

Climate Change in Tribal Communities

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Climate change disproportionately affects tribal communities by creating a domino effect of varying environmental crisis. This essay will outline climate change concerns in my community of Tuba City, AZ and the plan to create a positive impact for the environment.

My community is referred to as a dry desert that thrives on rainwater. The most obvious climate change impact in Tuba City is the rapid decline of monsoon rainstorms. In the Navajo culture, our livestock (cows, horses, and sheep) hold special meaning to our identity as Navajo people. As a result of climate change impacting water sources, the livestock become dependent on their owners for sustenance. This dependence is crucial to the survival of the Navajo way of life as it is said to “take care of your animals and they will take care of you.” When climate change impacts the frequency of rain monsoons, the livestock vegetation, underground water tables, and indigenous food systems become scarce.

The Tuba City community neighbors the Hopi village of Moenkopi. The Hopi people utilize traditional food ways of planting and farming. The importance of corn is evident in both Navajo and Hopi cultures which is commonly used in traditional ceremonies. As the water availability becomes limited, members of the community rely on hauling water for their crops and livestock. The local water company, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority (NTUA) recently reduced the amount of water people can haul in their barrels to 500 gallons per week due to the current drought. To my knowledge, this is the first time a water cap has been issued by NTUA.

Arizona has had many forest fires due to the dry hot summers and by negligent people. As a result, smoke fills the sky in my community causing unhealthy air quality for my people, especially those with respiratory illnesses. On some days, the smoke is so dense that it prevents children and adults with chronic asthma from going outside. With the current pandemic, this environmental hazard exacerbates Covid-19 symptoms in my community.

On a broader level, climate change impacts the migration of animals due to deforestation and urbanization. When people and wild animals inhabit the same area, zoonotic diseases occur. This is the cause for the current Covid-19 pandemic. A disease that started overseas had infiltrated my small community on the Navajo Nation. At one point, the Navajo Nation had the highest per capita rate of Covid-19 cases. A pandemic coupled with health disparities in tribal communities results in disproportionate health inequities. It is unfair. The lasting impacts of Covid-19 remain to be seen for tribal communities.

Undoubtedly, climate change has created a ripple effect of environmental crisis. As Navajo people, our identity is rooted in the land. When the land is not well, an imbalance occurs not only with the people but also with the animals and food systems. This interdependence leads to my plan to create a positive impact for the environment.

The socioecological model could be used to address the different levels of climate change impacts. At the individual level, we can remember our cultural knowledge systems surrounding the care of 'mother earth' and how our actions impact our descendants seven generations from now. The relationship level could incorporate Navajo kinship and social networks. Perhaps organizing a trash pick-up day or assisting families of how to recycle. At the community organizational level, free water hauling for families could be offered for those who do not have a truck or trailer to haul water. Education material on climate change within the Navajo Nation could also be shared. Additionally, the revitalization of traditional food ways could be taught in the community by elders along with a starter kit for first time gardeners. The societal level includes environmental policies at the local and national level. The Navajo Nation and Hopi leaders could come together to devise a robust water system so that the people are not dependent on hauling water for their crops and livestock. The United States government needs to recognize water sovereignty in tribal communities and protect indigenous environmental custodial obligations.