

# Lifeways of the Little Colorado River



  
OKHUWA P'ING  
Ed Keshia © 2021



## ***Confluence***

by Ed Kabotie, 2021

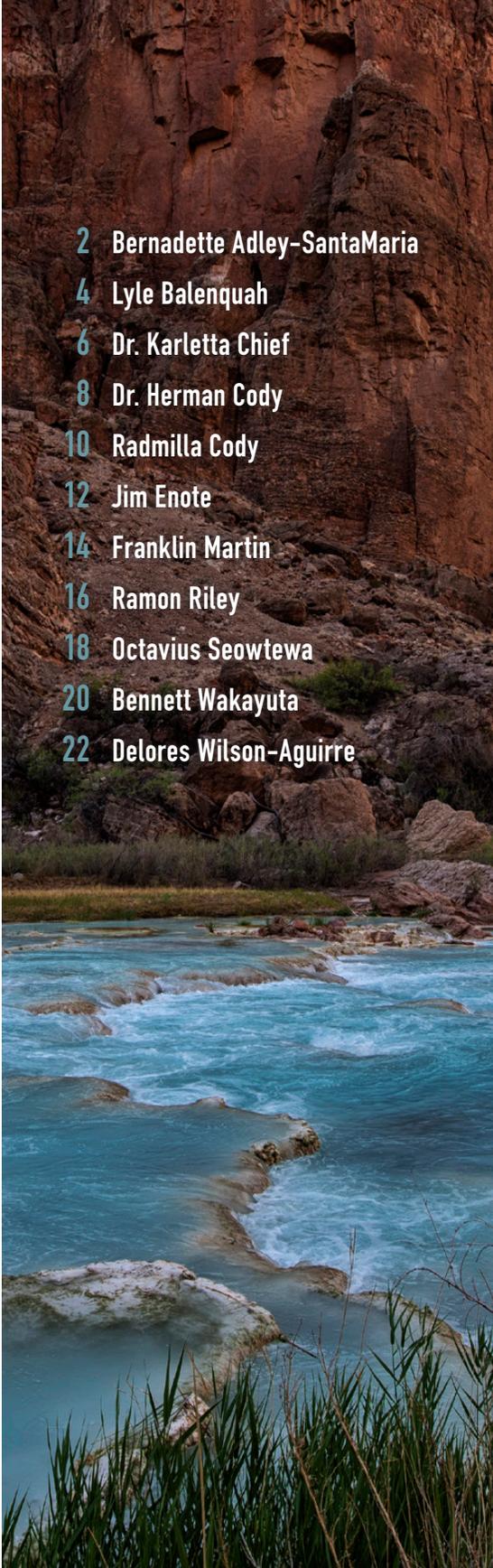
The union of the blue waters of the Little Colorado and the red waters of the “great” Colorado symbolizes and personifies the miraculous, life-giving union of feminine and masculine energies. Near the confluence of these great waters, along the shores of the Little Colorado, is the original womb kiva from which the human race emerged into this world. Among certain Indigenous cosmologies, the waters surrounding the confluence are the most sacred places on Earth.

FROM ITS HEADWATERS IN THE mountains to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, the Little Colorado River has sustained plants, animals, and humans since the beginning of time. Fish spawn in its warm waters, migratory birds stop by for a drink, medicinal plants grow along its banks. The Little Colorado River is a 330-mile lifeline for the desert dwellers who depend on it.

For millennia, Native people have taken care of the river, and the river has taken care of them. It remains an important place of livelihood, pilgrimage, and physical and spiritual nourishment to this day.

Here, White Mountain Apache, Zuni, Navajo, Hopi, and Hualapai people share their personal and cultural ties to the Little Colorado River. It's a place of emergence, a conduit for prayers, sustenance for livestock, and so much more.

**Come along to experience the lifeways of the Little Colorado River.**

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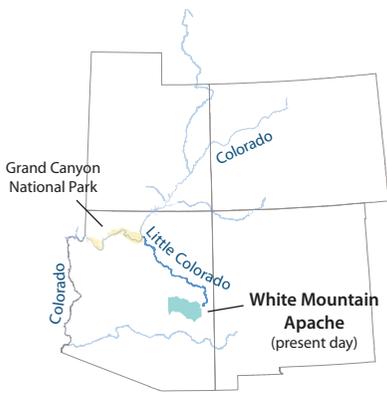
# Bernadette Adley-SantaMaria

White Mountain Apache language and culture consultant,  
cultural advisory board member



My name is Bernadette Adley-SantaMaria. I'm from the Bizaha Clan of the White Mountain Apache Tribal Nation.

DEIDRA PEACHES



THE LITTLE COLORADO RIVER BEGINS from the aquifer under our holy mountain, Dzil Ligai Si'an (White Mountain). Two small creeks then flow together to form the river that flows north to join the big Colorado River in the Grand Canyon.

If you ask our elders to talk about the water—the rivers, lakes, streams—they'll start with the traditional creation story, as it tells of our sacred mountain and surroundings. These stories involve the source of water that provides life for our people and all other beings. In contemporary times, we know that our sacred mountain is also a source of water for many others. The Little Colorado River flows off our lands to the north for use by towns and people along the way to the Grand Canyon, and several rivers flow south and provide water for the desert urban areas.

My late maternal grandmother, Mary Velasquez Riley, used to tell us about water—how *tu hadazlii'* (springs and little creeks) form below Dzil Ligai Si'an. She said *tu* (water) is a sacred element, along with the land, environment, weather, fire, and natural resources. All are related and interconnected. It doesn't make sense to an elder Apache to only talk about water.

My grandmother told us that in the old days, people used to take off their shoes before they got to the top of the mountain, that you go to Dzil Ligai Si'an to pray, to face the east where the sun comes up. You pray to the Creator for everyone on Ni'godzan (Mother Earth). You pray for all living things, the animals, plants, all of life. That is what she taught us.

She said you give an offering, then you turn full circle and that means your "amen" in a respectful way. As Apaches, we use *taa'nddin* (sacred pollen) to bless ourselves. She said they used to have rocks piled up like an altar where other tribal people visited too and made offerings.

I have respect for the Little Colorado River as life-giving water that comes from our sacred mountain. People from the other tribes in Arizona have similar respect for water. Water is a sacred element of life in our cultures and our lifeways.

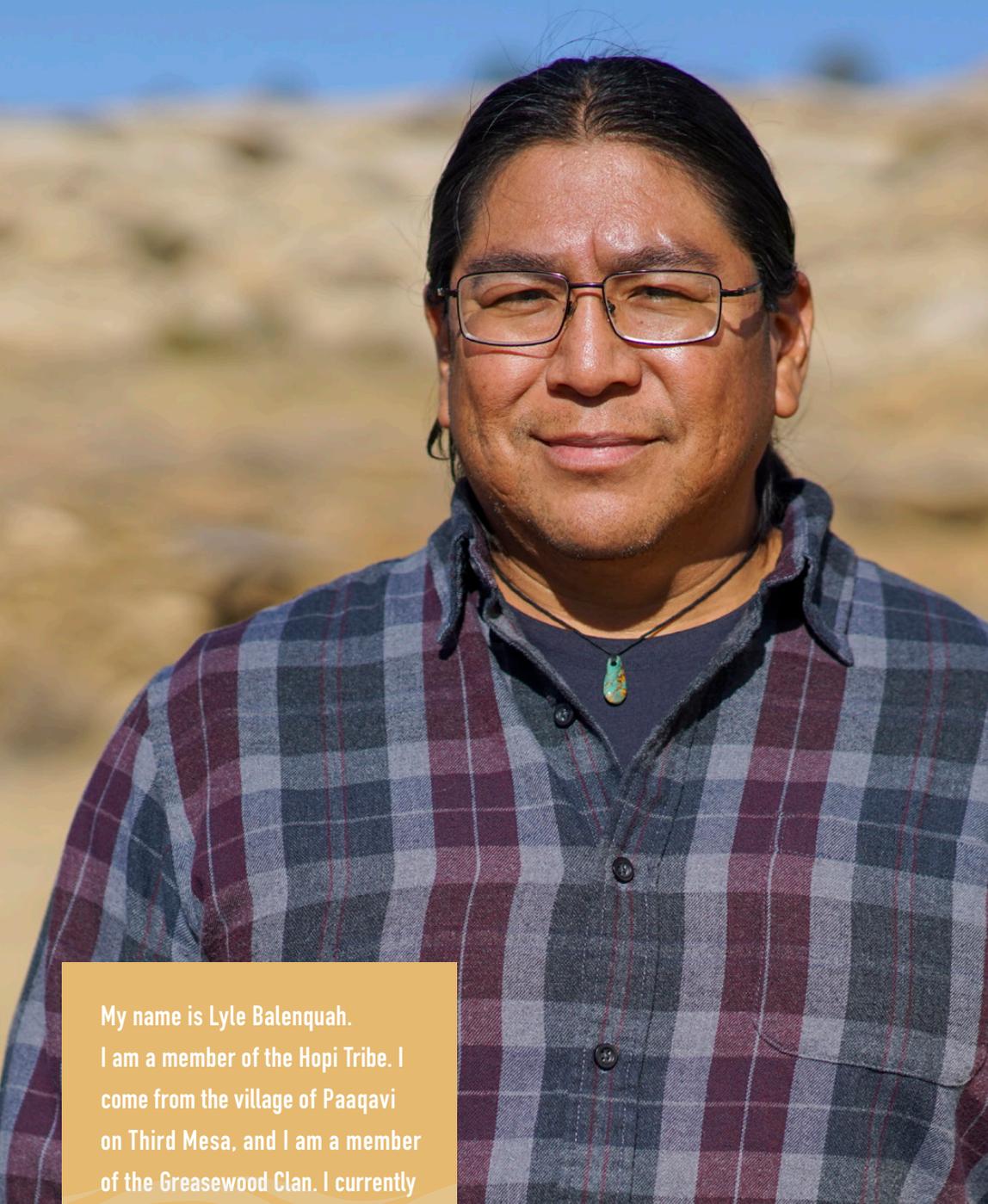
"Water is life" is an expression that numerous Native people have been saying across this country. *Tu hidahii at'ee*, which means "water is alive" or "life comes from water," is our way. The land cannot be without water.

I look at the Little Colorado River as a source that helps all people in the towns and from other tribes, as it flows north into the Grand Canyon. It also helps the Native people who live in the canyon, so we're connected to them too. I would like to see the Little Colorado River continue spilling into the greater Colorado River forever, helping all tribes and towns along the way.

**It has flowed for thousands of years and will remain so for future generations.**

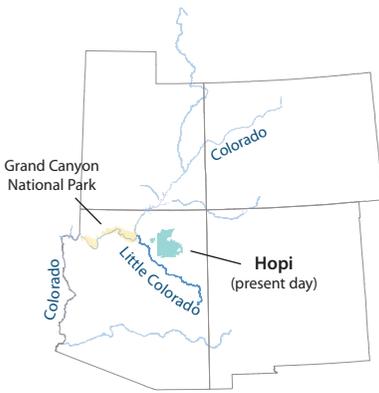
# Lyle Balenquah

Independent Hopi archaeologist



My name is Lyle Balenquah. I am a member of the Hopi Tribe. I come from the village of Paaqavi on Third Mesa, and I am a member of the Greasewood Clan. I currently work as an archaeologist here in the Southwest.

DEIDRA PEACHES



BACK IN OUR ANCESTRAL HISTORY, the Little Colorado River was an important area for us to live and farm. If you trace the Little Colorado River to its origins all the way back up into the White Mountains, there are ancestral villages

associated with that region. All along the Little Colorado River, there are various prehistoric settlements that were built and occupied by Hopi ancestors over 800 to 1,000 years ago. You see places like Chevelon Pueblo near Winslow, and Homolovi. The Little Colorado River borders Wupatki National Monument, a very large ancestral settlement area. As you get further down into the gorge itself, there are shrines and other areas that we identify in archaeology as culturally significant.

When you get down to the confluence area of the Little Colorado River and Colorado River, that's where you really enter an area of increased significance. There is the Sipapuni, which is the cultural origin point for Hopi ancestors. That emergence point symbolizes our coming from a previous world into this world seeking a new way of life. It's how Hopis frame our history.

The Hopi Salt Trail also follows the Little Colorado River. There are naturally occurring salt deposits downstream of the confluence. As part of older initiation traditions, it would have been a rite of passage for male initiates to make this long journey, a spiritually and physically dangerous journey, down into the Little Colorado River Gorge, down into the Grand Canyon, to obtain salt from the salt mines and then bring it back for their female relatives.

The Salt Trail has been in existence for probably thousands of years, as long as people have been living down in the Grand Canyon. Today, it's still an important part of Hopi cultural tradition, even though it's outside the Hopi Reservation boundaries.

We as tribes, are still fighting to maintain our connections to the Little Colorado River system and what it means to us in this modern day. It's an important part of who we are and the natural ecosystem of the region. Even though we have modern wells now and modern water infrastructure, the natural springs and watersheds still remain really important to the cultural side of Hopi people.

Hopi people believe that springs can serve as breathing holes. They're taking in the moisture from the atmosphere and reissuing it back out. When we see healthy springs out there on the landscape, it's an indicator to us that things are going ok. But as they dry up and disappear, you kind of have to wonder, how are we affecting them as human beings? Are we doing our part to help maintain those healthy landscapes out there?

**Water in all its forms is a really important resource here in Hopi.**

# Dr. Karletta Chief

Associate professor and extension specialist at the  
University of Arizona, Ph.D. in hydrology and water resources



My name is Karletta Chief, and I'm Bitter Water born for Near the Water. My maternal grandfather is Manygoats and my paternal grandfather is Red Running to the Water. This is how I identify myself as a Diné (Navajo) woman.

I am also an associate professor and extension specialist at the University of Arizona in the department of environmental science, where I work with tribal communities on the water challenges they face.



I GREW UP ON BLACK MESA, which is a community in northeastern Arizona, with a very cultural upbringing and Dinéke'jí (the Navajo language) as my first language. I grew up with a lot of wonderful

blessings around me—with my grandmother present, and my parents teaching me a lot about the values of Diné cultural livelihoods.

However, nearby, there is a huge coal mining industry called Peabody Western Coal Company. My family lived within the leasehold area. I grew up seeing the mine, seeing the water contamination happen in our washes, seeing all this environmental degradation around me.

It created in me questions of why is this happening? Why does my family not have running water? Why do we not have electricity? Yet nearby there's a coal mine producing energy for cities like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, and contaminating our pristine water and taking it away from these lands forever.

I really wanted to do something for my family, to help them. I got my bachelor's and master's degrees in environmental engineering from Stanford University, and my Ph.D. in hydrology and water resources from the University of Arizona. My projects focus on food, energy, and water security for off-grid communities. I choose to work with Indigenous communities because I have always wanted to give back to my people.

Communities on the Navajo Nation rely a lot on groundwater sources, aquifers. And those waters decline fast when there is drought. There's also surface waters, mainly rivers. The Little Colorado River is a tributary to the major stem of the Colorado River. It is a river that does not flow year-round. It's very dependent on precipitation, and it's very flashy. The Little Colorado River is an important river to the Navajo people, and culturally for many tribes here in the Southwest.

Climate change has a huge impact on the water resources of Native American communities. Within my lifetime, I've seen substantial declines in available precipitation, both rain and snow, in my community and in the region. In many communities on the Navajo Nation, there have been instances of shallow wells no longer producing because the water table has dropped below the intake of that well.

Our communities have gone through changes in climate through a variety of sustainable ways of living, ways of knowing. It's important to understand and amplify that resilience to promote adaptation to climate change.

My cultural background has a huge impact and influence in the way that I do environmental science with communities. Three of my four clans are water. So, water is my identity. And water is life, Tó' éi iiná at'éeé. It drives me in the work that I do. I believe that I'm still going through that process of connecting what I know through the science I've learned with what my grandmother taught me as a child growing up.

**And those are two worlds that I'm bringing back together through my own work.**

# Dr. Herman Cody

Associate professor at Diné College



I am Herman Cody. My clan is Tsi'naajinii (One Who Walks Ahead), born for the Naakai Dine' (Mexican Clan). My maternal grandfather is Kinyaa'áanii (Tall House People), and my paternal clan is Tódích'íi'nii, (Bitter Water People).

DEIDRA PEACHES



I WAS BORN IN A HOGAN with no modern amenities such as electricity or running water, on a desolate windswept mesa several miles north of Grand Falls. I was born the traditional way, ceremoniously “out in the middle of nowhere” as the adage goes.

When school let out in May, we would move north with the sheep to our summer home, across Grand Falls back to my birthplace. In August, when school was about to begin, we moved back south across Grand Falls. Our cattle subsisted on the pools and ponds left in the riverbed when water was not running. They still do to this day. Sometimes the monsoons hit us a bit early and crossing the river with the sheep became an all-day task. We had a hundred and some sheep, and we had to practically drag every one of them across to the other side. But we were always grateful and felt blessed that the river was running.

Grand Falls is the English name. In Diné bizaad (Navajo language), it is “Adah'iilíni” interpreted as “waterfall.” My father is from that area. He was a well-known native practitioner, and he was named after the falls. They called him Hastiin Adah'iilíni, which literally means, “Mr. Grand Falls.” He had three brothers and they were all native practitioners.

When my father did ceremonies close to home, he and others left sacred stones along the Little Colorado River. It was called Nit'iz Nihe'niif. The ceremonies were done with prayer and song. Some medicinal plants used in ceremonies grew along the riverbanks, and I recall times when my older brothers would be asked to obtain certain medicinal plants.

We were always told, lectured, reminded that the river was sacred. We were told that the creatures that live there—the frogs, tadpoles, and such—were sacred. They take care of the ecosystem, and they are more important than us as humans and therefore sacred. So we grew up adhering to those cultural teachings, along the river.

When we were old enough, my younger brother and I were trusted to take the sheep downriver from Grand Falls. It becomes a canyon there, with water when the ponds upstream become dry. At the bottom, the sheep would finally drink. Then we would start back up. I still visualize to this day the sheep laboriously climbing back up—through the hot, dark volcanic sand with all that water in their bellies—to the top where they would rest. Then we'd go home. It was an all-day endeavor.

Even in the hardest of times, the Little Colorado River had water for us somewhere. And the river provided more than water. Sometimes we would take our wagon to gather driftwood along the riverbed for our heating and cooking. The people who live in that area are known as, “The Forgotten People.” But they have subsisted. There is still no electricity, nor running water to homes. But we have the Little Colorado River and Grand Falls. I don't live there anymore, but that doesn't mean I have left.

**It's where I was born and raised. I will always be from there.**

# Radmilla Cody

Mother, Diné activist, singer



My name is Radmilla Cody,  
and I am of the Red Ochre Clan  
born for the African American.  
My maternal clans are of the  
Mexican Clan and my paternal  
clans are the African American.

DEIDRA PEACHES



I GREW UP IN THE GRAND FALLS AREA, and that is where I call home. My late grandmother, Dorothy Cody, raised me—herding sheep, planting corn, and everything that incorporates and embodies the life-sustaining methods of the Diné people. We

spent a lot of time on foot, visiting relatives. We would walk anywhere from 5-8 miles just to say *yá'át'ée'h*, just to say hello.

Our system of *k'é*, kinship—it goes beyond just our relationship to one another. It's our relationship to the land, to *Nahasdzáán nihí'ma* (Mother Earth), *Tó Diyin Dine'é* (water deities), *Nitchí Diyin Dine'é* (air deities), *Kq' Diyin Dine'é* (fire deities).

For us as Diné, we rely heavily on our lifeways. We need water to exist. We need air to exist. We need the fire to exist. We need the land to exist. We rely heavily on these sacred elements. The music my uncle and I have composed together is always connected to our sacred and holy elements. One song is titled, "Honoring the Homeland," which is about the area we come from. It's a beautiful song, and I love singing it. When I go to other communities, other parts of Dinétah, I share that song. We are the land, and we have to do everything in our power to continue to protect the land.

I recently went to *Adahiilíni* (Grand Falls), and it was really running. My aunt was there, and we stood there, looking down in the *Adahiilíni*. She said the last time the Little Colorado River ran that much was in 1994. And so, we have to think about what's causing our rivers to not flow the way they used to. There are dams preventing the rivers from running freely, and contamination also. I'm hearing stories from some of our relatives whose sheep are dying because they're drinking the water from the Little Colorado River.

My concern for the Little Colorado River is that it continues to be exploited and used for capitalistic purposes. And then where does that put us again, as Indigenous peoples? Leave the *Adahiilíni* alone. Let it be.

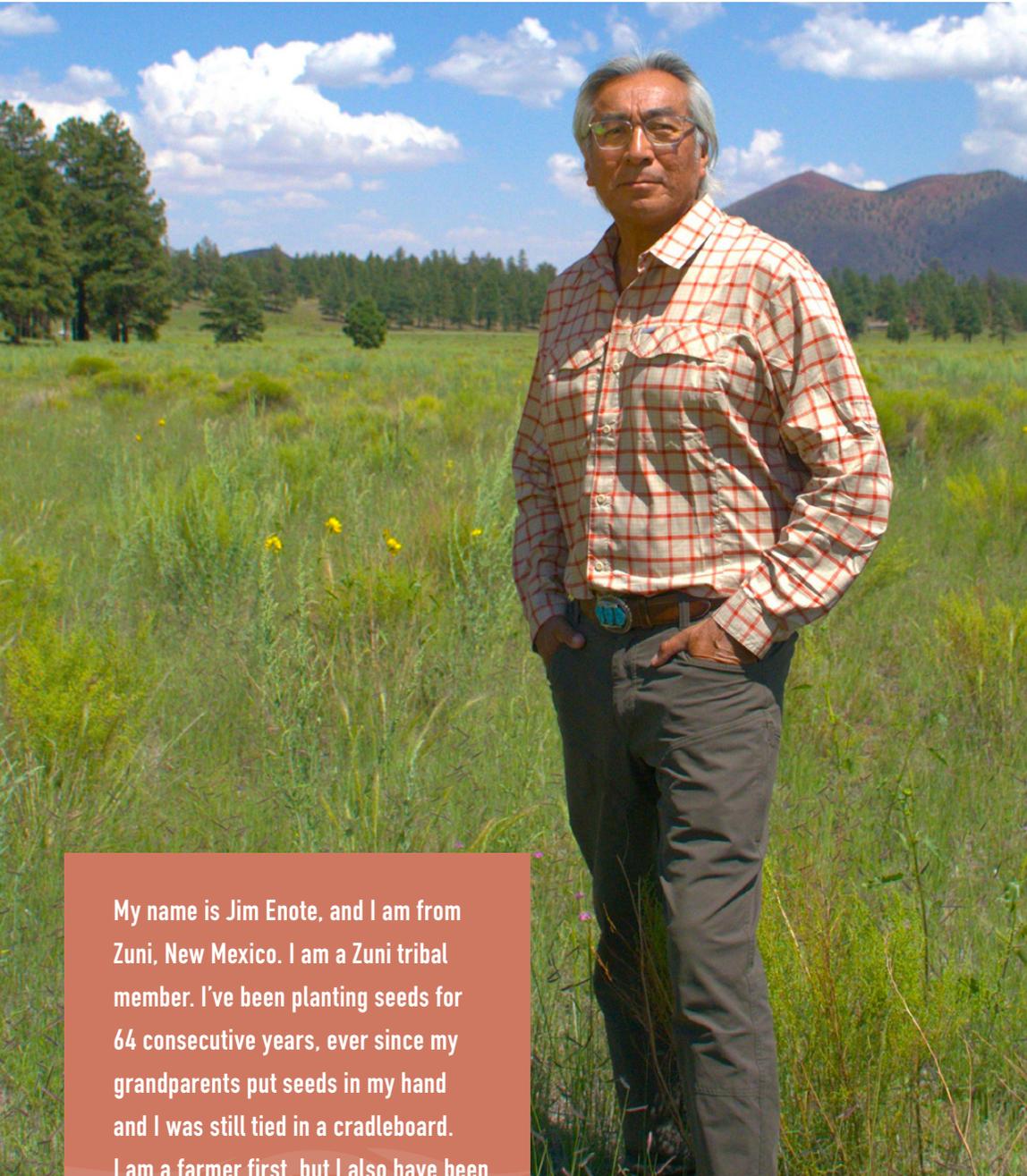
I remember when my grandmother was still with us, and I was little, they proposed to pave the road to Grand Falls because they wanted to accommodate the tourists. But the community said no, and so they didn't. We need to respect this beautiful area for what it is—yes, it draws a lot of people to the area, but at what point do we say no?

The basis of all of this is kinship, *k'é*. *K'é* to one another, but also *k'é* to the land. I think about our ancestors and how far ahead they thought for us. They didn't just think 10 years from now, 20 years from now. They thought 100 years from now. They thought about us as we're here today.

**They thought about the future of the land and of the people, and that's where our mindset needs to be.**

# Jim Enote

Zuni farmer and CEO of the Colorado Plateau Foundation



My name is Jim Enote, and I am from Zuni, New Mexico. I am a Zuni tribal member. I've been planting seeds for 64 consecutive years, ever since my grandparents put seeds in my hand and I was still tied in a cradleboard. I am a farmer first, but I also have been working in conservation and cultural resource work for over 40 years.



I GREW UP HEARING FROM MY GRANDPARENTS that if I left our house in Zuni and followed the Zuni River downstream, eventually it would reach the Little Colorado River. And if we kept going and walked down the Little Colorado River, it

would take us back into the Grand Canyon, the place where everything began for the Zuni people.

The world began for the Zuni people at a place called Chimik'yana'kya dey'a, a place that many will know as Ribbon Falls. That is the place where the Zuni people emerged from beneath the surface of the Earth. After many years living in the Grand Canyon, we explored the tributaries of the Colorado River, including the Little Colorado River, finally to the Zuni River. Then we settled in Zuni, where we are now.

So all the tributaries nourish and contribute to the place where we began. The Little Colorado River is like an umbilical cord. It connects the Zuni people back to their place of origin. It is a very important conduit for remembering where we came from, and it can be a conduit for offering blessings.

When I visit the Little Colorado River, it looks, smells, and even tastes different every time. It may appear dry at times. But in its ephemeral way, it comes to life again. It awakens, and it dries. And there's something really beautiful about that. And if I go in the springtime, when it's muddy, I feel jubilant. It's moving nutrients, it's moving and shaping earth.

When the water is flowing in the river, I gather some. I put some on my head. I get some in my hand, and I throw it in the direction of home to encourage more moisture and rain. And then I drink it. I put some of that earth into my body, because we say that we are what we eat. But we are, of course, also what we drink.

I have seen the Little Colorado River get drier and drier. A long time ago, when it became too dry or too hot, our ancestors would move. They'd move north, or move to other areas that were wetter and greener and live there for a thousand years or so. When the time was right, they would move back to their original place, or to more hospitable places. And that was migration. Migration is part of the human experience. But we don't have that liberty anymore. It's not like we can pick up entire tribal nations and be climate refugees.

Water is life. These are the most important arteries of Mother Earth. And they need nourishment.

**So we pray for rain, we pray for snow, we pray for moisture, and dew, and mist. To help our Mother survive. And then, if our Mother survives, so do we.**

# Franklin Martin

Diné rancher and owner of Sacred Edge Tours



My name is Franklin Martin. I'm a Zuni Edgewater, born for the One-Who-Walks-Around Clan. And my shí'cheii (maternal grandfather) are Red Running Into the Water. My shí'nalí (paternal grandfather) are the Towering House People.



I GREW UP HERE IN THE BODAWAY-GAP CHAPTER of the Navajo Nation, by the Grand Canyon and Little Colorado River. You can see it's dry out here. In Navajo, Bodaway is pronounced differently—Dibáá' Hóyéé. It means "water scarce." That's the way it is out here. We have water, but getting to it is hard.

When I was young, my dad took me and my brothers down the Salt Trail to the Little Colorado River. The water that comes out of the Little Colorado River is used in ceremonies. The female water is the Little Colorado River, the male water is the Colorado River, and they come together at the confluence. When you're down at the Little Colorado River, you do offerings to the water. It's a sacred and holy place. You listen. You do not shout. You hear the winds talking to you. It's like a temple. We collected salt there, and my dad instructed us to take only what we needed. Navajos have been going down there for salt for a long time, for our ceremonies.

Three of our ceremonies use salt. One is a baby's first laugh. The first laugh is a gift of joy, and whoever made the baby laugh is responsible for doing that ceremony for the child. The second ceremony is done during puberty, when boys' voices change and girls enter womanhood. And the third is the wedding. We also use the salt for butchering wildlife, like deer and elk. Buckskins are used in ceremonies, so they're treated with the salt we've collected. That's how you treat the wildlife with respect.

People come back from the Little Colorado River with different stories of what they went through. My dad said he started hearing the wind singing songs on the way back. I think what you get out of it is personal. You carry that on, and you tell your kids those things.

We have companies, corporations, and contractors coming in wanting to build along the Little Colorado River. When developers proposed to build a tramway from the rim of the canyon to the confluence, I wanted a say in how the area was treated. So I started a tour company, called Sacred Edge Tours, which takes visitors to the east rim of the Grand Canyon and gives them a look into the Navajo way of life.

This Little Colorado River, we have to defend it. And when we defend it, people want to know why. "Why are you doing this? Why are you opposing all this?" It's because of the way we think, the way we're taught. I wish we could write it all down, but we're not supposed to. This knowledge is passed down through our language, through stories. We're supposed to pass it on in sweat lodges and in hogans. And there's certain seasons we tell certain stories.

**The only thing I know is we have to do something as a local people here. We have to preserve our water.**

# Ramon Riley

Director of the White Mountain Apache Tribe Cultural Center



My name is Ramon Riley. I come from a clan called Biszaha (Adobe Cutbank People). And I am born for Ténádozhagé (A Ridge Jutting out from the River People). I am a member of the White Mountain Apache Tribe.

DEIDRA PEACHES



AS APACHES, WE ARE MOUNTAINOUS PEOPLE. We have four sacred mountains that surround us. And we live in the center of these mountains, where we believe our creation started from.

We consider these our holy mountains and sort of our boundary, in a way. Our sacred mountain to the east is called Ba'ishzhine Dzil in Apache (the Black Mountain), because that's where we collect beads that we use for our ceremonies. But when the army came, they named it White Mountain because they saw snow on it. When the Spanish conquistadors came through, they too called it Sierra Blanca.

The headwaters of the Little Colorado River are below what people nowadays refer to as White Mountain. One elder told me, referring to the White Mountain, "You see that rock there? That rock holds the water, the holy living water. There's a reservoir under that, which the water resource people call an aquifer. But we know it's a stream that has continued since time began."

So the Little Colorado River begins on the White Mountain and flows north all the way into the Grand Canyon. It gives life to all the animals, all sorts of creepy crawlers, even human people. They all survive. The sacred river was made for a reason; leave it the way the Creator made it.

Water is alive. It can be everlasting if it's protected. When you use it, you pray. You bless it, it blesses you also. And there are songs about water, tu'dinyi, holy water, healing water.

Our people went to the Little Colorado River to gather medicinal plants for healing ceremonies. We don't utilize it as much as we used to. It is controlled by the Apache National Forest. But if we are there, we wash ourselves with the water, cleanse ourselves. And even take some spring water from there. When we take it, we pray first, and we even sing a song for it.

The Little Colorado River water is important. The animals need it. All living entities need it. And it's part of the holy elements that are given to us. People who are brought up traditionally understand that. Other Indigenous tribes will get where I'm coming from.

**Ancient people knew that this is powerful land, and we're still here.**

# Octavius Seowtewa

Zuni cultural advisor



My name is Octavius Seowtewa, and I am from Zuni, New Mexico.

The Grand Canyon is, has always been, important because of our oral history. It states that our people emerged from the bottom of the Grand Canyon at Ribbon Falls. And they left behind information that we use as our history and our connection to the river.



IN THE CANYON, there's a pictograph with red hematite of our people actually pulling each other out from Ribbon Falls. We also see a petroglyph of how we looked when we came out of the Grand Canyon—we didn't have webbed hands or feet, we didn't have tails, we were transformed.

A lot of that information is still being identified. We just found a boulder with a phrase picked into it that is in all our Zuni prayers. In Zuni, it means, "holding on for strength, holding on for life, until we all grow old together." Our ancestors left this information behind a long time ago, and now we're given a chance to find it—a page at a time until we get the whole picture of our history.

Today, our land is the border of Arizona and New Mexico, but we have a river connection back to the Grand Canyon. The Zuni River runs right through Zuni and connects with the Little Colorado River. The Little Colorado River connects into the Grand Canyon. All waterways are connected, and the connections have no end.

Water doesn't regularly flow through the Zuni River, but our religious leaders still leave offerings there. When we do get floods, we understand that whatever was offered in Zuni ends up in the Colorado River. If you put something in that obstructs the natural flow of the river, like a dam, it takes away the ability to have our offerings and prayers answered. Any obstructions with our prayers is a block of our spiritual way of life.

I've been to the confluence of the Little Colorado and Colorado rivers many times. I've been there when it was flooding, and I've been there when the water has been blue. But standing there, during the floods when the water is red, I know that water came from Zuni. So I have that connection all the way back home.

We identify the Little Colorado River as "K'yawinan A'honna," which means "red river." The Little Colorado River is important, not only to Zuni, but to all the associated tribes that have connections to the Grand Canyon. It's a very important spiritual place for all of us. There are a lot of collection areas, a lot of offering places. The Little Colorado River was not intended for recreation. It's our connection to our histories, and most of our histories have emergence stories coming from the Colorado River.

I'd like to keep the Little Colorado River the way it is. I don't want any improvements because that would only take away from the river itself. It flows, it dries up. That's the nature of the river.

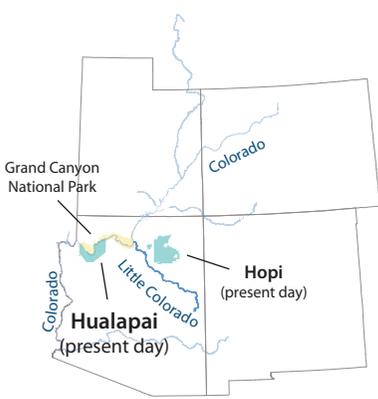
**Hopefully, people can appreciate the Native American concepts of who we are and why we want to keep these places as pristine and the same as they were when our ancestors were walking the same land a long time ago.**

# Bennett Wakayuta

Hualapai tribal member



I'm Bennett Wakayuta, Hualapai and Hopi. I'm from the Pine Springs Band in Mohawk Canyon on my Hualapai side. On my Hopi side, I'm Parrot Kachina Clan.



HUALAPAI AND HOPI are two tribes that have always been affiliated with the Grand Canyon. We both have similar creation stories, where we came up from the third world into the fourth world. And both of us kind of agree that our spirit energies will release here when we pass on.

Our bodies are made up of 70 percent water. The water in the ground seeps through us and merges with the river, the river goes to the ocean, the ocean turns into clouds, and the clouds become rain. It's all a big cycle of life. This is where our creation begins. We share that with about 11 tribes all together I think.

Our creation story talks about how each tribe was given a duty in life. For the Hualapai people, our duty was the deer. For the Hopi people, their duty was the corn. For the Navajo people, their duty was the sheep. For the Mojave people, their duty was the fish. With everyone's duties, we became important to each other. That was the way we lived in harmony.

Our connection with the Hopi Tribe has been like brothers forever. The Little Colorado River is revered by the Hopi. If my brother is going to protect something, then I'll help him protect it. We're protecting that water for everybody.

My personal connection to the Little Colorado River is the ceremony of water. We're a desert people, so a lot of our prayers and songs are about water. We sing for water. When we sing to one tributary of water, we're praying for all the water that it's connected to. There's a reason why we're so much water in our own bodies. That's part of the whole life cycle.

There are salt mines a mile below the Little Colorado River. The Hualapai used that salt as one of our main trade items. For us, it was more precious than gold. We were able to keep meat for longer periods of time; it was used for food seasoning. It was an incredible resource for us, and we began taking the salt to far places. We know of a trail from the Yucatan Peninsula all the way to Deer Creek in the Grand Canyon. We were travelers.

We still use that area as one of our pilgrimages. We take young boys there to gather salt at the salt mines, and they give it to elders. These elders are the ones that remember our historical trauma—being displaced and rebuilding from that, intergenerational trauma, prejudices we've had to endure. It kind of shut us down until we were no longer explorers, staying pretty much on our reservation.

But now, more healing has begun. A lot of things are coming back to life. We never had these imaginary boundaries they set for us. Our boundaries were us—our connection to the land, talking to the animals, talking to the waters, talking to all these canyons.

**It doesn't matter where we're at in the world. We are home.**

# Delores Wilson-Aguirre

Diné community organizer



My name is Delores Wilson-Aguirre, and I'm part of the Navajo Nation Tribe. I currently live in Tuba City, Arizona with my family, but I grew up here in Bodaway near the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers.



WE MOVED ALL OVER THE PLACE here with our sheep. We lived in canvas tents, and we used to make shades out of wood. Sheep was our life, land was our life. That's how we grew up. Back then I thought it was normal, moving all over the place,

living in a canvas tent. But it was during the Bennett Freeze, which was an issue with the Navajo and Hopi land dispute that banned all development and building repairs for over 40 years here on the western side of the Navajo Nation. We were told we were not supposed to build homes.

I remember living near the confluence during the winter, and we'd get a lot of snow. We would boil it, and my mom would wash clothes for us. Some of the melted snow we used to drink. I am attached to the area. Just over the hill is where I had my kinaaldá, which is the puberty ceremony. Our neighbors came, and we had a big feast of my ground-corn cake. That's the place I'm drawn to, the land here.

During the summers, I would help my mom and my grandma with the sheep. We listened to my grandma, she taught us. The times we went to the confluence were just to take our corn pollen and say our prayers. It's quiet there, and if you stand near the edge, you can hear echoes down in the canyon.

My grandma used to tell us those echoes are the holy beings that are living there, so do not disturb them by yelling. You look at the turquoise water. One river is female, the other is male. They come together, it makes life. When I'm at the confluence, I feel my mind is at peace. I say my prayers. I am part of the canyon walls, the holy spirits there.

My brother went to Vietnam back in the 60s. My mom used to go to the confluence, and she used to say her prayers for a safe return for her son. Prayers were not only made for my brother, but as a family we had a lot of ceremonies. And that's how we were connected to the canyon and the land. When my brother came back, he went to the confluence and said his prayers. You cannot destroy the paths that we made there, which are sacred.

From many years of going there, saying our prayers, you cannot dig those out and erase them. That's our pathway to our lives, our church. And other tribes, they have connections to the area too.

We may be a small group from the area, but we want people to know that the land is not free to do anything, for outsiders to come in and do as they please. There is enough tourism in other areas. We need to keep this area pristine, the way it is.

**If it's disturbed, then where are we going to go? Where are the families in the area going to go to say their prayers?**



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