

Havasupai Make a Stand

Uranium Mining in the Grand Canyon

By BRENDA NORRELL

Indigenous Havasupai people held a gathering to stop uranium mining in the Grand Canyon and protect ancestral Havasupai Territory, at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, in July of 2009. Indigenous peoples and activists came from the four directions, from Arizona Hopi land and from as far away as Hawaii, to participate with sacred songs and ceremonies.

For four days, Havasupai elders gathered on sacred Red Butte and listened to the legacy of uranium mining on Indian lands. They heard directly from the victims of the trail of death and cancer left behind by uranium mining corporations that were never held responsible on Pueblo and Navajo lands in the Southwest United States. They also listened to the promise of solidarity from the hundreds who gathered here to stand with them: Navajos from Big Mountain, Hualapai, Hopi, Kaibab Paiute, Paiute, Aztecs, and other American Indians from throughout the Americas.

The Havasupai Nation, with the Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, and Grand Canyon Trust, sponsored the gathering to halt uranium mining on Red Butte, July 23-26, 2009. Supai elders gave testimony for official U.S. records in their Havasupai (Pai) language and in English. Supai traditional singers sang as a camp was established on this mesa where Toronto-based Denison Mines is threatening to reopen a uranium mine.

Recent congressional legislation protects the Grand Canyon from new mining claims, but does not deter mining under existing claims held by Denison and others. When the price of uranium increased in recent years and new interest in nuclear power grew, mining claims exploded in Arizona, even in the pristine region of the Grand Canyon. Supai Waters, Havasupai Keeper of the Water Songs, said his people are the Guardians of the Grand Canyon. He said uranium mining here is not just a threat to the Colorado River and tourists who come to see the Eighth Wonder of the World, but to Supai drinking water, underground aquifers, and drinking water in Southwest cities.

Speaking of the Supai responsibility to protect the land, water, and air here from the poisons of mining, Supai Waters said, "If we do let this happen, we would be the murderers of the world. We cannot let that happen." He said that protection of the Grand Canyon also affects the weather patterns and climate of the earth.

"My people have lived in the canyon since time immemorial. The canyons contain power points and vortexes. If there is tampering or pillaging, the earth will not be the same. There are places where we guard. These sacred places have to do with the weather, the wind, the sun, the celestial movements. That is why we are here protecting it," Supai Waters said.

Matthew Putesoy, vice chairman of the Havasupai Nation, said the Grand Canyon is a national treasure, inviting 5 million people every year to explore and be inspired by its beauty. "To the Havasuw 'Baaja, who have lived in the region for many hundreds of years, it is sacred. As the 'guardians of the Grand Canyon,' we strenuously object to mining for uranium here. It is a threat to the health of our environment and tribe, our tourism-based economy, and our religion."

Putesoy thanked Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar for announcing a two-year moratorium on new mining claims in the 1 million acres of lands around Grand Canyon National Park. However, Putesoy said existing claims, such as those pursued by Canadian-based Denison Mines Corp., still threaten the animals, air, drinking water, and people of the region. Denison, which has staked 110 claims around the Grand Canyon, is seeking groundwater-aquifer permits that would allow it to reopen the Canyon Mine, near Red Butte, as well as two other mining sites, Putesoy said.

"Here, mining could poison the aquifer, which extends for 5,000 square miles under the Coconino Plateau, and serves as drinking water for our tribe and neighboring communities. As I told Congress recently, if our water were polluted, we could not relocate to Phoenix or someplace else and still survive as the Havasupai Tribe. We are the Grand Canyon.

"Most importantly, Red Butte, where Denison Mines intends to reopen a mine, is a traditional site sacred to the Havasuw 'Baaja. Located in the Kaibab National Forest, Red Butte is known as Wii'i Gdwiisa, meaning 'clenched-fist mountain'."

Putesoy, quoting longtime Havasupai leader Rex Tilousi, said, "'Red Butte is the lungs of our Grandmother Canyon.' My people have used these traditional Havasupai religious areas for centuries. Instead of allowing the destruction of our national treasure, we are asking the federal government to work with the Havasupai Tribe to protect Red Butte and all of the lands on and around the Grand Canyon from further mining activities. This natural wonder is irreplaceable and demands our shared action and protection for those living now, and those yet to be born," Putesoy said.

Pueblo and Navajo Uranium Victims Panel

Pueblos and Navajos gave oral testimonies during the Uranium Victims Panel. Introducing the panel, Carletta Tilousi, Havasupai, said, "When I heard their stories, it changed my life forever." Tilousi said the people will stand united to fight for sacred places, water, land, air, and people.

Manuel Pino, Acoma Pueblo, said his people have lived with a 50-year legacy of uranium mining, living in the heart of the Grants uranium belt in northwest New Mexico. There were numerous uranium mines, and the Jackpile Mine, in neighboring Laguna Pueblo, was the largest ore producer in the United States.

Laguna Pueblo housed the Jackpile Mine for 30 years. The mine was located only 2,000 feet from the Laguna village of Pagate and 24 million tons of ore were mined. Over 90% of the ore went to one source: the U. S. Department of Defense for weapons of mass destruction.

"Not only were we tearing up the earth, but the ore was going to weapons that the United States now has stockpiled all over the world and have not been decommissioned or taken care of," Pino said during the panel. One of the heroes of this movement honored was Dorothy Purley of Paguate village in Laguna Pueblo, an ore truck driver at Jackpile Mine and cancer victim who became a founder of the current Native American movement against uranium mining. Pino said Purley was a victim of lymphoma and passed to the Spirit World in the year 2000, just months after receiving the international Nuclear Free Future Award. She was an inspiration to the Native American movement that now battles uranium mining and educates others.

Pino praised the efforts of Phil Harrison, Navajo from Red Valley, who served on the panel at the Supai gathering. Harrison was instrumental in the congressional passage of the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, which compensates victims of the nuclear fuel chain, mainly uranium workers, atomic veterans, and those living downwind from atomic test sites.

Today, Harrison helps Navajo and Pueblo victims file claims and serves as a Navajo councilman. Harrison said his father died at 45 from lung cancer and many of his other family members died. For 30 years Harrison has fought this battle. He said uranium mining brought no benefits to the Navajo Nation. Harrison questioned where the promised high schools and parks are.

"What do we have? We have lung cancer, various illnesses, and birth defects." There is also leukemia and kidney failure. In the hard-hit communities of Cove and Red Valley in the Four Corners region of the Navajo Nation, he said Navajos stopped farming because they feared the radioactive contamination flowing down the mountain with the streams.

Harrison said the companies got off free and were never held responsible because the companies mined the uranium for the U.S. government. He said attempts to file suit against the corporation were met with the response that the uranium was being mined for the U.S. government and nothing could be done. Harrison said that meanwhile the radioactive waste from the nuclear industry winds up back on Indian lands. He said while Native Americans live with the radioactivity, cancer, and death, the corporate owners of mines live in the clean cities, free from contamination.

Larry King, Navajo panelist from the Eastern Navajo Dine' Against Uranium Mining, recently helped organize a 30-year commemoration of the devastating Church Rock, NM spill, whose victims were Navajos. Pino said the Church Rock spill on July 16, 1979, was the largest amount of radiation emitted at one time in the history of the nuclear fuel chain in the United States. Now, 30 years after this nuclear catastrophe, the federal government still has not restored this area where Navajos make their homes, Pino said.

Pino spoke of the Navajo and Pueblo mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles, and aunts who have died or who are now dying of cancer. "It is not a happy story," Pino said. "We are here to stop this nuclear nightmare. As Indigenous Peoples, we are the last ones to be served." Today, there are 550 abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation that have not been cleaned up. "We are a low priority when it comes to the federal government cleaning up these nuclear catastrophes."

Pino said this would never happen if radioactive tailings were strewn in the nearby cities of Albuquerque, Phoenix, or Flagstaff. "Because we are indigenous people, still traditional based and advocating our traditional based-knowledge, we are sometimes considered obstacles, because of our traditional world view to protect Mother Earth."

Carletta Garcia, daughter of Dorothy Purley, told the gathering that she grew up in Paguate, home of the world's largest open-pit uranium mine. She grew up with the deafening sounds and jolts of the constant blasts to loosen the ore. It shook the whole mesa and the radioactive dust would be sprinkled on the eating tables. "We ate it with our lunch."

Garcia said in 1975 her mother began driving an ore truck. The only safety equipment was a safety hat, goggles, and a flashlight. The workers were never told of the dangers of uranium. The tribe thought the mine would bring revenues and wealth. It brought wealth and death. Lagunas did not realize what would happen 30 years later. Garcia's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1993. "We cried, I hugged my mother, I told my mother we are not going to let this take over us, we are going to fight."

"My mother was a real trooper." But her mom also began realizing that other Pueblo people were dying all around her. Her relatives were dying. It was stomach cancer, leukemia, childhood leukemia, and other cancers. Garcia remembered the first day her mother began losing her hair. She took off her red scarf. "Her hair began fluttering with the wind. We cried."

Still, her mother traveled and fought the battle to halt uranium mining and educate other Native Americans. Then one day, Garcia said, "She said it was time to go." Garcia's husband, who grew up in the village, was also diagnosed with a rare skin cancer. Her husband died in 1995, twelve days after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He was 50 years old. Now, Garcia is a widow, and her health is beginning to fail; she said, "I am afraid for my children, I am afraid for your children. We don't need this uranium."

"All of these children here are so precious. I keep watching the children and hoping they will never get sick and never face what I had to, and hoping you young ladies will never be widowed," Garcia told the gathering.

"In Numbers, There is Strength"

During the panel, Larry King, Navajo from Church Rock, NM, told the gathering how he worked for the United Nuclear Corporation from 1975 to 1983 as a n underground mine surveyor. King said he has lived all his life in Church Rock and still raises his cattle on the land where he grew up. Now, a community activist, he said Navajos in the communities of Church Rock, Pinedale, Coyote Canyon, and Iyanbito, NM, have suffered greatly from uranium mining.

At Church Rock, the break in the dam at the tailings pond was the largest uranium spill from the United Nuclear Corporation (UNC) tailing pond, with 94 million gallons of contaminated water flooding into the Puerco wash (arroyo or stream), which wraps around his grazing area, and flows through Navajo communities, before it meets up with the Little Colorado River.

UNC installed pumps at the operation and for more than 20 years, from the 1960s through the 1980s, the contaminated underground water was pumped into four ponds. Those ponds were unlined and unprotected against seepage, King said.

"This water was eventually released into several unnamed washes, which meet up with the Puerco wash. So even prior to the UNC spill of July 16, 1979, there was already untreated water being released into the Puerco wash for more than 20 years."

"Every time you walked up to the wash, you could smell the real bad smell that used to emit from the wash and the yellowish slime that would collect along the stream bed." Today, the uranium contamination has seeped deeper into the ground, a fact that is revealed when Navajos install water lines for their homes. King smelled the stench when his water line was dug and saw the yellowish color.

"Our community continues to suffer from the mining operations." There are 20 unreclaimed uranium mines in his community. He said the uranium was used for weapons of mass destruction. Navajos knew they lived in a contaminated community, but in recent years the extent of the serious contamination of the water, land, and air has become obvious. The mining companies in the Church Rock, NM region included Phillips Petroleum Company, UNC, and Hydro Resources Corp. (HRC). HRC, which left behind a waste pile, now has a license from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, to mine uranium there again. The targeted land borders the Navajo Nation land where uranium mining is now halted, but the mining could poison the aquifer and destroy the water supply of Navajos. Navajos at ENDAUM are now fighting HRC's plan to mine.

King said Navajos were never told of the dangers of exposure to uranium or the health effects in years to come. He said many of his coworkers died from cancer. "As an underground worker, the only safety equipment we were given were hard hats and rubber boots, nothing else."

The workers were never told that breathing the dust and drinking the water exposed them to radiation, he related. In the mines, there were downpours underground of contaminated waters. They were never told that eating their lunches underground would contaminate them. King said UNC was able to appear in compliance when OSHA (U. S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration) inspectors came because the company was informed in advance and knew the inspectors were coming. Suddenly, ventilation fans were rerouted and barricades would go up. OSHA would give a passing grade, but the next day it would be business as usual in the tunnels, where there was no ventilation.

King, like other Navajos, is now suffering from asthma, respiratory problems, and arthritis. He is fighting Hydro Resources Corporation's new plan for in situ uranium mining. King said Navajos have already been warned about Hydro Resources' false promises by victims in Texas and elsewhere. "We need to make a stand and say, 'No more.' We have to think about our future and our water."

In situ uranium mining uses injection wells, which inject chemicals and make the ore into a liquid. Then centrifugal force in the production well brings the ore to the surface. Pino said the process is a great threat to the water of the Grand Canyon,

where the aquifers are like underground rivers. In situ uranium mining could poison the entire watershed.

Dennis Banks: Solidarity

During the gathering, Dennis Banks, Ojibwe from Minnesota and cofounder of the American Indian Movement, opened his talk with these words, "We are all Havasupai when it comes to this struggle.

"Whatever our roots are, whenever there is oppression, whenever people are being hurt, whenever there are mining companies that are destroying our land, we have to stand up," Banks said.

Banks said Native people are born into struggle. "It will never go away." Banks urged everyone in the struggle to give it their all, since the mining companies are ready to seize the land and water. "They don't want part of our land—they want all of the land."

Banks said his own Ojibwe Council is trying to negotiate away land to a corporation for millions of dollars. But the grassroots people are saying no. "Not one more inch, not one more acre, not one more tree, not one more blade of grass are we going to give up for these people exploiting our land."

Banks warned that companies tear away at the culture, which is "the very fabric of who we are." He said Indian people must never forget that they were once hunted down like dogs and chased down by men on horseback. The language, too, should be held sacred; the traditional languages stolen from so many when Indian children were ripped from their parents and put in boarding schools. Banks said acre after acre of fertile land has been destroyed and Indian people are sick and tired of these mining companies. At Red Butte in Havasupai Territory, he said the fragrant sage growing wild here would be replaced with the "stench of mining" if any corporation were allowed to mine.

Louise Benally and her brother John Benally came from their home in Big Mountain, to show their support for the resistance to the uranium mine. The Benallys have spent their lives in the resistance to the relocation of Navajos in Arizona. They came with the message of solidarity of struggle.

During two days of meetings, following two days of ceremonies, Roland Manakaja said the Havasupai are not only battling the desecration of uranium mining, but they are also battling the desecration of another point considered part of the sacred geography—the San Francisco Peaks. There, developers have announced a plan to make snow out of sewage water for tourism at the Snowbowl ski resort. If this happens, Manakaja affirmed, the Snowbowl will be known as "the toilet bowl," and the Eighth Wonder of the World, the Grand Canyon, will become known as the "Eighth Blunder of the World."

"Make no mistake, mining company," he said. "We will be there in your face every day!"

Tiny Hanna, Supai elder, told of the time when Havasupai were at home in the canyon, before it was claimed as the Eighth Wonder of the World. It was a time when Supai grew their crops below the mesa of Red Butte, in the canyon, before tourists from around the world began pouring in. Seated around the dinner tables, Supai elders told of their lives now in the canyon, southwest of here in the Grand Canyon at Supai, accessible only by foot, mule, or helicopter from the rim above.

New Ways to Get the Word Out

During the gathering, Hopi, Navajo, Yavapai, Aztecs, and other traditional singers shared their songs with the Supai. The sounds of traditional Birdsongs filled the four days, along with the modern sounds of some of the best Native American singers in the music industry: Keith Secola, Casper and the 602 Band, Burning Sky performing with John Densmore of the Doors, Clarence Clearwater, Summit Dub Squad, and others, shared reggae, folk, and hip hop.

Earthcycles grassroots radio, broadcast for four days, all day each day, live on the Internet globally, and portions of the days were broadcast locally on the FM radio. The testimony of the elders was recorded for hearings and Congress, with the audios preserved in public files and now available for listening at www.earthcycles.net.

Govinda Dalton has a passion for grassroots radio and believes in providing a vehicle for the voices of the people. He drove in from California in his bus, equipped with solar power and a satellite. The solar panels provided electricity for the gathering, including powering the sound system, and the satellite provided Internet service for broadcasting.

Earlier, Earthcycles broadcast live for five months across America on the Longest Walk in 2008 and at the Indigenous Border Summits of the Americas in 2006 and 2007 in Arizona. Dalton views grassroots radio as a means of social change and a mechanism for a new evolving consciousness for humanity. He said it is essential to air the voices of the people since the media is heavily controlled and censored.

Speaking of the corporations who have contaminated this region for decades, Pino said, "Why would they want to mine uranium in one of the natural wonders of the world like the Grand Canyon? If they will mine uranium here, they will mine uranium anywhere. They have no heart, they have no soul."

Brenda Norrell is a freelance writer and Americas Program border analyst, www.americaspolicy.org. Her blog can be found at <http://www.bsnorrell.blogspot.com/>.