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Zuni Eagle Sanctuary
Zuni Fish and Wildlife Department
Pueblo of Zuni (Zuni, New Mexico)

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Created in 1999, the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary is the first eagle sanctuary owned and operated by Native Americans as well as the first aviary constructed for the purpose of cultural preservation. Combining both functional aspects of eagle care with an aesthetic that reflects the natural surroundings of Zuni, the Sanctuary is home to more than twenty eagles that otherwise would have been destroyed. Successfully meeting the Zunis' demand for molted eagle feathers that are used in religious and cultural ceremonies, the Sanctuary is also a model of intergovernmental cooperation between a tribal government and federal agency.

Located in west-central New Mexico, Zuni Pueblo is the largest and most remote of the nineteen New Mexico Indian Pueblos. Among other factors, the Zunis' remoteness has contributed to the strong continuation of their cultural and religious traditions—traditions that require the use of eagle feathers. Since time immemorial, eagles' molted feathers have been used in rain and prosperity ceremonies, as well as in prayer offerings.

Traditionally, Zunis satisfied this need for feathers by practicing eagle husbandry. They would collect eaglets from the wild and "adopt" them into their families. The birds were treated with the utmost respect and tenderness, frequently living with families for over half a century. According to the Zuni origin myth, Chimik'ana'kowa, a catastrophe can befall the Zunis when they become lax in their religious observances. Therefore, when the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973 made traditional means of obtaining eagle feathers illegal, the Zunis were challenged to identify other sources of feathers.

For several decades, the only legal way for Zunis and other Indians to obtain eagle feathers was to submit applications to the National Eagle Repository in Colorado. However, working through the Repository has proven challenging, largely because the demand for eagle feathers far exceeds the available supply. Although high demand may be indicative of Native cultural renaissance, the difficulty of obtaining feathers threatens that momentum. Applicants frequently wait several years to obtain eagle feathers from the Repository, delay which compromises tribal citizens' ability to plan and participate in religious and cultural ceremonies. The fact that many Zuni religious traditions specify that an eagle feather can be used only once makes it particularly difficult for the Zunis to obtain a sufficient number of feathers. By the mid-1990s, Zuni leaders agreed that something had to be done to increase the legal supply of eagle feathers for ceremonial use—even if it meant changing federal law.

Thus in 1995, the Zunis took a leadership position. They began discussions with the US Fish

and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to address their dilemma. The discussions revealed that each year a large number of eagles in need of permanent placement were actually euthanized. In general, these were eagles injured in collisions with vehicles or electrocuted by power lines, and while many of these eagles could be rehabilitated, they could not be released back into the wild because of the loss of a wing or an eye. Sadly, disfigured but healthy eagles also were difficult to place in zoos or educational facilities – institutions that typically care for non-releasable birds. These birds provided Zuni Pueblo with an opportunity: By building an eagle sanctuary, it would not only accommodate the traditional practice of eagle husbandry and provide a source of molted eagle feathers for ceremonies, but it would save birds that otherwise would be destroyed.

After several years of negotiations with the USFWS that culminated in a historic Statement of Relationship, the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary received its first eagle in March 1999. The Sanctuary now maintains twenty-one birds (nine bald eagles and twelve golden eagles). The Zuni Fish and Wildlife Department oversees the Sanctuary and has developed its own feather distribution protocol, which makes it possible for religious and cultural leaders who once had to wait three years or more to obtain eagle feathers to do so within weeks. When necessary, a Zuni religious leader can obtain feathers on the day of the request, frequently within minutes. Since the Sanctuary's creation, the Zuni Fish and Wildlife Department has distributed nearly twenty thousand feathers to tribal citizens.

In addition to satisfying the Zuni people's need for molted eagle feathers, the excellent care that individual birds receive combined with the thoughtful design of the Sanctuary itself are extraordinary examples of government innovation. Indeed, the Zuni Fish and Wildlife Department's ability to translate community respect for eagles into top-quality care has earned Zuni the admiration of federal and state agencies (including those responsible for licensing the Sanctuary's activities), animal welfare groups, zoos, and wildlife rehabilitators. The Sanctuary building combines the functional aspects of eagle care with an aesthetic that reflects Pueblo's natural surroundings. The façade is made from locally quarried, hand-shaped, red Zuni sandstone while much of the lumber is from sustainably harvested mistletoe-infected trees milled by the Zuni Community Sawmill. The facility faces Dowa Yalanne, a sacred mesa, where golden eagles are occasionally sighted. In November 1999, the American Institute of Architecture recognized the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary with an "Award for Design Excellence."

Zuni Pueblo has exercised its sovereignty through the creation and operation of the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary in several significant ways. First, Zuni has exercised its political sovereignty by entering into a highly productive, government-to-government relationship with the USFWS. This relationship began with the Pueblo's conscious decision to identify and cultivate an individual ally within the federal bureaucracy who would understand the Zunis' concerns and be willing to work with the Pueblo to develop an innovative solution. The strategy worked: Zuni leaders found an ally in the USFWS, and together they turned good individual relationships into productive institutional relationships that are grounded in mutual respect and a willingness to cooperate. Formalized in a Statement of Relationship that recognizes the Pueblo's sovereignty and the US government's trust responsibility, the strong positive relationship between the Pueblo and the USWS has allowed the two parties to effectively address a seemingly intractable problem in which Zuni cultural imperatives clashed with federal policy. In crafting a jointly beneficial solution to the problem, the Zuni transitioned from being recipients of the services of a federal program to partners in the design of a program that addresses their particular cultural needs. In fact, although they work in consultation with their community and the USFWS, the Zunis have gone one step farther by administering the program in its totality. A USFWS tribal liaison has called the agreement with the Zuni Pueblo

a “paradigm shift” and feels that it has “blazed a trail for other tribes” with regard to innovative, tribally determined solutions to pressing cultural problems.

Further, in designing, building, and operating the Sanctuary, Zuni Pueblo has strengthened its ties with the local community and benefited from relationships with outside organizations without compromising its control over the facility. In addition to extensive communications with the USFWS, the National Park Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Zunis have built relationships with dozens of local and national non-governmental foundations and organizations. These include the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and the National Association of Wildlife Rehabilitators, which assisted in designing the facility, and the Albuquerque Zoo and the New Mexico Wildlife Center, which provided training to sanctuary staff in raptor care. The Sanctuary also has engaged the Pueblo in relationships with other Indian nations that are either receiving eagle feathers for ceremonial purposes or are interested in pursuing similar agreements with the federal government.

Zuni Pueblo’s success in meeting its core objective – increasing the supply of eagle feathers for use in religious and cultural ceremonies by creating and operating its own aviary – is tied directly to good program management. Two practices stand out as being particularly significant. First, the Zuni Tribal Government encouraged tribal citizen participation at every step of the Sanctuary’s development. Prior to making the decision to proceed, staff of both the Zuni Fish and Wildlife and Zuni Natural Resources Departments spent a great deal of time canvassing tribal opinion. They held public meetings, consulted with Zuni religious leaders, made visits to kivas, and talked with village residents to hear and address concerns about the possibility of building and maintaining an eagle sanctuary. In establishing the Sanctuary, departmental staff honored what they had heard. For example, when religious leaders objected to a surgical procedure for “sexing” the birds for breeding purposes, the Sanctuary declined to breed the birds. This process of sincere consultation established confidence among tribal citizens that their opinions were being heard and valued, fostered broad support for the Sanctuary, and ultimately, bolstered Zuni citizens’ trust in government. Critically, this process of consultation with the Zuni people has become a model for other Zuni tribal government programs, including a major wetlands project. One tribal member told a Sanctuary staff member that “We’re not afraid to speak up anymore.”

Second, the Sanctuary is committed to educating Zunis and non-Zunis in eagle husbandry, thus supporting a long-standing cultural practice while sharing knowledge with other interested individuals and Indian nations. The Sanctuary has developed a full-scale, hands-on educational program that serves both visitors and formal trainees, a highlight of which is the glove-trained golden eagle O:lo (“Golden” in Zuni). To date, the Sanctuary has trained ten Zuni high school work-study students in aspects of eagle care, one of whom intends to attend veterinary school. The Sanctuary also is working to give religious leaders a more significant role in the day-to-day handling and care of the birds. These partnerships draw on the long-standing knowledge of raptor care among the Zunis, a tradition of care that the Sanctuary helps maintain even while educating its staff and visitors in modern veterinary techniques. This communication of traditional and modern knowledge ensures the long-term sustainability of the Sanctuary.

The establishment of the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary in 1999 led to the successful satisfaction of the Pueblo’s need for molted eagle feathers for religious and cultural ceremonies. It is the first Native American built and operated eagle sanctuary, and it reinvigorates the long-standing Zuni cultural tradition of eagle husbandry through unprecedented means. Creating the Sanctuary prompted the establishment of a cutting-edge, mutually beneficial relationship

between the Zuni tribal government and a federal agency, strengthened ties between the tribal government and surrounding non-governmental agencies, and established a pattern of sincere consultation between the tribal government and the citizens it serves. It is a successful program that demonstrates how the pursuit of self-governance can strengthen and support cultural traditions and values. Already, the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary has received visits from more than thirty Indian nations that hope to construct similar facilities. In sum, the Zuni Eagle Sanctuary is an inspiring example of the unimagined possibilities for sustaining cultural practices open to Indian nations that harness the power of self-determination.

Lessons:

- Indian nations can work productively with and spark change within federal bureaucracies by cultivating individual allies. These allies can help tribal leaders navigate unfamiliar organizations and help their opinions and ideas be better heard. Importantly, these individual relationships can form the basis for productive, formalized intergovernmental relations (for example, MOUs, MOAs, Statements of Relationship).

- Indian nations that manage their own natural resources are able to craft culturally appropriate policies and procedures and measure success using tribal standards. Tribal management also gives tribes an opportunity to develop technical and policy expertise in fields dominated by non-Indians.

- One way tribal governments can become more responsive to community needs is to create mechanisms for soliciting tribal citizen input into governmental affairs. Not only can citizen involvement help tribal governments create better programs, but the resulting public support contributes to program sustainability.

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