"With Anything Manmade There is Going to be Danger": The Cultural Context of Navajo Opinions Regarding Snowmaking on the San Francisco Peaks.

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Introduction

Among the many ways that academics conceptualize sacred space, one of my favorite definitions of sacred space is land that people are willing to fight or debate over (Lane 2001). This is certainly the case with the San Francisco Peaks. We can see this in the strong negative response of some Navajo towards a proposal to expand a ski resort - the Arizona Snowbowl - located on this mountain.

I was shocked one day during this project when, while setting up an interview with an elderly Navajo woman, she asked me if I was for or against this ski resort expansion. She then informed me that if I were for it, she would "run me out". Whether she was joking or not (I believe she was) this reflects the degree to which some Navajo see the ski resort expansion as a threat to the San Francisco Peaks.

Context

The San Francisco Peaks tower above Flagstaff, Arizona. This mountain is extremely important in Navajo tradition as one of the four sacred mountains bounding the Navajo homeland. However, because it falls about 30 miles outside of the Navajo Nation reservation, it is not owned by the Navajo Nation[1]. Instead, it is operated largely as part of the Coconino National Forest.

The Arizona Snowbowl ski resort, one of Flagstaff's important tourist attractions, is located on the slopes of the Peaks. The Arizona Snowbowl has struggled to maintain a consistent operating season due to sporadic or low snowfall (Coconino National Forest Peaks Ranger Station 2005:7-10). To overcome this challenge, in 2002 the Arizona Snowbowl Resort Limited Partnership, proposed what has now become the Snowbowl Expansion Plan. The Forest Service announced its intent to implement this plan in 2004 (Save the Peaks 2010). Under this plan, artificial snow would be sprayed on 205 acres of the Peaks to compensate for the low snowfall that has limited the operating season (Coconino National Forest Peaks Ranger Station 2005:7-10). Undeniably, one of the most contested aspects of this

[1] The San Francisco Peaks is actually a volcanic chain of mountains including Humphrey's Peak, Fremont Peak, and Agassiz Peak. These three peaks are referred to as one mountain, San Francisco Mountain, on USGS maps. Most Navajo I spoke with also spoke of the Peaks as a singular mountain, rather than distinguishing any specific part of the range.

proposal is that the artificial snow would be created from reclaimed, treated sewage water, a fact that many groups have expressed outrage at.

The Navajo nation and other tribal groups responded to this plan by filing lawsuits to halt the expansion plan, citing federal laws which protect Native American sacred lands (Save the Peaks 2010). Some Navajo, and many others, also objected to the plan through public protesting. I personally attended an anti-expansion plan protest outside Flagstaff City Hall where Navajo and non-Navajo chanted sayings like "Defend Human Rights-Protect Sacred Sites!" and "No Poop Snow!" As vehement as these activists were, they are not alone in Navajo country, where many people are echoing the sentiment that snowmaking should not occur on the sacred San Francisco Peaks.

The Navajo response to the snowmaking proposal is an important example of the conflicts that can result over federal management of tribal sacred lands. It is also an example of the difficulties that result when a natural area is managed without a full understanding or accommodation of the worldviews of all parties invested in that land.

Central Thesis

In this paper, I explore the perspectives of Navajo I spoke to living in Leupp, AZ who object to the plan to use artificial snow on the San Francisco Peaks. I argue that these objections are related to a popular perception that the Peaks are sacred, a home to Deities, plants, and animals, and should be respected by being left alone. Many believe that artificial snow would contain human chemicals and wastes and would alter the original nature of the Peaks. Because of this, artificial snow is seen as both dangerous and disrespectful by many of the Navajo with whom I spoke.

Methods

I base these findings on ethnographic research I conducted during the summer of 2009. For the bulk of this research, I stayed in Leupp, AZ, a Navajo Nation community that is about 45 miles from the Peaks. I explored public perceptions of the snowmaking proposal through semi-structured and informal interviews. I also spent time in Tsaile, Arizona learning from elders and scholars at the Dine College.

The weakness of my approach was that I utilized a small and non-random sample from one community. This paper is therefore not meant to answer the question: "what do all people living on the Navajo Nation think about snowmaking" or even "all people living in Leupp". Rather, through I was able to deeply explore the common concerns of those Navajo with whom I personally spoke. I hope this can point us all, as American Indian scholars, in promising directions for further study on the issue of Native responses to snowmaking on the Peaks.

Research Questions

It is interesting to ask ourselves what the Navajo Nation, or Navajo people individually, which have no legal ownership over the Peaks, have to gain from filing lawsuits against snowmaking. I have found that many authors have written on the legal aspects of the snowmaking debate, while relatively few have researched in-depth the underlying socio-cultural factors that may have lead the Navajo Nation,

and individual Navajo, to object to this plan (Tsosie (2005) and Cragun (2005) are good examples of legal analyses with cultural insights).

To understand Navajo response to snowmaking, we really need to explore three questions:

1. Is opposition to snowmaking limited to Navajo who have filed lawsuits or attended anti-snowmaking protests? Or is opposition more widespread? In other words, how do "typical" Navajo, who aren't in the courtroom or at the protests, feel about snowmaking? Although various authors have spoken to some of the cultural issues involved in the Navajo response to snowmaking, I seem to be one of the first to approach it using a methodology of in-depth interviews with Navajo living on the reservation who are not directly involved with the lawsuits and protests over snowmaking.
2. Are there any specific cultural variables or beliefs that are correlated with these opinions? For example, what do individual Navajo consider their relationship with the Peaks, which have traditionally been defined as "sacred" in their society?
3. What concerns do Navajo in communities close to the Peaks have regarding the potential impacts of artificial snowmaking on the mountain? How do these concerns feed into broader objections to snowmaking?

"That Mountain is Sacred"

The first of these questions was easy enough to answer. Most Navajo I spoke with said they were against snowmaking. Leupp residents who were against snowmaking also tended to express a belief that the San Francisco Peaks were sacred. Inevitably during our discussions they would bring up the fact that the Peaks were "one of the four sacred mountains".

Among a culture which contests that all nature is sacred, and that what makes something sacred is "life", the San Francisco Peaks are held in unique reverence. They are known in the Navajo language as Dook'o'oo'sliid. In traditional stories and art, Dook'o'oo'sliid is the western of four sacred mountains which bound the Navajo homeland in a circle within which the Navajo are protected.

In response to inquiries about how we should respect the San Francisco Peaks, I was told that to respect this mountain human beings should leave it alone or in the state in which it was created and intended to be. If it were to be used, it should be used in non-destructive ways. Informants seemed to consider it their duty to protect this holy place.

So there is this personal relationship of respect that individuals in the Leupp community feel towards the Peaks. In its most basic elements, this reverence is based on the importance of this mountain as part of the Navajo traditional way of life and the strong emotional connection they feel towards the mountain, having lived in its shadow throughout their lives. It is obvious from their statements that many Navajo see artificial snow as completely contrary to the ideal respect relationship with the mountain, and I would like to highlight at least two possible reasons for this.

First, the artificial snow would be made from treated wastewater, and, although it has been treated, many Navajo associate it with human feces and urine. They consider such "dirty snow" disrespectful for a sacred place. Artificial snow is referred to by Navajo as "poop snow" or "yellow snow" and the ski resort on which the snowmaking would take place, the Arizona Snowbowl, is often called "the

Toilet Bowl". It was not uncommon for me to be told by an informant "Snowmaking is like if I was to come and pee on your church". Since Navajo culture emphasizes respect and reciprocity, they consider snowmaking indefensible – they do not put wastes on the sacred places of non-Indians, whereas non-Indians ware now trying to put filth on theirs.

Secondly, Navajo feel that artificial snow is disrespectful to the San Francisco Peaks because it would have negative impacts on the various forms of life living on and in this mountain, as I will now outline.

The Peaks are home to Deities or powerful spirits (sometimes known as Holy People). Perhaps for this reason, informants said they go there to pray over their flocks and whatever good thing they need. One informant told me that if snowmaking were to occur "everything will leave, the animals, the Deities" because Navajo would no longer give prayers and offerings to these beings. When I asked in surprise why the Navajo would stop, my informant explained that offerings must be done in a place that will not be disturbed, and the Expansion Plan/snowmaking would leave no place on the mountain undisturbed.

To many Navajo the Peaks are also literally alive – a living, breathing being which can feel pain or joy. Snowmaking and development would be, in the words of my informants, like "throwing chemicals on a person", "injecting them with drugs" or "cutting into their side". One informant said it would be like bathing one's mother in filthy water.

Also, Dook'o'oosliid belongs to wildlife which live on it and with whom Navajo feel a strong connection. Artificial snow is made from wastewater and, when it melts, it may be avoided by animals. It could also hurt them. The Navajo consider this a serious threat: "how are you going to be happy," one man mused "when your relations are dying off?"

Some Navajo also collect plants used for healing from the Peaks, plants they use when western medicine is ineffective. They feel that the artificial snow will alter or make these plants unusable.

Anthropological Pollution Theory

Because artificial snow would alter the natural condition of the Peaks in all the ways just described, its use, for many Navajo, would be a painful contradiction of the relationship of respect they feel people should have towards this mountain. Given the premise that respect means leaving the mountain in a natural condition, and the belief that artificial snow does not do that, it is entirely consistent that some Navajo consider artificial snow disrespectful for the Peaks.

But the question remains: why would snowmaking have this effect of altering the natural order of animals, plants, ceremonies, and the mountain? My theory is that this is because artificial snow is by definition *artificial* and manmade, rather than what has been given by nature. And since according to the traditional Navajo worldview nature is done in a good way, that which departs from that good way will have negative effects. As one informant told me, "with anything manmade there is always going to be danger."

We can understand on a broader level why snow that is manmade would be dangerous by relating it to the anthropological theory of pollution as matter out of place. Mary Douglas, in a survey of what cultures consider "dirty, dangerous, and polluting" said, "dirt is matter out of place…it implies two conditions, a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order" (Douglas 1988 [1966]). Is there a set of ordered relations here? Yes, the San Francisco Peaks in its natural state, with humans

respectfully using it. Is there a contradiction of the order? From the perspective of my informants? Yes, the artificial snow. It is manmade, being put on the natural Peaks.

As noted by other ethnographers, in Navajo culture, humans are beings with the ability to put nature out of balance, out of the good way in which it was created (Pinxten, van Dooren, and Harvey 1983:26). Artificial snow is the epitome of the dangerous ability of humans to alter nature. Artificial snow contains human waste and ashes, it contains chemicals created by humans present in city water, and it is an attempt by man to control seasons, which is always unwise.

In short, artificial snow is seen as foreign to the San Francisco Peaks and those things that live on it (which are natural, not artificial) and will therefore damage the natural and holy state of this sacred mountain. This will be disrespectful and damage the benign qualities of the mountain.

Take Home Messages

In closing, I would like to suggest three conclusions that we can draw from Navajo responses to snowmaking on the Peaks.

The first conclusion is about the role that traditional beliefs play in the lives of many Navajo today. Robert McPherson in his book *Sacred Land, Sacred View: Navajo Perceptions of the Four Corners Region* suggests that the traditional practices and beliefs towards the land may disappear from the lives of many members of Navajo society in coming generations (McPherson 1992:8). What role traditional beliefs about the environment will play in orientations of Navajo toward modern natural resource issues is a critical question. This is not an issue that can be answered with one case study. But in my research, traditional beliefs about the landscape were an important element in how Navajo viewed appropriate uses of their local environment. This lends evidence to the hypothesis that these beliefs are still key parts of how some Navajo conceptualize nature.

The second message is that we, as social scientists, are going to need to continue to play an important role in the management and conservation of tribal sacred lands. There are laws and policies which require federal agencies to consider the ways their land management activities will impact sacred lands (For example, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1979). Community level research like this study may be vital in outlining how tribal communities feel about the proper uses of these lands by the federal government. This type of data can be used preventatively by the government to make decisions more in line with tribal interests, decisions which would respect traditional sacred lands and help federal agencies avoid lengthy battles between themselves and the tribes that are costly not only in resources but in their relationship with tribes.

Finally, as someone who has studied both social science and environmental science, I would strongly emphasize that social science can be vitally important when gauging the effects of environmental management plans. I am proud of the progress we as a society have made in protecting our natural resources, and the methods that we utilize to accurately estimate the effects we have on wildlife, soils, and air quality. Yet these are not the only lenses, or even sufficient lenses on their own, through which to see our effects on the natural world. Environmental impacts are not limited to what we can test in a lab. I do not know of a test which can measure the effects of snowmaking on the living soul of a mountain. I do know that an environment is more than animals and plants. It is also people and their

conception of how they relate to the land. We cannot put a number on what a wooded hill means to a hunter, a forest to a boy scout, a church to a believer, or a mountain to a native tribe. The Navajo have a relationship with the Peaks that I hardly understand and that we, as believers in justice, need to listen to. Their voices matter.

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