

## *The Grandmother Rebellion*



**AT A MEETING IN** Washington, D.C., among grassroots anti-coal groups, longtime Appalachian activist Larry Gibson turned to two Navajo women who had come to the gathering as representatives of the Black Mesa Water Coalition.

“What happened to you was the blueprint,” said Gibson. “Now it’s metastasized all over the country.”

Gibson’s family has lived on Kayford Mountain in West Virginia since the late 1700s, and more than three hundred of his relatives are buried in the family cemetery that now sits isolated above a devastated landscape. Since 1986 he has watched the destruction of Kayford Mountain while enduring relentless personal harassment. His dogs have been shot; there are bullet holes in the siding of his cabin. But Gibson was right. The assault of the coal industry on Navajo and Hopi country was part of a far longer story of conquest and exploitation whose roots traced deep into the genocidal policies of white expansionism.

The U.S. Army established Fort Defiance and Fort Wingate on Navajo land in 1851, and in 1864 thousands of Navajo people

were marched over three hundred miles to southeastern New Mexico. More than two hundred people died during the Long Walk. Four years later, most people returned from the relocation camps, but the experience left indelible scars. In 1882 an executive order by President Chester Arthur created a new Indian reservation consisting of a near-perfect square of land that enclosed one of the richest energy deposits in the world, the Black Mesa coalfield. Federal surveyors had recently assessed the coal deposit, and President Arthur's motive in establishing the reservation was to prevent nearby Mormon settlers from laying claim to the land and its rich deposits under the Desert Lands Act of 1877.

Both Navajo and Hopi people lived within the boundaries of the Black Mesa reservation. In the 1960s the Hopi tribal council approved leasing Black Mesa coal to Peabody Coal Company, as did the Navajo tribal council. But subsequently it came to light that attorney John Boyden, who had handpicked the Hopi council and represented the tribe for thirty years, had secretly worked for Peabody Coal during the time he was officially representing the tribe.

Strip mining began at the Navajo Mine in 1963, and by the mid-1970s the Four Corners region had developed into one of the largest coal complexes in the United States, powering Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and other areas on the southwestern power grid. The second mine on Black Mesa was the Kayenta Mine, supplying the Navajo Generating Station. Royalties and taxes from the mines provided approximately 80 percent of the Hopi general operating budget and 60 percent of the Navajo general fund budget. The power plants were massive in scale. At 2,410 megawatts, the Navajo Generating Station was the fourth largest power plant in the United States. The Four Corners plant

was nearly as large. Built in the early 1960s, its plume was seen from space by the Apollo astronauts. Two other plants used Navajo and Hopi coal: the 1,800-megawatt San Juan Plant and the 1,640-megawatt Mohave Generating Station in Nevada, which burned coal shipped 273 miles by slurry pipeline from the Black Mesa Mine.

While the mines and plants generated employment, a common complaint on the reservation was that Navajos and Hopis were filling few of the higher-paying jobs. On Black Mesa, 80 percent of Navajo people still lack running water, and 50 percent of people on the Navajo and Hopi reservations lack electricity, a huge irony given the massive transmission lines overhead. In a 2004 *Los Angeles Times* article, Black Mesa resident Nicole Horseherder said, “Somewhere far away from us, people have no understanding that their demand for cheap electricity, air conditioning and lights 24 hours a day has contributed to the imbalance of this very delicate place.”

Reservation physician Marcus Higi testified that he had never seen worse asthma than the cases he found on the Navajo reservation. During four years on the reservation, he had to fly five children to hospitals in order to save their lives. Research reported by the U.S. Geological Survey showed that people living in the Shiprock area, where thermal inversions trapped emissions from two nearby coal plants, were more than five times as likely to experience respiratory complaints as residents of nearby communities. In an area where air quality had once been pristine, the power plants had created smoglike conditions worse than those in congested urban areas.

Erich Fowler, a resident of Kline, Colorado, about thirty miles from the Four Corners plant, testified at EPA hearings that a yellow haze “as bright as daffodils” blocked his view of

Farmington and that at times “the sky begins to look like it’s filled with scrambled eggs.” The American Lung Association estimated that sixteen thousand people in the region (15 percent of the population) suffer from lung disease probably caused by plant emissions. Each year, the San Juan generating station emits approximately 100 million pounds of sulfur dioxide, 100 million pounds of nitrogen oxides, 6 million pounds of soot, and at least 1,000 pounds of mercury. The Four Corners plant emits 157 million pounds of sulfur dioxide, 122 million pounds of nitrogen oxides, 8 million pounds of soot, and 2,000 pounds of mercury. Even the Grand Canyon was affected: photographs showed its depths obscured by yellowish brown smog.

In addition to air problems, those living in the vicinity of strip mines, mainly farmers and sheep ranchers, suffered from water toxicity or loss of water supplies. Furthering the pressure on water supplies was the annual removal of over a billion gallons of water from the Navajo Aquifer to feed the coal slurry between the Black Mesa Coal Mine and the Mohave Station. Runoff from coal mines supporting the Four Corners and San Juan plants contaminated aquifers with sulfates, leading to the death of livestock. Another hazard to water supplies was 150 million tons of coal combustion waste (containing cadmium, selenium, arsenic, and lead) that had been dumped in the Navajo and San Juan mines.

Alongside the environmental impacts came severe sociological upheaval. In 1974 attorney John Boyden and his coal industry allies pushed legislation through Congress that directed the relocation of fourteen thousand Navajo families. Additional legislation in 1996 required the remaining families to move. It was the largest forced relocation in the United States since the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Thayer

Scudder, professor of anthropology at the California Institute of Technology, protested the action to the United Nations, writing, “I believe that the forced relocation of Navajo and Hopi people that followed from the passage in 1974 of Public Law 93-531 is a major violation of these people’s human rights. Indeed this forced relocation of over 12,000 Native Americans is one of the worst cases of involuntary community resettlement that I have studied throughout the world over the past 40 years.”

Federally appointed Relocation Commissioner Roger Lewis resigned in protest. Lewis said, “I feel that in relocating these elderly people, we are as bad as the Nazis that ran the concentration camps in World War II.”

Now, another power plant was being slated for Navajo/Hopi lands, a 1,500-megawatt facility known as Desert Rock. The project was sponsored by Sithe Global Power, a “merchant power” company that planned to sell the power from the project to utilities in the Southwest. It was backed by the private equity firm Blackstone. Enticed by the promise of a \$50 million annual payout to the Navajo Nation, the Tribal Council voted 66–7 in favor of inviting Sithe to build the plant, but the plan quickly ran into strong grassroots opposition.

When I met Dáilan Long, one of the organizers with Diné CARE (Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment), I was struck by the quiet confidence and persuasiveness of someone still in his early twenties. Raised on the Navajo reservation and educated at Dartmouth, Long had returned to help organize against the Desert Rock power project. He was quick to say, however, that his role was that of a supporting player, noting that the leadership of groups like Diné CARE rested in the hands of the elders.

“In our culture,” said Long, “you do what the grandmothers tell you.”

In the Diné language spoken by the Navajo, or Diné, people, the word *doodá* means simply “no.” It’s also the first word in the name of another Navajo/Hopi activist group: Doodá Desert Rock. If the group succeeds, the proposed Desert Rock Coal Plant will not be built and the Navajo Nation will not receive an annual payment of \$50 million from the plant’s sponsors. Yet despite the loss of the promised payment that would result from killing the project, Doodá Desert Rock and other groups opposing the plant appear to enjoy widespread support.

Among dozens of comments about the Desert Rock plant collected by Ecos Consulting, the following were typical:

A rancher/farmer: “I lost five of my female cows and each of them was with an unborn calf during the winter from drinking contaminated water in the mining area. The energy corporation creates hopes and dreams they do not keep. We don’t need the power plant and we don’t need the coal mine to survive; our people survived for many centuries without any power plants and coal mines so why should we need it now?”

A weaver/rancher: “Two power plants and one more on the way are too many power plants, and I opposed all of them. We are already badly polluted by all kinds of toxics and who is cleaning it up? Nobody. We are sick and most of the people around Four Corners power plant and surrounding areas have numerous health problems. We can even smell the smoke from the smoke stacks in certain temperatures or the way the wind blows.”

A rancher: “I oppose another coal-fired power plant. We have already experienced the bad side of Four Corners power plant. We have been there. They lied to the people and all the promises were never fulfilled. Why should we go for any other power plant with the same empty promises?”

A nineteen-year-old student: “Being a Christian, we must LOVE our people and protect what God has provided for us to live with. We should not reject or in any way misuse what God gave us. We need to protect our cultural sites, traditional burial grounds, our holy offering sites, and historical sites by not contaminating the air, water, and land.

Desert Rock power plant will pollute our land and put our health at risk. People are sick and it is caused by breathing in toxic pollutants. How else would they be ill?"

On a cold night in December 2006, the Desert Rock issue came unexpectedly to a head when Elouise Brown of Doodá Desert Rock discovered a contractor affiliated with Sithe Global Power doing exploratory water drilling on grazing land permitted to Alice Gilmour, an elder in her eighties. Brown blocked the contractor's pickup, and Gilmour, members of Brown's extended family, and others joined her blockade. Brown appealed for help from other Navajo, and the blockade continued in subzero weather.

One visitor wrote: "They had a small, white tent that the grandmas were trying to stay in, but the wind blew through it; and they made a wood stove out of a 55-gallon drum, but the wind was blowing the smoke back into their tent; and the grandmas were having a hard time."

Soon videos of the blockade were being watched around the world, and supporters arrived to reinforce the protest. On December 22 police forcibly removed protesters from the road, but they established a nearby protest campsite and vigil that was still occupied nearly a year later.

At public hearings on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement in late July 2007 in several towns in Navajo territory, scores of local residents expressed vehement opposition to the plant. That month, Diné CARE sued the federal Office of Surface Mining for approving an expansion of the Navajo Mine to fuel the plant, and New Mexico governor Bill Richardson added his opposition to the plant. The next month, the Mountain Ute Tribal Council unanimously passed a resolution opposing construction, and in September the EPA expressed concerns

about the thoroughness of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' draft environmental impact statement.

In September 2007 the construction contract was granted to the Fluor Corporation, but opponents continued to explore other avenues for slowing or blocking the project. One was to defuse the commonly cited argument by tribal officials that the plant would generate new jobs for an area with unemployment rates above 40 percent and poverty rates close to 50 percent. Was there a different course of economic development that would not exact such a terrible toll in illness and environmental degradation? To raise that option as a real possibility, Diné CARE presented Sithe with a report contrasting the development of the coal-fired plant with a clean energy scenario. The study based its argument on principles of Navajo ethics directing humans to live in harmony with the environment.

Meanwhile, a formal effort had been brewing that could provide the finances to underwrite such an alternative energy path. That effort grew out of the shutdown of the Mohave Generating Station in 2005 due to a Clean Air Act lawsuit and resolutions passed by both the Navajo and Hopi tribes ending Peabody's use of water from the Black Mesa aquifer to send the coal by slurry to Mohave. Because Mohave had been the highest emitter of sulfur dioxide in the western United States, shutting it down produced a windfall to the plant's owners in the form of pollution credits under the U.S. Acid Rain program administered by the Environmental Protection Agency. After the closure of Mohave, those credits began accumulating at the rate of an estimated \$30 million annually. An alliance of groups calling itself the Just Transition Coalition (JTC) began working to secure the credits for tribal use by establishing a renewable energy infrastructure that would be partially owned by tribal



communities and that would provide electricity, income, and jobs. The coalition included the Indigenous Environmental Network, Honor the Earth Foundation, Apollo Alliance, Black Mesa Water Coalition, To’Nizhoni Ani, Grand Canyon Trust, and Sierra Club.

The Just Transition Coalition proposed that annual revenues from the sale of pollution credits from the Mohave plant be reinvested in renewable energy on tribal lands, such as wind and solar plants, as well as be used to help offset the economic burden of lost coal royalties and jobs. In a formal motion to the California Public Utilities Commission, the coalition asked that the funds be allocated as follows: 30 percent for local villages and chapters to invest in solar, wind, and ecotourism; 10 percent for job retraining; 40 percent for alternative energy development and production; and 20 percent for tribal governments to help sustain programs cut due to loss of royalty income.

Throughout 2008 and into 2009, prospects for defeating Desert Rock appeared to steadily improve as project financier Blackstone suffered setbacks in the global financial crisis. In March 2009 Reuters reported that Blackstone CEO Steve Schwarzman had been forced to give himself a 99 percent pay cut as the private-equity firm posted a \$1.33 billion loss. Estimated costs for Desert Rock had risen from \$1.5 billion in 2003 to \$4 billion in 2009, a sum that Blackstone now seemed less likely to be able to underwrite. Even as its stock market value plummeted from over \$35 per share in early 2007 to less than \$4 per share in early 2009, Blackstone was losing friends even more rapidly in the New Mexico state legislature, where an \$85 million tax break for Desert Rock that had failed to secure passage in 2007 failed to win even a single sponsor in 2008. At both the New Mexico Environment Department and

the EPA, regulators announced decisions to take a new look at the project's previously approved air permit because of ozone, carbon dioxide, and other issues.

Most ominously for the future of the project, potential buyers of Desert Rock's power were turning elsewhere for their future power needs. California utilities had already turned a cold shoulder to Desert Rock because of a new state law prohibiting the purchasing of power from coal plants that did not employ carbon capture and storage technology. Arizona Public Service, another potential buyer, had stated its intention to move away from coal toward solar energy. Only one real friend remained: the Navajo tribal government, which held out hope that the \$50 million annual revenue stream promised by Schwarzman to the tribe could be revived. Ironically, money was now actually flowing from the tribe to the project, as the Navajo Nation racked up \$110,000 in legal fees defending Desert Rock's permit applications. While Navajo Nation president Joe Shirley Jr. continued to win key Tribal Council votes securing right of way for the transmission lines required by the plants, closer votes on amendments to the transmission line legislation showed increasing uneasiness within the council.

As of mid-2009, Desert Rock still survived as a proposal, but activists opposing the project were hopeful. "We have drawn the line in the sand," said Dáilan Long.

Here's how a Navajo electrician summarized his feelings toward the project:

"I worked on plenty of power plants in California and Arizona, but when one hit home I decided against it. Power plants are dirty, but the pay is good, yet I opposed Desert Rock. We are already dealing with two coal-fired power plants in the San Juan basin, and my mother, brother, and nieces are asthmatic and many people are sick with diabetes. I believe all this newly arrived disease comes from

breathing in chemicals from the power plants which slowly kills the inside organs. I just wish the Navajo Nation president and the council delegates could find something else in place of the power plants, coal mines, and oil fields. Our reservation is getting to be a dump yard for energy companies. We will be helping our president Joe Shirley and his council delegates digging graves for our future. We have to put a stop to this crazy genocide on Navajo land. We need help to put a stop to all this mess."

