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**Conservation at the Zuni Pueblo:
Lessons in Sustainability**

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Conservation at the Zuni Pueblo: Lessons in Sustainability

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I. Introduction

A. Summary

In the high arid plateau country of western New Mexico among red sandstone mesas, broad valleys and deep canyons the Zuni people have sustained a culture of land use by uniting thousands of years of experience with cosmological understandings of the world and the universe. The universe of the Zuni is interpreted much differently than the perceptions of nature experienced by non-Zunis. The web of Zuni knowledge and reverence that holds the universe together is based on clandestine systems of ceremony and ritual which are sacred and inaccessible to the uninitiated. Like a left or right hemisphere oriented persona, thoughts can be developed and brought into action unaware of values unexplored. It is vital to understand how belief is the fulcrum of action for Zuni land use and modern capabilities are tools for implementation.

B. References

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I. Transformational Aspects of Modern Land Use Policy

Around the turn of the century Zuni had begun to lose most of its aboriginal lands to westward expansion of the new republic. Prior to the manifest destiny opening lands in the west, Zuni had traditionally used approximately 14.5 million acres in the Zuni area for hunting, farming, religious activities and collecting. By the 19th century Zuni land use was being dictated by U.S. government policy while the culture of Zuni lands use technologies went unrecognized.

By the 1970's there was already growing evidence of damage to Zuni lands as a result of federal improprieties related to trust responsibilities. Basically, the fed had mismanaged Zuni lands so recklessly that severe environmental damage had rendered much of Zuni's lands unusable.

Zunis essentially were not included in land use development or policy during this period and many Zuni customs were violated. The change to a cash economy and value as labor had significant affects to Zuni agriculture and other land uses and

knowledge of traditional Zuni land use technology began to disappear.

The marginalization of Zuni knowledge and customs has had a lasting affect on Zuni society and lands.

II. A Cosmological Approach to Sustainability

A. The Zuni Interpretation of Reality Goes Beyond the Absolute Provable and Graphable.

Zunis have been in the same place for a very long time. By archaeological interpretation, Zunis have been in the same valley for roughly 4,000 to 7,000 years. By being in the same place for such a long time Zunis have developed a perception and understanding of the universe which accounts for dimensions not normally considered in modern thinking. Much of this knowledge has been gained through experience and has become a religion of reverence and respect of how nature affects our lives and how it can be lived with.

Through thousands of years of sensing the conditions that make life difficult or wonderful, Zunis have become participants in the cosmological process. When the fulcrum between thought and action is belief there are ways to control rain, fertility, the creation of beings and protection of the universe. To start or maintain control of universal processes, Zuni ceremony and ritual is necessary. The power of this knowledge is preserved through a complex system of secrecy and socioreligious protocol. There are requirements of language, initiation, intimate community affiliation and family support which must be met before a person can learn and participate in the actions which sustain the Zuni world and universe.

B. Zuni's Attention to Intellectual Property Rights

The power of Zuni knowledge is protected through the inherent clandestine nature of the Zuni religious society. This mechanism of control is local and familiar, but there are objects of Zuni spirituality which are physical manifestations such as Zuni crops and seeds (traditional folk varieties). These materials are rapidly being sought for their economic value by outsiders. Whether it is seeds, medicine, techniques or procedures developed by Zuni people over time there are big questions of how they will or will not be protected.

How or if these forms of Zuni knowledge are to be shared with humanity is a dilemma Zunis and other native peoples are facing. Most Zunis would agree that the seeds given to us by the creator is not for sale and cannot be compromised on the market or with outsiders who do not understand their significance. How intellectual property rights are recognized are often creations by western industrial nations exerting pressure on less developed countries and indigenous communities such as Zuni. If misused or misinterpreted, even the greatest allowable legal protection and monetary compensation will neglect the essence of Zuni knowledge and fail to capture the unmeasurable reverence of a world view within the context of Zuni society.

III. Thinking about the Next Centuries

A. Reorienting Policy and Developing Capability

Dealing with the transformation of the past century by reorienting policy and empowering people to allow positive adjustments to occur could not be approached too idealistically. The idealists, "intellectuals", managers and administrators with all good intentions have had to consider the capabilities of Zuni government and the realities of Zuni society. Getting to a modern vision of Sustainability has required a regrounding on the part of some and training for others. The vision is generational in

scope with programs for human resource development in tandem with resource development. We need to grow our farmers, administrators and scientists to meet the needs of the future if we want a Zuni version of Sustainability.

Reaching a modern of vision of Zuni sustainability requires developing full partnerships with our own people and community to establish processes to empower Zuni people through:

- strengthening appropriate policies and or legal instruments

- promoting the status of Zuni values, traditional knowledge and resource management practices

- recognizing traditional and direct dependence on renewable resources, including sustainable harvesting which continues to be essential to Zuni cultural, economic, and physical well-being

- Developing and strengthening dispute resolution in relation to settlement of land and resource management concerns

- supporting a range of choices on how to improve the quality of life so tribal members can participate in their own form of development

- enhancing capacity building based on traditional knowledge and experience and appropriate scientific methodologies

E. Designing and Implementing an Appropriate Program of Action

As a result of law suits against the U.S. government for lands taken and lands damaged, two settlements were reached after about 12 years of litigation. Each suit was settled out of court

through two separate acts of Congress. The Zuni Claims Settlement Act of 1990 and the Zuni Land Conservation Act of 1990 separately allowed appropriation of \$25 million to deal with the wrongs done by the U.S. over the past century. The Conservation Act established a \$17 million trust fund and interest from the trust fund will be used in perpetuity for restoration of damaged lands and strategies for sustainable development of Zuni resources.

As ideas were being formulated on how to design a program of action for sustainable development in Zuni, bold new ideas and debates were being introduced in preparation for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. A new blue print was introduced which proposed more social and cultural participation in development of the earth's resources and long term vision for ensuring that benefits today will not compromise the ability of future generations to benefit as well. Zuni hybridized the spirit of Rio and other efforts by other developing communities and countries to meet the needs of Zuni.

The Zuni Conservation Project is in its second year of implementation. The project's spectrum of knowledge incorporates Zuni farmers and other practitioners, elders, children and new college graduates. The project is a prototype for resource development policy, encouraging humanity in technology and revitalization of traditional land use practices.