in a new way, with a new emphasis. This is an important story, and by telling it carefully we have a valuable opportunity to stimulate public dialogue about the relationships of land and culture, of spirit and place, of Indian and non-Indian.

Background

by Co-Producer Malinda Maynor

I began working in film as a way to tell Lumbee Indian stories to a wide audience. I've often encountered resistance to the notion that Native Americans still exist; people sometimes respond with confused stares or impertinent questions when I tell them I am a Lumbee Indian, that I come from the swamps and streets of North Carolina, that English is my first (and practically only) language, that my uncle is a preacher and grandmother was a healer, that I am Ivy-league educated. To me, none of this is surprising or unusual; all the Indians I grew up with and all the ones I know now have such diverse backgrounds. Those who stare and question have heard very few stories that give accurate representations of Indian histories, cultures, religions, or politics.

I can see the impact of these omissions on the children in my home community; their identity and culture is actively invalidated by the media that they inhale, and that invalidation is reflected in their tendency towards drug addiction, suicide, and uncontrolled violent behavior. The per capita violent crime rate in Robeson County is the highest *anywhere* on the East Coast, including New York and Washington, D.C. When I've shown my own films to Lumbee children, they smile and start actively talking (not listening to the film at all!), pointing out people and places they recognize. Just seeing someone like them—not just the same skin color or the same culture, but the same Nikes, or nail polish, or Pepsi can—has a demonstrable effect on their feelings of inclusion. Unfortunately, I have yet to see this perspective consistently included in television programming. While it is unarguable that there are more representations of Native peoples and their contemporary concerns in the media, how much has the American public learned?

In my classroom at San Francisco State University, many students have consistently refused to let go of their noble savage, casino-bankrolled, crying-Indian stereotypes. The false reality that television and film have put forth about Indians is difficult to shatter; even when students are faced with a “real” Indian—me—they try to qualify my identity by arguing it away: “well, if your tribe doesn't have a language, how can you have a culture?” and “what do you mean your tribe goes to church? That's not Indian.” I have to admit, my students know far more about the Trail of Tears, broken treaties, and other historical injustices than my former Harvard classmates did, but that knowledge has not alleviated the injustices that are occurring right now. Instead, that knowledge is used to explain the disappearance of Indians from view, except as welfare

prisoners on reservations, powwow dancers without faces (just feathers), and sepia-toned, soft-focus photographs.

I was drawn to this film, and to working with Toby, because this is a story that actually reveals something true about the realities of indigenous people. This film could easily fall into the predictable category of clichéd flute music with hapless and irrelevant Indians (and that is, unfortunately, the film that many funders have wanted us to make), but it doesn't. *In the Light of Reverence* counterbalances those stereotypes with the voices of people who define themselves in a complex relationship to a place, a place that lives in their food, their songs, their art, their science, their laughter, their arguments, and their prayers. This film provides the public with a window into what makes me, personally, a Lumbee Indian—my relationship to my home. I started making films when I couldn't find an honest and critical representation of indigenous experiences on television; I am working on this project because it provides that representation. If enough people see this film, we can begin a real dialogue about the place of indigenous peoples in this country, and about the history and place we all share. Perhaps my students will learn something other than stereotypes.

Distribution History of Previous Films by Christopher McLeod

The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?

This 1983 film, produced by McLeod, Glen Switkes and Randy Hayes as a masters thesis in journalism at U.C. Berkeley, documents the cultural and ecological impacts of coal strip-mining, uranium mining and oil shale development in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona—the homeland of the Hopi and Navajo. *Four Corners* was broadcast nationally on PBS in November 1983, and won the Academy Award for Best Student Documentary in 1983, Best Documentary at the American Indian Film Festival and a CINE Golden Eagle award.

After completing *Four Corners*, an outreach campaign was launched during a seven-week tour of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah for film screenings in Tribal Council chambers, town meeting halls, churches, high schools, and theaters. Appearing with the film at screenings were Hopi spokesman Thomas Banyacya, Acoma poet Simon Ortiz, folksinger Kate Wolf, and former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm. Each screening was followed by question and answer sessions in which a broad range of people including traditional Indians, coal and uranium miners, public officials, environmentalists, energy company executives and academics discussed issues raised in the film. Over six thousand people came to see the film during the Southwest tour, and the film and the issues raised in it received extensive media coverage.

Four Corners was screened for an audience of 100 members of Congress and their staff in a congressional hearing room, and later at EPA Headquarters in Washington, Denver and San Francisco, and at the United Nations in New York. The film has been seen by millions of people through national broadcast on PBS in 1983 and on cable TV's Learning Channel in 1985. Print sales and rentals to colleges, high schools, libraries, theaters and citizen/activist groups continue through our distributor, Bullfrog Films.

Four Corners has played a role in the clean-up of radioactive waste from uranium mines and mills, the compensation of widows of Navajo uranium miners, the removal of land next to Canyonlands National Park as a potential site for the nation's first nuclear waste dump, the protection of air quality in National Parks, the enforcement of reclamation regulations at coal strip-mines in desert regions of the West, and the creation of the new Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah.

Downwind/Downstream and Poison in the Rockies

Downwind/Downstream explores the link between air and water quality, and the importance of sub-alpine ecosystems in the Rocky Mountains, establishing mining, acid rain and ski resort development as urgent, interconnected public policy problems in the West. *Downwind/Downstream* won 12 awards within its first year of release and was broadcast twice nationally on The Discovery Channel. Awards included: Blue Ribbon, American Film Festival; Golden Gate Award, San Francisco Film Festival; CINE Golden Eagle; Gold Apple, National Educational Film Festival; Special Jury Award, Telluride Mountain Film Festival. A congressional screening in May 1989 sponsored by The Wilderness Society drew over 100 Congress members and staffers.

In the spring of 1988, we took *Downwind/Downstream* on a three-week tour of Colorado, premiering the film in Aspen with a benefit concert by Dan Fogelberg, and in Leadville, Telluride, Denver, Boulder and a dozen other communities. In Denver, we screened the film at EPA Regional Headquarters, the Colorado Health Department and the Colorado State Legislature. Five thousand people came to see the film in Colorado. The film's premiere in Northern California drew favorable reviews and four thousand viewers.

Appearing with *Downwind/Downstream* at various screenings were former Colorado Senator Tim Wirth, Representative David Skaggs, poet Gary Snyder, environmentalist David Brower, recording artist Dan Fogelberg and actor Peter Coyote. Ongoing distribution to schools, colleges and citizen groups is being handled by Bullfrog Films.

In early 1989, the PBS series NOVA provided \$80,000 for new material in an updated and revised version of *Downwind/Downstream*, titled *Poison in the Rockies*. The film was broadcast nationally in January and May of 1990, and in May and December of 1992, with an estimated total audience of twenty-five million people.

Downwind/Downstream and *Poison in the Rockies* have played an important role in advocating quick Superfund clean-up of toxic mining wastes in the high country of the West, and in publicizing the possible link between acid rain and declining salamander and frog populations. Both films have been used in many small, western communities to raise questions about proposed mega-mines and to encourage the protection of water quality throughout the Rocky Mountain region. The films have been used extensively in the campaign to reform the 1872 Mining Law.

The Cracking of Glen Canyon Dam—with Edward Abbey and Earth First!

While making *Four Corners* we arranged an interview with author Edward Abbey. For an interview site he suggested “Lone Rock campground, nine mile north of Glen Canyon Dam, on the spring equinox—we have something planned.” We showed up with our cameras and filmed the birth of Earth First, as environmental activists unfurled a 300-foot long roll of black plastic down the face of the dam to simulate a crack, and Abbey gave a rousing speech from the back of his green pick-up truck. This 9-minute film has had a cult following ever since.

Voices of the Land

Voices of the Land was produced in 1991 as a 20-minute “preview” of the Sacred Land Film Series. Footage shot between 1985 and 1991 was edited into three short stories— a profile of a Southern Ute elder who describes a vision quest on a sacred mountain in Colorado, a profile of native Hawaiians opposed to geothermal energy development in the rainforest home of the goddess Pele, and a profile of Earth First founder Dave Foreman. The film won a Blue Ribbon from the American Film and Video Festival and is used in many high school and college classes. It is distributed by Bullfrog Films.

A Thousand Years of Ceremony

After filming sensitive ceremonies at Mt. Shasta in northern California we began to work with the Wintu to produce an archival film, for use within their community, containing songs, prayers and language valuable for teaching purposes. We produced a 55-minute video exclusively for the Wintu, and a 40-minute version that has been shown publicly just once, at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco. This film enabled us to establish a working relationship with the Wintu and built the trust that enabled us to complete *In the Light of Reverence*, with their involvement, consultation and support.