

Climate Resilience Fall 2021 Essay Contest

Andrew R. Garcia

On the periphery of southern Tucson sits several acres of farmland nurtured by the Santa Cruz river and the labor of the Wa:k community. These farmlands have gifted the Wa:k O'odham with a portion of their dietary needs in the harsh Sonoran desert climate, but this exchange has come under pressure due to climate change. Due to several years of over pumping of local aquifers by the City of Tucson to feed its urban sprawl, it has resulted in depletion of the Santa Cruz watershed underneath the San Xavier Indian Reservation. Unfortunately, instances such as the over pumping and increasing water scarcity for Indigenous peoples and tribes are occurring all over the state of Arizona.

Climate change has increased the need for water conservation and heightened the possibility of water wars amongst states, farmers, cities, mining companies, and tribes. Urbanization of the state of Arizona has come at the expense of the native populations bearing the brunt of the assault. Native vegetation has been replaced by water-intensive invasive plants used for commercial use or casual recreational areas. Desert animals are being pushed further on the fringes of suburban residences and commercial parking lots and Indigenous people's water stolen right under their own lands to continue the fueling of Western lifestyles.

As a citizen of the Tohono O'odham Nation and hailing from the Wa:k community, we have been on the frontline assault of climate change and the fueling factors of an American indulgent lifestyle in Arizona for several decades now. Unfortunately, Indigenous peoples have been pushed to the sidelines on how to conduct proper water governance. Climate change has become the reckoning event in which Indigenous peoples can now reclaim our seat at the table for discussion on how Arizona can become good stewards of our shared natural resources.

Part of this reclamation for Indigenous tribes of Arizona is exerting our water rights and governing through sound policies that ensure water usage is practical and ecologically sustainable for Arizona's climate. This will require a large team of experts from Tribal Nations, such as lawyers, engineers, scientists, Tribal leaders, and other stakeholders. Business personnel will also be needed in ensuring that Tribes can effectively govern water policy is carried out in their desired manner. The invention of water markets and water leasing have added to the complexity surrounding future water policy decision in Arizona. Tribal Nations will need Indigenous business experts to help guide their teams through these new unexplored financial territories in order to help shape water and climate policy in Arizona.

This is where I hope that I can use my business knowledge with my Economics degree to assist my Nation and other Tribal Nations in structuring, navigating, and implementing these complex water deals to help shape policies. I hope that my academic knowledge can be of use to help shape policies that improve the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples in Arizona, while also positively impacting the environment with a more holistic vision of cohesion of desert through sound policy.

We have shown that we can be good stewards of the natural world with our respect and guidance of the natural world's gifts, so we must enter a new chapter where we once again impart our wisdom on how to properly live in a desert climate with our neighbors. Indigenous peoples created the foundation for humankind to exist in the Sonoran desert before settlers and we will continue to act as guiders through climate change to ensure life can continue to exist in Arizona for several more generations to come.