



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

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Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation Program White Mountain Apache Tribe (Whiteriver, AZ)

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The White Mountain Apache Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation Program performs all wildlife conservation/management activities for the Tribe and operates a self-sustaining business enterprise based on the Tribe's thriving recreation and tourism industry. The Program's effective management techniques have allowed the White Mountain Apache to gain control over their wildlife and recreation resources and to manage these resources in accordance with Apache values.

Located on 1.6 million acres of resource-rich land, the Fort Apache Reservation is known for its scenic high elevation lakes and over 500 miles of cold streams, pristine lands and thriving wildlife – making it a popular outdoor destination area for visitors throughout Arizona and the southwestern United States. Until the early 1980s, however, the Tribe had minimal management control over its abundant natural and wildlife resources. Although the Tribe had long possessed a Game and Fish Department, the Arizona Game and Fish Department regulated all non-member hunting activities on tribal lands. The Tribe had little input into the State's process of establishing non-member hunting seasons or setting harvest levels for reservation wildlife. By the 1970s, tribal managers had grown increasingly concerned that the State's liberal issuance of big game hunting permits at below-market prices was irresponsible from a conservation standpoint. Further, the Tribe was missing out on a potentially lucrative source of income.

Seeking to expand its jurisdictional control over its resources, the Tribe filed a lawsuit against the State of Arizona in the late 1970s. The issue ultimately found its way to the United States Supreme Court: in 1982, in a related case, *Mescalero Apache Tribe v. State of New Mexico*, the Court recognized tribes' sovereign authority over the management of tribal fish and wildlife resources. This decision paved the way for the White Mountain Apache Tribe to institute its own management practices and to develop innovative, culturally appropriate recreation-based businesses. Building on its success in fisheries management – a program contracted from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) some years earlier – the Tribe established its wildlife management program through another 638 contract with the BIA and focused on the development of various big and small-game hunting programs.

Since assuming management control, the Tribe has developed one of the most respected resource management divisions in Indian Country and worldwide. With a full-time staff of 40 and a seasonal staff of 70 – comprised almost entirely of tribal members – the Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation Division (W&ORD) is the umbrella for a spectrum of conservation and enterprise functions. The W&ORD houses several departments aimed at conservation: a Law

Enforcement Department with 12 certified tribal game rangers, and a Fish and Wildlife Department that employs tribal biologists and technicians who, among other activities, manage a sensitive species program. The W&ORD also oversees two profit-generating tribal enterprises: the Outdoor Recreation Department, which sells permits for recreation activities, and the Trophy Hunting Program, which is anchored by the Tribe's world-renowned elk hunting program, but also includes hunts for pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, bear, mountain lion and turkey.

The W&ORD has been successful in both preserving the reservation's wildlife population and creating sustainable revenue streams for the Tribe – functions that the Tribe has shown can be complementary despite the commonly held belief that they are diametrically opposed.

For example, the Division's strategy of pursuing conservative harvest levels and strict monitoring practices, which are articulated in the Tribe's self-designed Game and Fish Code, has resulted in an extremely healthy wildlife population. In fact, the Tribe has produced more Boone and Crockett record-book elk than any other individual land management area in the world. Indeed, the W&ORD's mantra of "quality over quantity" is paying off: trophy bull elk packages command a price of \$14,500, and in a special sealed-bid action conducted by the Tribe in 2000, one trophy bull elk hunt sold for a record \$38,000. Critically, the W&ORD is constantly searching for ways to link its successful conservation efforts with new profit-generating activities to meet the ever-evolving demand for outdoor recreation services and to enhance the funding base for conservation and resource management programs. Taking the success of its trophy elk hunt sales to the next level, the W&ORD has established outfitted fishing expeditions, a rent-a-lake program and guided canyoneering, camping, hiking, and white water rafting trips. In short, self-governance over resource management has given the W&ORD freedom to innovate in its enterprise development. The Tribe now generates over \$600,000 in profits from its W&ORD enterprises annually.

There are other hallmarks of the W&ORD's success. The Division's sound biological strategy has not only enabled the Tribe to generate profits once unimaginable under state management, but it has given the Tribe the necessary expertise to take on sensitive plant and animal management – a balanced approach that distinguishes it from most wildlife management programs in Indian Country. An example is the Tribe's work in recovering the native Apache Trout. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) acknowledges that the Tribe's biological expertise and active local participation have been the primary reasons why this once-endangered species has been upgraded to threatened status – and is well on its way to being completely de-listed. By combining strong will, good management and technical know-how, the Tribe has avoided the costly and time-consuming litigation that has plagued other tribes' involvement in recovery efforts. In fact, state and federal agencies have asked the Tribe to lend its expertise to partnerships for the recovery of a variety of threatened species, including the Mexican spotted owl and the Mexican gray wolf.

Several key factors underlie the W&ORD's sustained success in resource management. First, the Tribe is fully dedicated to managing its own resources rather than relying on outsiders. Since the legal win in the Supreme Court in the 1980s, the Tribe has consistently sought to further expand and exercise its jurisdictional sovereignty. In the mid-1990s, for instance, the Tribe's relationship with the USFWS became strained by a series of proposed species listings and critical habitat designations involving tribal lands. Compelled to defend its own management capabilities, the Tribe went toe-to-toe with the Service. After lengthy negotiations, the two entities signed a path-breaking "Statement of Relationship," which recognizes the Tribe's sound institutional capacity and allows the Tribe to carry out its own management and protections for the threatened and endangered species on the reservation.

This example provides an important lesson for all Indian nations: Not only must tribes be willing to expand and defend their sovereignty, but their sovereignty must be backed by capable institutions.

Second, the W&ORD understands that community support is directly tied to the effectiveness of its work. The Division actively seeks elder involvement, largely through an elders advisory board, which has led to the Tribe's list of sensitive species being even broader than those of the state or federal government. Another example is the W&ORD's approach to managing tribal citizens' hunting. In the late 1980s, the W&ORD established a separate harvest system for tribal citizens, which provides subsidized game tags, sets aside hunting areas on the reservation, and designates special seasons for big game hunting. Moreover, tribal member hunting fees support the W&ORD's Conservation Fund, which in turn supports hunter education, a "report a poacher" program and a college scholarship program for tribal members pursuing degrees in fields related to natural resource management. Clearly, these efforts to reach out to citizens and to embrace their ideas, needs and cultural connections to natural resources, not only improve program management, but also citizens' acceptance of W&ORD's activities and help ensure program success.

The Wildlife and Outdoor Recreation Division's many achievements are a tremendous source of pride for citizens of the White Mountain Apache Tribe. By combining a strong will for self-management of the Tribe's abundant natural resources with an unwavering pursuit of excellence in outdoor enterprise development, the White Mountain Apache Tribe has laid the foundation for the sustained use of the outdoors for generations to come.

Lessons:

- Profitability and conservation are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, can be mutually beneficial. For example, the profitability of tourism and outdoor recreation enterprises can be directly tied to the tribe's competency in natural resource management and conservation.
- Strong institutional capacity enables tribes to exert their jurisdictional sovereignty more effectively and may even lead to new opportunities for the exercise of sovereignty.
- Tribal codes, regulations and policies gain acceptance and effectiveness when they reflect community values.

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