

Cowboy and Indian Alliances in the Northern Plains

ZOLTÁN GROSSMAN

In the early 1970s, South Dakota was the center of a confrontation between Native Americans and white Americans. Oglala Lakota (Teton Sioux) and American Indian Movement activists fought U.S. government forces on the Pine Ridge Reservation, notably at the historic village of Wounded Knee. Elsewhere in the state, Native Americans and white ranchers and farmers were often at odds over water and grazing rights around the reservations. Conflicts over natural resources and Lakota treaty rights stretched back at least a century to George Armstrong Custer's seizure of the Black Hills, which opened the way for a massive gold rush into the region.

Yet by the early 1980s, a new mineral rush—this time for coal and uranium—actually served to bring together Native Americans and their white rancher and farmer adversaries. Both groups feared that mining companies would damage the environment of the “sacred” Black Hills and deplete the underground water table. This interethnic environmental alliance succeeded in stopping the mine plans and opened the door for cooperation between Native Americans and white agriculturists around ensuing environmental issues. In the late 1980s, both groups united again to stop a planned bombing range, this time actually naming their coalition the “Cowboy and Indian Alliance.” Similar alliances developed elsewhere in western South Dakota and eastern Montana between white ranchers and some of the most traditionalist and activist elements on Indian reservations. The oppositional framework

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was ideal for the independent-minded rural communities, which have a history of mistrusting government officials, even when these communities were in conflict with each other. Their cooperation formed a model for later Native and non-Native environmental alliances in Nevada, Washington, Oregon, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.¹

The popular image of “cowboys and Indians” as primordial and eternal enemies belies some important contemporary realities. Many Native Americans on the northern plains participate in the ranching economy and culture, wear the same hats, drive the same pickups, and can literally change from their powwow outfits into rodeo gear. Many ranchers see their lifestyle and culture as endangered by modern economic trends in much the same way as tribal members have seen their cultures under siege and have been forced to adapt their traditional values to present-day realities. Both Native and non-Native communities in the northern plains are affected by the environmental destruction brought by large-scale resource extraction (such as coal and uranium mining), and the use of the relatively unpopulated region for other large-scale projects (such as bombing ranges) that would not be tolerated elsewhere.

Native peoples continue to encounter anti-Indian racism in the northern Great Plains, which many agree is still harsher and more open than in other areas of the country, perhaps given the region’s relatively more recent warfare between the tribes and the United States. It is curious, therefore, that the northern plains have seen some of the earliest and most highly developed Native and non-Native environmental alliances in the country.

In the northern plains, local alliances between Indians and white ranchers and farmers sometimes seem more resilient and successful than alliances around similar issues between tribes and urban-based environmental groups. They seem to be stronger in areas that both groups highly value, even in religiously sacred areas, than in areas that only one group or neither group highly values. White residents may resist tribal land claims on sacred hills; yet when those same hills are threatened by mining, sacredness becomes an

1. Zoltán Grossman, *Unlikely Alliances: Treaty Conflicts and Environmental Cooperation Between Native American and Rural White Communities* (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2002).

asset to non-Indian mining opponents. This cooperation creates possibilities for the sharing of sacred space that would have previously been anathema to both Native and non-Native communities. The same sense of sacredness that divided the two communities intensifies the way they value the place.

The emergence of environmental cooperation in the northern plains, however, has clearly not overcome the history of racial contentiousness in the region. After each environmental alliance recedes, areas of tension between Native and non-Native communities reemerge, and the two communities often return to conflict. At first glance, this pattern would seem to indicate that the alliances are merely temporary aberrations in a seamless narrative of interethnic tension and hatred, that they represent anomalies rather than signs of improved relations.

Yet at second glance, it becomes clear that each new chapter of tension is more muted than the last because the tribes have used each alliance to build more public understanding of their land rights. While each alliance makes cooperation easier between Native and non-Native communities, the progress seems to be offset by a recession in relations between the communities after the alliance, but not to the same levels as existed before it. Conversely, the next time an environmental issue comes to the forefront, it becomes progressively easier to form an interethnic alliance around it. While the alliance represents two steps forward in Native/non-Native relations, it is generally followed by one step back, followed by another two steps forward. In this way, communities in Montana and South Dakota are making slow but steady overall progress, despite the obvious setbacks along the way.

The Indian populations in Montana and South Dakota have very different histories. Montana has reservations of the Crow, Assiniboiné, Gros Ventre, Northern Cheyenne, Salish, Kootenai, Blackfeet, Cree-Chippewa, and Sioux. South Dakota has nine reservations—all of them Sioux. The non-Indian populations in Montana and South Dakota, on the other hand, have rather similar histories. Most of the European-Americans who originally settled in the region came for employment either in ranching, farming, mining, or railroading.

After the 1973 Mideast War and resultant Arab oil embargo of the United States, the coal and uranium of the northern plains became coveted resources for multinational mining companies. Much of the U.S. supply of uranium and

low-sulfur, strippable coal were found in the region. New mining project proposals threatened both Native American treaty rights and the lifestyle of non-Indian ranchers and farmers. The primary reason was not only the possible pollution of water supplies, but also the heavy use of aquifers by large-scale mining operations, threatening groundwater supplies in the semi-arid region. A 1973 report by the National Academy of Sciences demonstrated how semi-arid land would take centuries to recover from coal mining development and suggested defining such tracts as “National Sacrifice Areas” for U.S. energy self-sufficiency.² Water had been a primary point of contention between tribes and white agriculturists, but the resource projects redefined the conflict as one between both groups and outside corporate interests. In this context, some of the animosity between Indian and non-Indian communities began to lessen in western South Dakota around proposed coal and uranium mining in the Black Hills and around the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeastern Montana, due to common opposition to coal projects.

For decades the coal mines of southeastern Montana have supplied the energy needs of Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and many other cities around the country. The Powder River Basin has supplied the country with coal that has a lower polluting sulfur content than coal from eastern U.S. mines. Yet stripping the coal from the semi-arid land has resulted in profound environmental damage. The two tribes in the area have long had divergent views about coal mining. The Crow tribal government welcomed coal development in the 1960s for its economic benefits to the tribe, while the adjacent Northern Cheyenne feared environmental consequences.

The Cheyenne had a strong attachment to their 445,000-acre reservation as a historic refuge from persecution. The tribe was ravaged by a series of U.S. Army massacres and by forced removal to the Indian Territory in 1877. Some tribal members escaped and fled back to the northern part of their vast homeland, where they were granted a small reservation parcel in 1884. The Northern Cheyenne saw even a heavily “checkerboarded” reservation as a

2. National Academy of Sciences, *Rehabilitation Potential of Western Coal Lands. Report to the Energy Planning Project of the Ford Foundation* (Washington, D.C.: Ford Foundation, 1973), 135. This document was drafted with the National Academy of Engineering.

refuge and formed about 90 percent of its population. In 1900, the parcel was enlarged into the Tongue River Valley, where a single coal strip mine operated in the 1920s through the 1950s in the (appropriately named) town of Colstrip.³

In the early 1970s, the Northern Cheyenne discovered that the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) had leased about 64 percent of the reservation's acreage to coal mining companies such as AMAX. BIA leases gave a royalty to the tribe of only 17.5 cents per ton, and contained few, if any, environmental safeguards for strip-mining operations. Northern Cheyenne traditional elders, alarmed at the environmental destruction and social displacement involved in large-scale coal-mining operations, called for the termination of the coal leases. The secretary of the interior suspended many leases pending negotiations with the tribe.⁴

In 1972, a group of white ranchers and farmers in the Tongue River Valley outside the Northern Cheyenne Reservation formed the Northern Plains Resource Council (NPRC) to fight for their interests against coal mining companies, particularly against a newly proposed coal-fired power plant near Colstrip. Ranchers and farmers in the area had formed the Rosebud Protective Association to work on coal mining and agricultural issues; the group became one of the founding affiliates of NPRC. The group was named for Rosebud Creek, which was the scene of a longstanding water-rights dispute with the tribe, but was also affected by two newly dug coal strip mines and five coal-fired power plants.

For decades ranching families around Rosebud Creek had lived next to the Northern Cheyenne. The village of Birney straddled the Tongue River, the eastern boundary of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Ranchers lived on the east bank of the river, referred to as "White Birney," and Northern Cheyenne lived on the west bank, referred to as "Indian Birney." Although only a few tribal members were employed by businesses in "White Birney," both Indian and white students attended the Colstrip high school together. Tribal

3. Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1999), 78–90.

4. *Ibid.*, 83.

and white families therefore had personal relationships that predated any political alliances.⁵

A key individual in the formation of the alliance was Northern Cheyenne traditional activist Gail Small. She developed a close relationship with young women from local ranching families. Another key individual was Wallace McRae, an NPRC founder who later became widely known as one of the country's foremost cowboy poets. McRae saw the growth of the coal mining and agribusiness industries as not simply an economic or environmental threat to smaller ranchers and farmers, but as a cultural threat to their rural and cooperative way of life.

NPRC saw one of its primary tasks as building bridges between agricultural and environmental concerns. Instead of focusing on mainstream environmental issues, such as wilderness area logging or protection of endangered species, the NPRC strategy reformulated ecological issues to fit the "rights of property owners to protect their land and water from negative effects of unsustainable development."⁶

Northern Cheyenne activists saw the coal leases as a threat to collective Native control of tribal lands, culture, and self-government. Gail Small served on a tribal negotiating committee to void the coal leases on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Small observed, "The Cheyenne people, like most Tribes, are waging many battles on many fronts and with few allies. . . . I told the Tribe to request help from the big white environmental organizations. . . .no one responded to our calls for help, except the few white ranchers living in the impacted area."⁷

To protect the area's air quality, in 1977 the tribe redesignated its entire reservation air quality as Class I airspace, pursuant to the Prevention of Significant Deterioration amendments of the federal Clean Air Act. The tribe was the first in the United States to redesignate its air quality under the act. Local ranchers backed the move as protecting their own air quality. The Class

5. Teresa Erickson of the Northern Plains Resource Council, interview by author, Billings, Montana, 5 August 1997.

6. Northern Plains Resource Council, *Annual Report* (Billings, Mont.: Northern Plains Resource Council, 1996).

7. Gail Small, "The Search For Environmental Justice In Indian Country," *News From Indian Country* (Hayward, Wis.), March 1994.

I status eventually blocked the expansion of coal plants in the area, but coal mining outside the reservation continued.

Small remembered, "Implementation and enforcement of our Class I Air Quality proved to be a bureaucratic nightmare, however. The Cheyenne Tribe had to lead the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency by the hand for over ten years before they acknowledged that we were a government, with a right to establish a Tribal Air Quality Implementation Plan that triggered funding and enforcement authority."⁸ In the mid-1980s, Small founded the group Native Action to organize Northern Cheyenne members around environmental and other political issues. Some tribal officials were tempted to accept new coal leases to overcome a high tribal unemployment rate, and Small herself was elected to the tribal council to successfully stop tribal lease proposals. The reservation's Clean Air Act status and continued pressure from the tribal negotiating committee convinced Congress to finally void the reservation coal leases by 1988.

Through the 1980s, Northern Cheyenne and white rancher communities maintained cooperation around coal-mine reclamation issues but at a reduced level. The water-rights conflict over Rosebud Creek simmered through the 1980s. Northern Cheyenne leaders did not want more divisions with neighboring communities, choosing to settle the legal dispute in the early 1990s.

Matching its mixed successes on the ground, the rancher-tribal alliances also left a mixed legacy in relations between the Northern Cheyenne and neighboring white rancher communities. When interviewed, NPRC staff director Teresa Erickson recollected that the alliance of "true warriors" resulted "in a better understanding of each other," and that alliance members were "not so quick to throw stones at each other." She reported that "people have learned from each other and made friendships," and that they have "joked around, and learned about each others' cultures."

Erickson also related, however, the difficulties of maintaining trust and community ties in the face of continuing economic and cultural differences: "It is a constant struggle. . . . It is sometimes hard to understand how it reverts back and forth." She pointed to bitter financial conflicts over the new reservation high school and banks' "red-lining" of loans to Indians. Yet she also saw

8. Ibid.

positive legacies of the 1970s environmental alliance, making subsequent cooperation easier. Tribes and smaller ranchers joined forces in taking on big meatpackers, low cattle prices, and farm and ranch foreclosures.⁹ But perhaps the primary legacy of the 1970s alliance around the Northern Cheyenne Reservation was a continuing common focus on land issues.

In 1992, the new issue of a proposed coal railroad resurrected the rancher-Indian alliance. The Tongue River Railroad would be used for shipments of coal from Wyoming's Powder River Basin fields, providing rail access to the largest untapped low-sulfur coal reserves in the country.¹⁰ The threat of coal dust pollution again brought together the ranchers and the Northern Cheyenne. Although the railroad would not run on tribal land, tribal members opposed it because they foresaw desecration of ceremonial sites, burial grounds, and collection areas for sacred and medicinal plants. Ranchers and farmers opposed the railroad because they saw it as destroying prime agricultural land next to the river, causing fires and weed growth, and threatening cattle.

The fight to stop the Tongue River Railroad continued into the new century. While not claiming a complete victory, the alliance built on the previous alliance against coal-fired power plants in southeastern Montana. Despite the renewal of tensions between white and Northern Cheyenne communities following the 1970s alliance, the previous model had enabled environmentally minded residents to more easily construct a new alliance. The 1970s interethnic alliance in southeastern Montana coalfields had taken two steps forward, then one step back. The 1990s alliance against the Tongue River Railroad had again taken cooperation between Natives and non-Natives two steps forward.

In the mid-1990s, the coalfields of southeastern Montana also unexpectedly came to figure in a national controversy over a proposed gold mine in southwestern Montana, near Yellowstone National Park. In 1996, President Clinton announced the federal buyout of the New World gold mine from the

9. Northern Plains Resource Council, "Background," (1998) <http://www.nprcmt.org/history.htm>.

10. Northern Plains Resource Council, "Tongue River Railroad," (2000) at <http://nprcmt.org/railroad.asp>.

Noranda Corporation. Most national environmental groups hailed the move as protection for national parklands. Yet many Montana environmental, agricultural, and tribal groups later found that Clinton's deal had provided the transfer of \$10 million in federal coal-mining rights to Montana. Coal became an asset to offer the company as compensation for its lost opportunities in gold. NPRC strongly opposed the "coal-for-gold" deal as trading "one environmental nightmare for another," and shifting the potential burden of environmental pollution from park-goers to Native Americans and ranchers.¹¹ NPRC described the deal as an attempt to drive a wedge between white environmentalists on the one hand and tribes and ranchers on the other. Clinton reversed his position, but too late to stop the deal. In fighting the shift of mining plans from the Yellowstone area to the Tongue River Valley, tribal and white agricultural communities became the closest of allies, both suffering from inadequate statewide or national support.

In the northern part of the state, two other gold-mining controversies clearly demonstrated the importance of unity between tribes and white agricultural interests. The contrast between the stories of the Little Rocky Mountains and the Sweetgrass Hills again affirmed that the two groups might be potentially stronger with each other as allies than they were as allies only with predominantly white environmental groups.

In northeastern Montana, the Little Rocky Mountains on the Fort Belknap Reservation have long been the scene of large-scale gold mining. The Zortman-Landusky gold mine just outside the reservation served as a national symbol of the dangers of unregulated gold mining. Yet the Gros Ventre and Assiniboiné tribes have fought the mine and its proposed expansions largely on their own with some help from environmental groups but little or none from local ranching communities.¹²

The piney Little Rockies have long been identified as a center of prayer and fasting, a destination for tribal members on vision quests, and a burial site. The small mountain range dramatically juts out of the surrounding roll-

11. Northern Plains Resource Council, "Background"; Bob Struckman and Ray Ring, "A Breath of Fresh Air," *High Country News* (Paonia, Colo.), 20 January 2003.

12. James Main Jr. of the Red Thunder and Indigenous Environmental Network, a Gros Ventre, interview by author, Fort Belknap, Montana, 5 August 1997.

ing prairie, looking almost like a green oasis or an island in the middle of a rolling sea. It is considered one of the key “island mountain” ranges in the northern plains. As a Helena photographer wrote, “Like the Black Hills of South Dakota and the Sweetgrass Hills . . . the Little Rockies are seen as a refuge in these tribes’ sacred geography.”¹³ All these ranges serve to elevate cloud systems and condense moisture over their slopes and therefore to recharge the aquifers of the vast surrounding plains.

The mountains became part of the original Fort Belknap Reservation when it was established in 1887. The U.S. Congress ceded 40,000 mineral-rich acres of the reservation to mining companies in 1895. Underground gold mines were dug in the ceded land, yet tribal members continued to use natural resources and water. The mines closed when the high-grade gold ore petered out in the early 1950s. By the mid-1970s, mining companies had found a new technique to extract the low-grade gold remaining in the ore, using cyanide to dissolve the metal from the rock. Cyanide ore processing has been implicated in massive fish kills and contaminated water supplies around the world. The mining of low-grade ore also causes enormous physical destruction; on average, it takes 100 tons of ore to extract 1.6 ounces of gold.¹⁴

In 1979, Pegasus Gold Corporation opened a complex of cyanide heap leach gold mines in the Little Rocky Mountains. Gros Ventre activist Jim Main Jr. claimed in an interview that the 2,800 tribal members were “guinea pigs in a sacrifice area,” and that “most ranchers sold out” in the face of company financial offers. Tribal members were horrified to discover that the mining operation leveled by about one-third the sacred peak of Spirit Mountain, one of the range’s three major peaks. They also began to suspect contamination of surface waters after a waste tailings dam released toxins into local streams. They formed a series of tribal environmental groups, including Red Thunder, Inc. and Island Mountain Protectors, with support from the Fort Belknap Community Council and the tribal government.

13. John Smart, “Gold and Ethnocide,” *Plains Truth* (Billings, Mont.), Fall 1993.

14. Mineral Policy Center, *Cyanide Uncertainties* (Washington, D.C.: Mineral Policy Center, 1998); Ted Lange, “Big Problems at Montana’s Biggest Mine,” *Plains Truth* (Billings, Mont.), Fall 1993.

In 1996, federal and state officials forced Pegasus to pay up to \$32.2 million in fines for pollution of the reservation. The company tried to expand the mine complex, but was blocked by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Low gold prices caught up to the company, which filed for bankruptcy in 1998, leaving behind an estimated \$4 million in clean-up costs. Public outrage at the environmental and economic disaster at the Zortman-Landusky mine fueled the passage of a state ballot initiative to prohibit cyanide ore processing in Montana mines. But for the most part, in the area around the Little Rocky Mountains, the Assiniboiné and Gros Ventre were forced to fight the Zortman-Landusky mine almost alone, only winning their fight after the ecological and cultural devastation had been done. Even when economically affected by the mine closure, the local white ranching community did not join forces with the Fort Belknap tribal community.¹⁵

In contrast to the Little Rocky Mountains, ranchers and farmers have joined tribes seeking to prevent gold mining in a similar island mountain range 130 miles to the west: the Sweetgrass Hills. The Hills consist of three separate rocky, grassy buttes that rise dramatically out of the plains, and were noticed by Lewis and Clark during their travels. At least seven tribes—the Blackfeet, Chippewa-Cree, Gros Ventre, Assiniboiné, Sioux, Salish, and Kootenai—view the Sweetgrass Hills as a sacred site for prayer. The Hills are also economically significant to local white ranchers and wheat farmers as a key source of water for the semi-arid region.¹⁶

Some of the white agriculturists, however, view the Hills' value as more than economic. Richard Thielges, a third-generation wheat farmer descended from German immigrants, grew up next to the Hills. He has asserted that they are "intrinsically a sacred place" with a "certain mystique." Rancher activist Arlo Scari has claimed that "many farmers and ranchers of the area share that sacred respect for the Hills as a vital source of water and

15. Fort Belknap Community Council (FBCC), "The Struggle to Save the Little Rocky Mountains," [Pamphlet] (Hays, Mont.: n.p., 1997); Mike Dennison, "Interior Board Halts Expansion at Zortman," *Great Falls Tribune*, 18 June 1997; Heather Abel, "Montana on the Edge: A Fight over Gold Forces the Treasure State to Confront Its Future," *High Country News* (Paonia, Colo.), 22 December 1997.

16. Ted Lange, "BLM Considering Mining Ban for Sweetgrass Hills," *Plains Truth* (Billings, Mont.), Fall 1993.

unique habitat and landscape offering outstanding scenic and recreational values.”¹⁷

In the 1980s, two companies proposed gold exploration operations in the Sweetgrass Hills with the aim of building cyanide heap leach mines to extract the remaining low-grade gold from old mines in the area. Local ranchers and farmers grew alarmed, particularly as the scope of the Zortman-Landusky mine’s toxic contamination was reported in the media. In 1986, local white agriculturists and other citizens founded the Sweetgrass Hills Protective Association (SHPA) to fight the mining plans. In the early 1990s, SHPA members became more aware of the sacredness of the Hills in Native spiritual systems and began to work closely with area tribes. Jim Main welcomed the involvement of ranchers in the newer struggle: “They use our arguments. . . . They join in our prayers, call it Mother Earth.” Congressman Pat Williams observed, “Just as these hills are significant to generations of ranchers and farmers, they have been among the most sacred of places to Great Plains Indian Tribes for thousands of years.”¹⁸

Thieltges described the “natural alliance” of Native Americans, farmers, ranchers, and environmentalists as a “tripod” that needs all three legs to stand. “Farmers-ranchers, Native Americans and environmentalists are three sides of a natural alliance. We are the only people who truly have to bear the burden of what’s happened to the land. So the mining industry tries to drive wedges between us.” In 1996, a 600-mile Native American walk to protect the Hills received support from white communities along its entire route from South Dakota to Montana. Blackfeet-Lakota march leader Brock Conway was “joined at various times by the great-granddaughter of a homesteader, a grandmother from the Crow tribe, and a cowboy herding cattle on an ATV.”¹⁹

In 1997, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt visited the Sweetgrass Hills, and withdrew the Hills from gold mining for 20 years. SHPA, its tribal

17. Richard Thieltges of the Sweet Grass Hills Protective Association, interview by author, Helena, Montana, 6 August 1997; Lange, “BLM Considering Mining Ban.”

18. Mert Freyholtz of the Environmental Rangers, interview by author, Gildford, Montana, 5 August 1997; Native Action, “Montana’s Sweet Grass Hills: The Gold Rush is On!” [Pamphlet] (Lame Deer, Mont.: n. p., 1995).

19. Heather Abel, “On the Trail of Mining’s Corporate Nomads,” *High Country News* (Paonia, Colo.), 23 June 1997; Emily Cousins, “Marching to Stop a Montana Mine,” *High Country News* (Paonia, Colo.), 5 August 1996.

allies, and environmental groups celebrated the move and observed that the secretary would never have made a supportive visit to the area had it not been for the federal-tribal trust relationship. Main and Thieltges have contrasted this federal response, however, with the more lackadaisical government response to protect the Little Rocky Mountains next to the Fort Belknap Reservation. Although the exclusively tribal response, without local white support, eventually demonstrated its powers to influence the federal government, the damage had already been done. In contrast, the interethnic alliance around the Sweetgrass Hills succeeded in stopping a similar cyanide gold-mining operation before it ever fully reached the stage of mineral exploration.

The Sweetgrass Hills victory has also left a legacy of greater interethnic contacts. Thieltges claims that an “on-going relationship” with the tribes has taught local white agriculturists a great deal about Indian cultures and “sacred” places. He has taken, for example, a strong interest in indigenous herbal medicines, which initially he learned of only as natural resources to protect against the mining. Thieltges, like others in the successful alliance, described this process of cultural education as the “most important thing” that has emerged from the joint effort to protect the Sweetgrass Hills.

Yet in much of the rest of Montana, the lack of cultural contact between Native and non-Native rural communities remains the norm, and tensions remain high between the two communities. Montana’s anti-sovereignty movement emerged in the 1970s among white residents of Montana reservations who challenged tribal jurisdiction over non-Indians. The “All Citizens Equal” group grew openly racist by 1990, when a poster advertising an “Indian Shoot” was enclosed in one of its newsletters. In 2000, the Montana Human Rights Network released a report that the state’s anti-Indian movement was thriving and would continue to grow unless more steps were taken to educate non-Indians about sovereignty, culture, and history. The network and other anti-racist groups sought to shift the agenda with the “Montana State Conference on Race: Partnering Indians and Non-Indians for Change.” The conference sought to build better ties between tribal and state officials, yet the ensuing state-tribal discussions were marred by state legislators’ racist remarks. The Indian-rancher environmental alliances, formed in opposition to state environmental policies, have not played a central role in this

dialogue. A common front against outside corporate interests has not translated into a strong common movement to deal with racism on the social or institutional levels.²⁰

When tribes do establish relationships with white farmers or ranchers, the resultant alliances have been extremely effective in meeting their environmental goals. The local alliances around Northern Cheyenne and the Sweetgrass Hills—in some of the most isolated corners of a sparsely populated state—effectively held off mining company plans, even when support from environmental groups was inadequate. Where tribes only had the backing of environmental groups and not local non-Indian communities, such as in the Little Rocky Mountains, the alliances could not prevent damage to the environment. In the case of the “coal-for-gold” deal around the New World Mine, tribes, farmers, and ranchers were “sold out” in the name of environmental protection.

Native American activists who have been the most vocal in support of Indian treaties and traditional culture—such as Gail Small and Jim Main Jr.—have also been the tribal members who have seemingly been most open to an alliance with white ranchers and farmers. Their openness oddly parallels their unrelenting work against anti-Indian racism within local white communities—over issues such as schooling, hiring, and banking. Their attitude produces a paradox seen repeatedly in relations between Natives and non-Natives.

The most successful alliance-building strategies have tended to use a carrot-and-stick approach—using a particularist “stick” to confront racism by white communities and institutions, while dangling a universalist “carrot” that promises a common future based on common environmental values. If the Native groups had practiced only confrontation, they would not have modeled an appropriate set of behaviors and practices for their white neighbors to follow. If they had practiced only cooperation, they would not have begun to overcome centuries of discrimination and would have played a

20. Ken Toole and Christine Kaufmann, *Drumming Up Resistance: The Anti-Indian Movement in Montana* (Helena: Montana Human Rights Network, 2000), 12–17, 26–29, 43; Rudolph C. Ryser, *Anti-Indian Movement on the Tribal Frontier*: Occasional Paper #16, rev. ed. (Kenmore, Wash.: Center for World Indigenous Studies, 1992), 34–36; Ericka Schenck Smith, “Indian-State Meeting Plan Debated,” *Billings Gazette*, 10 January 2002.

subordinate role in any alliance. A combination of confronting racism, while leaving the door open to cooperation, integrates the ideas of confronting the exclusivist past, while building a more inclusive future. This lesson is even more pronounced in western South Dakota, the scene of some of the most famous battles between the United States and Native Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Native American nation known as the Sioux once extended from Wyoming to Wisconsin.²¹ Despite their dialect- and band-based divisions, the Sioux have a common origin myth, centered on the island mountain range they call *He Sapa* (the Black Hills). Most attention by scholars and the public has focused on the Teton Sioux or Lakota bands in present-day western South Dakota.

In 1868, after the U.S. Army lost battles to Lakota forces led by Oglala Lakota leader Red Cloud, federal officials signed the Fort Laramie Treaty to recognize Lakota sovereignty over a large area of the northern plains between the Missouri, Platte, and Big Horn Rivers.²² Six years after the treaty was signed, U.S. Army forces led by Colonel George Armstrong Custer discovered gold in the northern Black Hills. The resultant influx of miners led to Custer's 1876 battle at Little Big Horn with the Lakota, Arapaho, and Northern Cheyenne. Following Custer's defeat, the vengeful government herded the Lakota onto a reservation covering western South Dakota. In the 1880s, the Great Sioux Reservation was divided into five smaller reservations: Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock. Continuing tension culminated in the 1890 massacre of hundreds of Oglala Lakota at Wounded Knee—a tragedy that most Americans assumed marked the end of the Indian Wars.

Lakota nationalism—centered on the 1868 treaty, the 1874 “theft” of the Black Hills, the 1876 Little Big Horn battle, and the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre—was passed from one generation to another through oral tradition in the twentieth century. Oglala Lakota elder Agnes LaMonte said in 1974 court testimony, “I was raised by my grandparents. My grandfather and other

21. In their regional dialects, the Sioux call themselves Lakota in their western territory, Nakota in parts of their central territory, and Dakota in their eastern territory.

22. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, *The Great Sioux Nation* (Berkeley, Calif.: American Indian Treaty Council Information and Moon Books, 1977), 94.

old chiefs would come together and talk about the Treaty since I was knee high to a grasshopper. They wanted to get back the Black Hills.”²³

The Fort Laramie Treaty became a key factor in the rebirth of the Native rights movement in the early 1970s. After young Minneapolis Indian activists founded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1969, they made contact with traditionalist elders and religious leaders in South Dakota, Oklahoma, and other states. AIM became national, encompassing both urban and rural Native communities. In late 1972, after AIM occupied the BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C., it turned its attention to the racist murders of Lakota men around the Pine Ridge Reservation.

By early 1973, AIM had earned a reputation for militancy in South Dakota, which repelled white citizens but was welcomed by many Pine Ridge tribal members. It accused the BIA-backed tribal government of President Richard Wilson of corruption and of stifling dissent among traditionalists and AIM supporters. Tribal members founded the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) to impeach or remove Wilson. When Wilson blocked this effort in early 1973, OSCRO decided to make a stand in the symbolically important hamlet of Wounded Knee—perhaps the most important confrontation between Native peoples and U.S. government forces in the late twentieth century.²⁴

The AIM-OSCRO occupation of Wounded Knee village on 27 February 1973 immediately encountered heavily armed FBI agents and U.S. Marshals in helicopters and armored personnel carriers, pro-Wilson Oglala gunmen, local white rancher gunmen, and Air Force Phantom surveillance jets. Hundreds of Native supporters from around the country streamed into Wounded Knee, where they fought running battles with federal agents for seventy-one days. They welcomed Oglala Lakota chiefs to the small village and established a small-scale version of a traditional government and society for the duration of the occupation. Although the siege ended with two Indians dead and dozens injured, it galvanized indigenous movements and public opinion around the world.

23. *Ibid.*, 47.

24. *Voices from Wounded Knee, 1973, In the Words of the Participants*, (Roosevelt, N.Y.: Akwesasne Notes, 1974).

After the Wounded Knee siege ended, Oglala Lakota traditional chiefs negotiated with the White House about federal recognition of the 1868 Treaty, but to no avail. However, they also began meeting on a regular basis with chiefs from other reservations and bands, and formed the Sioux Nation Council to push for recognition of the 1868 Treaty. In 1974, the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) offered a cash payment of \$106 million to the Sioux Nation Council to settle the Black Hills treaty claim.²⁵

The council rejected the settlement as both financially insufficient—given the billions of dollars in natural resources extracted from the Black Hills since 1876—and as not meeting the Lakota demand to return the “stolen” land.²⁶ The chiefs asserted that since the Black Hills were essential for the survival of Lakota culture and could provide a continuing source of economic sustenance for future generations, the land was “not for sale.” The council proposed that state and federal lands be returned to the tribe, while guaranteeing that local residents would retain their private lands. The Lakota avoided a conflict with Black Hills residents by taking the flexible and practical path that they did not covet the majority group’s private property but only the state and federal domain. Since ICC could not return stolen lands, the federal government placed the treaty payments in an escrow account, where they remain today.

In 1974 on the Standing Rock Reservation, AIM drew on widespread Native and international support for its Wounded Knee stand to form the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), which soon gained non-governmental organization (NGO) status from the United Nations. For three years after the Wounded Knee siege, the Wilson tribal government and federal agents continued to battle AIM and Oglala activists, which resulted in dozens of violent deaths.²⁷ The fighting culminated in the Oglala shootout on 26 June 1975, which left two FBI agents and one Lakota AIM member dead. AIM leader Leonard Peltier was convicted of the agents’ deaths the follow-

25. Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills, White Justice: The Sioux Nation versus the United States, 1775 to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 310, 401.

26. *Ibid.*, 407–28.

27. Bruce Johansen and Roberto Maestas, *Wasi’chu: The Continuing Indian Wars* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 83–84.

ing year in a controversial trial. International human rights groups have highlighted the Peltier case into the twentieth-first century. In 1976, new tribal leaders took office on the Pine Ridge Reservation, reducing the level of violence.

In the mid-1970s, as the Pine Ridge conflict subsided, the global energy crisis rekindled the historic conflict over minerals in the Black Hills. Multinational mining companies, such as Union Carbide and Exxon, proposed the development of the Black Hills for energy resources, including coal mines, uranium mines, and coal slurry pipelines. The Hills had been mined for gold since the arrival of Custer's troops a century before and also for uranium in the 1950s, resulting in the extensive irradiation of the southern Black Hills community of Edgemont.²⁸

In the mineral rush of the 1870s, the battle was over gold, and non-Indian residents were the enemy of the Lakota. In the mineral rush of the 1970s, the battle was over coal and uranium, and the white residents of the Black Hills were now allies. This time the Lakota, who feared damage to sacred sites, were joined by non-Indians who perceived the new proposals as a particular threat to surface water and groundwater supplies. The Lakota treaty-rights movement entered a new phase in the late 1970s when it gained strange, new bedfellows in the fight to save the Black Hills.

The Lakota origin myth holds that people emerged from the earth at Wind Cave, now a national park in the southern Black Hills. Another legend holds that an ancient race between four-legged and two-legged animals (including human beings) left behind blood that explains the red iron-rich soil found today in the "racetrack" that surrounds the sacred Black Hills. Lakota legends also link Black Hills cartography to the arrangement of stars, for example, linking the seven peaks of the highest mountain in the range to the seven sisters of the Pleiades star cluster. Traditional leaders maintain that the Black Hills are the Earth's "heart," pointing out that the Hills are in the shape of a human heart. They attribute the presence of uranium, gold, and other minerals to sacred forces that were feared and left untouched by pre-colonial

28. Black Hills Alliance, *Keystone to Survival: The Multinational Corporations and the Struggle for Control of Land* (Minneapolis: Haymarket Press, 1981), 46–47.

Lakota. The sense of Sioux cultural identity is geographically situated in a sacred place, even if the larger Sioux people never possessed a common language or centralized political system.²⁹

In 1978, a gold miners' group in the northern hills, Miners for Safe Energy, began to hold meetings to educate local citizens about the radioactive dangers of uranium mining. Other groups, including the Sierra Club and Black Hills Energy Coalition, also opposed the mining plans but refused to associate with Native Americans because they feared alienating potential white followers. Yet at the same time, some ranchers and farmers concerned about the large-scale diversion of groundwater began discussing the issue with Lakota activists. Native traditionalists were concerned that the primary site where Union Carbide had identified uranium deposits was Craven Canyon, where many ancient pictographs are located.³⁰

IITC director and AIM leader Bill Means remembers the delicate process that followed as "building a bridge" between rival communities. The issue of water rights had at times brought the Lakota into conflict with white local governments and ranching organizations. Means has said the first approach to the ranching community was to "explore through mutual friends, who get along with Indian people," and "old friends" in the ranching community. Their message was that the Lakota "had something in common with ranchers"—the view of water as a "precious commodity," and a desire to keep the land in good condition. Bill Means eventually spoke directly with small groups of ranching families, with the message that if the energy corporations had their way, there would be little water left to fight over. Means said he and other Lakota "didn't push the racism issue," and defined the treaty as covering only state and federal lands, not private lands. In turn, he also came to understand the concerns of ranchers about low cattle prices and contamination from pesticides and herbicides. Out of these discussions came the 1979 founding of the Black Hills Alliance (BHA), a coalition of Lakota, grassroots

29. Linea Sundstrom, "The Sacred Black Hills: An Ethnohistorical Review," *Great Plains Quarterly* 17 (Summer/Fall 1997): 185–212.

30. Bruce Ellison, a Black Hills Alliance co-founder and attorney, interview by author, Rapid City, South Dakota, 24 June 1999.

environmentalists, Black Hills residents, and a handful of off-reservation ranchers and farmers opposed to corporate plans for the region.³¹

BHA co-founder Mark Tilsen remembers that before the group was founded, the Lakota and white ranchers had only two points of social contact: rodeos and basketball. There was also some overlap between the groups, as some Lakota had taken up ranching, although they were rarely the same traditionalists who strongly opposed the mining of the Black Hills. He explained that it was a “political statement” by white ranchers to simply meet with the Lakota, and that the meetings at times went poorly until the ranching women stepped in to demand that the Lakota be treated with respect.³²

BHA co-founder Bruce Ellison remembers the early meetings between Natives and non-Natives: “You could feel the tension in the air . . . ever since white people came [to the region], the corporations have used ignorance to keep the people [who had] most in common with each other at each other’s throats. We wanted to avoid that being an available tactic.” Yet in a series of community meetings in small Black Hills towns, Ellison saw local residents’ faces change when they examined the extent of mineral leases on a BHA map, believing that uranium mining “threatened them and their families’ future survival.” BHA organizer Madonna Thunder Hawk, an Oglala Lakota, has observed that the non-Indian residents came to understand that the treaty could help to prevent uranium mining: “They realized how helpless they were in the face of eminent domain. But Indian people had treaty rights—they could *stop* things!”³³

Marvin Kammerer, whose family had lived east of Rapid City since the 1880s, opposed uranium mining because of its use in nuclear weapons. He opposed the expansion of the Ellsworth Air Force Base onto his land and recalled a day when all the B-52s took off from the base at once, causing him to fear that a nuclear war had begun. Kammerer was one of the ranchers who served as a bridge to the Lakota and helped to form BHA. In an interview

31. Bill Means of the International Indian Treaty Council, an Oglala Lakota, interview by author, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 21 March 1997.

32. Mark Tilsen, the former director of Black Hills Alliance, interview by author, Stillwater, Minnesota, 10 August 1997.

33. Ellison interview; Madonna Thunder Hawk of the Black Hills Alliance, an Oglala Lakota, interview by author, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, 26 June 1999.

that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, Kammerer said, "I've read the Fort Laramie Treaty, and it seems pretty simple to me; their claim is justified. There's no way the Indians are going to get all of that land back, but the state land and the federal land should be returned to them. Out of respect for those people, and for their belief that the hills are sacred ground, I don't want to be a part of this destruction."³⁴

In 1980, Kammerer's ranch hosted the Black Hills International Survival Gathering, which drew 11,000 participants from around the world to learn about indigenous rights, energy resource conflicts, and alternative energies. At the time, Kammerer's children were teased in school for being "Indian lovers." Means also reported that his children were teased by fellow Lakota students. Ellison asserts that BHA was "looked at in the Indian community as a white organization, and in the white community as an Indian organization. We looked at it as both."³⁵

The process of alliance building clearly resulted in tensions within both communities, but also had some success in defending the environment and building improved community relations. Bill Means credits the success to the "breaking down of doors" at the grassroots level, asserting that a similar effort to build ties between tribal and local white governments would have met the barrier of entrenched political interests.

In 1980, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed that the Black Hills had indeed been stolen from the Lakota in 1876 and backed ICC's cash-based "just compensation" rather than a return of land. A bill sponsored by Senator Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) proposed the return of 1.2 million acres of Black Hills federal lands to the tribe, which would then establish a Sioux National Park, but the bill could not overcome objections from South Dakota's congressional delegation. The Black Hills remained an area outside any federal reservation, but an area that would become increasingly important in building support for Lakota treaty rights.³⁶

34. Marvin Kammerer of the Black Hills Alliance, a rancher, interview by author, Rapid City, South Dakota, 26 July 1997; Peter Matthiessen, "High Noon in the Black Hills," *New York Times Magazine* 13 July 1979.

35. Black Hills Alliance, *Keystone to Survival*; Ellison interview.

36. Lazarus, *Black Hills, White Justice*, 401, 419–25.

In February 1987, the Minneapolis-based Honeywell Corporation announced plans to open a weapons-testing range in the southern Black Hills, in Hell Canyon near the Cheyenne River and the town of Hot Springs. The company planned to test gunnery munitions in the 6,200-acre site, including some tipped with depleted uranium—a low-level radioactive substance dense enough to penetrate tank armor. The Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce, some Fall River County ranchers, and Governor George Mickelson backed the plan as an example of needed economic development. Yet a number of local landowners, who questioned the project's noise and potential radioactivity, formed the group Keep the Hills Attractive (KHA), which studied the proposal and sought new zoning laws to stop or modify it.³⁷

Two couples managing ranches adjacent to the Honeywell property viewed the project not only as a nuisance to their rural way of life, but as a threat to local property values. Cindy Reed and her husband Marc Lamphere owned a 7,000-acre ranch that was faring poorly in the era of low cattle prices. Bruce and Linda Murdock ran a 6,000-acre spread that was doing better economically—a status they feared would disappear as soon as the Honeywell shells began to explode. They coordinated an informal group of ranchers who believed that KHA was moving too slowly in its opposition and sought a wider range of allies.

Murdock had attended the University of Colorado with Charlotte Black Elk, who was a great-granddaughter of the Oglala Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk and an early leader of Pine Ridge support for the Bradley legislation. After reading news coverage of the controversy, Black Elk called Murdock and was invited to a meeting, which she remembers was “all white people and me.” She told the ranchers that since the U.S. government in the 1800s had displaced her family, she could identify with farmers and ranchers facing farm foreclosures or the threat of environmental dislocation. Some friends on the reservation thought it was “absolutely outrageous” that she would meet with white ranchers. But she was joined by other tribal members, including Germaine Tremmel, a great-granddaughter of Sitting Bull, who

37. Cindy Reed of the Cowboy and Indian Alliance, interview by author, Hot Springs, South Dakota, 24 June 1999.

said, "There are areas in the Black Hills that you get strength from . . . where you can talk to the Great Spirit. This is one of those areas."³⁸

The ranchers invited other Lakota to visit the proposed testing site in Hell Canyon. An elderly spiritual leader from the Standing Rock Reservation saw numerous ancient pictographs in the canyon. Dozens of Lakota from different reservations, including former AIM activists and the Gray Eagles Reservation elders group, quickly converged on the Honeywell property and established two *tipi* camps. Murdock donated meat to the Native occupants, and Reed told news reporters that the occupation was backed by increasing numbers of local ranchers: "This is not Indian versus white. It's a land-based ethic versus a profit-oriented motive. This is a beautiful place. There's no reason to begin to ruin it."³⁹ Although the ranchers were not using BHA as a model for an alliance, many of the Indian activists were consciously using the lessons from the earlier uranium-mining struggle.

Media reports began to describe the Honeywell opponents as a coalition of "cowboys and Indians," and the white ranchers and Lakota found that their unusual relationship drew more attention to the project than their actual complaints about the munitions testing. By June, they began describing their loose, unorganized coalition as the Cowboy and Indian Alliance, with "CIA" as its poignant acronym. Reed believed that the ranchers and the traditional Lakota "have more in common than either side acknowledges." She had grown up in the ranching town of Faith, South Dakota, where she interacted with Native students in school. She observed that Honeywell and its Hot Springs supporters could understand the Lakota opposition to the project, but could never understand the opposition from white ranchers.⁴⁰

Pine Ridge Reservation President Joe American Horse praised CIA: "It's about time the Black Hills residents join with us on these land issues. It's going to benefit all of us and that's important." Many Black Hills residents had been fearful that the Lakota would reclaim the hills and confiscate their

38. Charlotte Black Elk of the Cowboy and Indian Alliance, an Oglala Lakota, interview by author, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, 25 June 1999; James Grass, "Battle Flares Over Weapons Test Site," *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 17 August 1987.

39. Bob Sector, "Indians, Ranchers Oppose Black Hills Weapons Tests," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 August 1987.

40. Reed interview.

private landholdings, even though the Bradley bill would have returned only federal lands. Honeywell supporters termed CIA part of an effort to return the canyon to the Lakota, who, they claimed, had never visited the site until the controversy. "I've hunted down there since 1947," said Hot Springs resident Art Donnell, "and I've never seen an Indian." Pine Ridge Tribal Vice President Paul Iron Cloud said, "The main purpose of not wanting Honeywell in there is the sacredness of the Black Hills to our people. They say there could be bloodshed. It's that serious."⁴¹

Public hearings were held in Summer 1987 on the Pine Ridge Reservation and in Hot Springs to hear the concerns of both the Lakota and residents near the site. Ranchers drove a long distance to attend the Pine Ridge hearing, and many Pine Ridge Lakota drove to the Hot Springs hearing—presenting a united front in both communities—and the hearings were regionally broadcast by the reservation radio station KILI.

By August 1987, national TV crews and European magazines were regularly reporting on the CIA's opposition to the Honeywell testing range. Reed reported increasing support from area residents, and Black Elk believed that 60 to 70 percent of rural non-Indian residents opposed the gunnery range. Black Elk also told Reed of a dream she had of horses running in the canyon.

Honeywell formally dropped its proposal in October 1987. The company took advantage of a state program by selling the Hell Canyon property to the quasi-governmental Community Foundation—receiving a large tax break in return. The foundation then sold the land to the Oregon-based Institute for Range of the American Mustang. The group founded the Hell Canyon Wild Horse Sanctuary on the land, which continues to be a popular tourist destination.

Black Elk is relieved that the canyon is "safe for at least a century." Reed observed that the victory was based on heavy media exposure generated by the unusual nature of the alliance. Yet according to Reed, the informal alliance was based on strengthening social ties between the Lakota and non-Indian ranchers rather than on formal institutional structures. In the late

41. John Wooliscroft and Joan Morrison, "Ranchers, Indians Join to Oppose Honeywell Plans," *Rapid City Journal*, 25 June 1987; Kurt Chandler, "Clash Over a Canyon: The Meaning of Sacred," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, 9 August 1987; Grass, "Battle Flares," *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*.

1980s and 1990s, these ties between Native and non-Native communities became progressively easier to establish in ensuing South Dakota environmental conflicts.

The experiences of BHA and CIA taught Lakota activists that uniting with non-Indian ranchers was instrumental in protecting the Black Hills from unwanted development. Yet the true test was on reservations such as Pine Ridge and Rosebud, where tensions persisted between Lakota and the white ranching community over issues such as grazing, water rights, political representation, racism, and economic power.

In 1990, the Amcor Company proposed a toxic waste dump on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Joanne Tall, a former Lakota organizer against the Honeywell testing range, took the forefront in educating her community about the toxic issue through the Native Resource Coalition (NRC). Tall remembers that non-Indian reservation ranchers came to the NRC's first meeting and heard about the possible environmental degradation and increased truck traffic that could result from the dump operation. Tall voiced the perspective that "these projects don't know a color—they impact anybody." The tribe declared a moratorium and planned a study of project impacts; the company dropped their plan. The RSW Corporation then proposed a similar toxic waste project on the neighboring Rosebud Reservation. A new group began in opposition to the project, named Good Road Coalition (GRC) after the road where RSW planned to site the waste dump. GRC also included ranchers in a campaign that defeated the proposal.⁴²

Several other coalitions have followed a similar path. In 1994, a development corporation owned by the film star Kevin Costner (ironically, of "Dances with Wolves" fame) and his brother Daniel proposed a 838-acre Dunbar resort complex on Lakota sacred ground near Deadwood, in the northern Black Hills. Local residents concerned about increased taxes joined with Lakota, including former BHA organizer Madonna Thunder Hawk, to form the Black Hills Protection Committee (BHPC). Thunder Hawk expressed relief that Lakota opposition to the Black Hills project was no longer the "overwhelming struggle" it had been in the 1970s and 1980s.

42. Joanne Tall of the Good Road Coalition, an Oglala Lakota, interview by author, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, 25 June 1999.

Because local non-Indian landowners now understood the value of the Black Hills, she could count on them to help protect the environment. BHPC used economic, environmental, and cultural arguments to oppose the resort complex, leading Costner to reconsider the project in 2002.⁴³

In 1998, another alliance developed on the Rosebud Reservation against a proposed giant hog farm operation. Small-scale hog farmers opposed the project, fearing overwhelming competition from a huge operation, and local Lakota expressed concern over burial sites. Natives and non-Natives alike, however, expressed the deepest concern over the threat of hog waste to groundwater supplies. Reservation non-Indian farmers and ranchers who already mistrusted large agribusiness firms joined Rosebud tribal members; together they formed the Concerned Rosebud-Area Citizens. In 2000, a majority of tribal members opposed the project in a nonbinding referendum.⁴⁴ In early 2001, tribal members established a camp to combat the hog lot operation, and the tribal council began to oppose the project.

On the neighboring Pine Ridge Reservation, a railroad project similar to Montana's Tongue River Railroad met strong opposition beginning in 1999. The Dakota, Minnesota, and Eastern (DM&E) Railroad would ship coal from the Powder River coalfields of Wyoming to the Mississippi River in Minnesota. Opponents formed the Alliance for Responsible Development out of concern that the railroad would cause high dust and noise levels, environmental degradation, and wildfires on the semi-arid land. A survey in 2000 showed that 85 percent of landowners in affected areas opposed the railroad. The Sioux National Council has expressed concern over the project's impact on petroglyphs, burial sites, and the Pine Ridge village of Red Shirt. It has condemned the DM&E as a violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty.⁴⁵

In late 2000, non-Indian ranchers and Lakota tribal members resurrected the Cowboys and Indians Alliance to fight DM&E expansion and included

43. Els Herten, "The Costner Brothers and the Black Hills," *Kola News* (Belgium) 12 April 2000 <http://users.skynet.be/kola/costner.htm>.

44. Joe Kafka, "Rosebud Hog Operation Under Fire By Members," Associated Press, 22 June 2000.

45. Jim Kent, "85% Resist Railroad Expansion," *News From Indian Country* (Hayward, Wisc.) Late Spring 2000; Charmaine White Face, "The DM&E Railroad's Impact on the Great Sioux Nation," *Lakota National Journal* (Rapid City, S. Dak.) 23 October 2000.

some ranchers from the old Black Hills Alliance. Drawing on earlier experiences, the "CIA II" group drew Indians and non-Indian ranchers to a March 2001 rally in Rapid City, where they held a free feast and huge round dance. When the Surface Transportation Board gave its approval to the project in January 2002, it faced a joint lawsuit by Lakota tribes, environmental groups, and ranchers' groups.⁴⁶

Lakota organizer Charmaine White Face reports that some ranchers believed that the tribes possessed legal influence with the federal government because of the 1868 treaty, tribal archeological sites, and their environmental justice role in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Despite rebuilding a cultural bridge between cowboys and Indians, the new alliance did not prevent the recurrence of tensions over water rights. It did, however, achieve some success in causing federal agencies (such as BLM) to question the railroad expansion.⁴⁷

Opposition to toxic waste dumps, the Costner resort, the Rosebud hog complex, and the DM&E Railroad showed that BHA and CIA in the 1980s were not anomalies in relations between Indians and non-Indians in South Dakota, but set a precedent and a standard for later alliances. Yet these four new alliances are counterbalanced by examples of continuing tensions between the Lakota and the white communities and institutions of western South Dakota.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Lakota rights struggle continued, against what many Lakota perceive to be continuing obstacles to their on-reservation sovereignty, off-reservation treaties, and aboriginal cultural rights. Confrontations have flared over unsolved murders of Lakota men in Pine Ridge and Rapid City, liquor sales just outside reservation boundaries, the federal transfer of treaty lands along the Missouri River to state control, and mountain climbers' desecration of the Devil's Tower sacred site in Wyoming. In a report in March 2000, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights corroborated the Lakota perception that South Dakota maintains a racial "dual system of

46. Dan Daly, "Tribes Join Opposition to Railroad," *Rapid City Journal*, 9 April 2002.

47. Charmaine White Face of the Cowboys and Indians Alliance II, an Oglala Lakota, interview by author, Manderson, South Dakota, 8 June 2001.

justice.”⁴⁸ The continuing conflicts testify that, despite successes in building bridges to some neighboring non-Indian communities, the Lakota still maintain an adversarial relationship with non-Indian governments. The relationships established within environmental alliances have not generally translated into greater social, economic, or cultural cooperation. Tensions persist with local and state officials and with non-Indian “outsiders.”

Some small improvement can be seen, however, in relations with local farmers and ranchers. Lakota groups in the 1990s tended to focus more attention on institutional racism in government agencies, police departments, and the tourism industry than on repeating the 1970s confrontations with local white ranchers and farmers. These institutional conflicts are somewhat counterbalanced by the presence of allies in the non-Indian community and of interethnic coalitions that provide a contrast to ethnic antagonism. Just as in the case of Montana alliances after the 1970s, the initial success of BHA and CIA in the 1980s enabled the later establishment of successor coalitions during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A common enemy may improve relations between a tribal and a neighboring white community, but the alliance may then lay dormant or even face reversals over local issues. Yet the experience of building bridges makes the formation of new alliances, even around different issues, much easier to accomplish.

The ranchers or farmers may initially only emphasize how Native sovereign powers might benefit their particular environmental cause. Later they may learn more about the land ethic of their Indian neighbors and in turn allow their neighbors to learn more about their land ethic. The two steps forward, one step backward process that is evident in both Montana and South Dakota has reduced organized anti-Indian sentiment, but not entirely eliminated it. It has built a greater understanding between the communities, in episodic fits that do not individually appear to leave a deep impression in the short run but have collectively done so over a quarter of a century. As BHA co-founder Bruce Ellison observes, each environmental coalition serves as “a ripple in the pond; it builds greater understanding.” After each particular alliance ends, “the circle retracts, but not all the way, and a new

48. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Native Americans in South Dakota: An Erosion of Confidence in the Justice System* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000).

alliance expands it farther outward. . . . It couldn't retract back to where it was." When discussing the Black Hills Alliance, he asked, "Did the alliance turn [western South Dakota] into utopia? Absolutely not. Did it go a long ways to build understanding? Absolutely. It was a contributing factor to real changes. . . . Prejudice is still substantial, but there is less and it is no longer acceptable."⁴⁹

Despite the advances made in relations between Indians and non-Indians in Montana and South Dakota, both states still harbor anti-Indian movements and institutions that remain hostile to Native treaties and sovereignty. The environmental alliances have effectively confronted outside corporate interests, but they have not yet effectively changed institutions inside the state or many individual white attitudes toward Native Americans. The alliances' original purpose was not to transform local realities but to provide a common oppositional framework both for tribes and for ranching and farming communities. Only in the 1990s have some of the Native and non-Native circles turned toward non-environmental relationships; their ultimate success will be judged by how much they transfer environmental successes into social, economic, or cultural areas.

The South Dakota experience also demonstrates that the initial caution of some white environmental groups in working with tribal members in the late 1970s was unfounded. By directly addressing the relationship between Native American and white rural communities, the interethnic alliances built lasting bonds that enabled a unified environmental defense of the region. The local environmental groups that avoided an alliance with Lakota communities faded away, while those that worked with the tribes generally succeeded in their goals.

A number of activists also ironically asserted that had the Wounded Knee confrontation not happened in the early 1970s, BHA would not have happened in the late 1970s, and the alliance against Honeywell may not have prevailed in the late 1980s. AIM's militancy put it at odds with ranchers in the short term, but helped in the long term to bring out the critical issue of the treaty and Lakota culture, and how they could help defend the Black Hills. As in eastern Montana, it was some of the most outspokenly pro-treaty indig-

49. Bruce Ellison interview.

enous activists—such as Bill Means and Charlotte Black Elk—who made the first key moves to ally with white ranchers. As in eastern Montana, their carrot-and-stick approach fused particularist confrontation around racism and treaty rights with universalist cooperation around environmental issues. The strategy was crafted to confront the racist past, make tribal members equal partners with non-Indians in the present, and promise a common landscape in the future.

On a deeper level, there is something more profound about Native American alliances with non-Indians living on their claimed historic lands. After all, many Native peoples claim a primordial attachment to the Black Hills or the Sweetgrass Hills that non-Indians do not share, and therefore claim a special relationship to the land. The Lakotas' collective conflicts and treaty-making with the United States brought their own disparate ranks—divided by dialect, band, and reservation—to identify themselves as part of the Sioux nation. It was in fighting for the sacred Black Hills that the Lakota created this national identity in the 1870s and reasserted it in the 1970s. Yet as part of their tribal land claim, the Lakota proposed sharing their sacred lands with non-Indians. Furthermore, the tribal activists who most aggressively promoted the tribal land claim were the same activists who made the initial contacts with the non-Indians living on the land.

Under certain circumstances, protection of the natural environment may provide a powerful counterargument to the divisions of ethnic or national identity. If the environment is threatened by an outside interest, the groups that value the place must band together to prevent its loss. They may further accept a relationship to significant natural features, such as the Black Hills or Sweetgrass Hills.

Conflicts between Native Americans and the dominant European-American society not only contest ownership and control over land, but often contest cultural concepts of the land itself. Many of the clashes between Native and non-Native societies involve contrasting perspectives on land use, particularly when the contested place is considered sacred in local indigenous religious systems. Unrestrained development has destroyed many Native sacred sites, causing environmental and cultural harm to Indian cultures that is nearly impossible to reverse.

Many sacred places around the world, notably shrines in the Middle East

and India, are often contested by different groups. Native Americans and whites have fought over the Black Hills since the 1870s in conflicts pitting Native religious views of the hills as a sacred place against the non-Native quest for gold and tourist dollars. These conflicts have elevated the Black Hills' importance in both cultures. The Black Hills have become an icon for Lakota nationhood, and (since the construction of Mount Rushmore) have also served as an icon for American patriotism.

More recently the sacredness of the Black Hills and Sweetgrass Hills, instead of dividing Indians from white ranchers, has actually helped to bring them together. The strongest environmental alliances in the northern plains have been formed to protect the most sacred or culturally significant sites. The white ranchers supporting the alliances no longer seek to exclude Native influence or presence from the Hills, and Native Americans no longer seek the return of privately held lands. The goal of both groups is instead to exclude outside companies that do not value the ranges as either sacred or significant.

The growth of environmental consciousness in non-Native society has increasingly blurred the distinction between Indian and white worldviews. When Indians and white ranchers and farmers agree that the "sacred" Black Hills or Sweetgrass Hills need to be protected, they are agreeing not on religious questions, but on the significance of a mountain range to their cultures and lifestyles. A threat to a place not only bonds those who respect the place, but elevates their view of the place. Discussion about the significance of the place can take an alliance beyond short-term environmental issues to long-term mutual cultural understanding. If both communities view the sacredness of the place in a non-exclusive way and include the other ethnic group within their definition of the place, an alliance between the communities becomes possible. Such alliances can introduce ways that sacred spaces can be shared without degrading either cultural or religious tradition.

The Lakota scholar Vine Deloria has claimed that Indian views of sacred places are based on religious values, collective experiences, and prolonged occupation or intimacy with the land. He believes that non-Native views are based on aesthetic values, individual experiences, and a limited presence on the land. Yet Deloria acknowledged that "a good many non-Indians have some of the same emotional attachment to land that most Indians do. . . . And

critical to the recognition of this attachment is the family, the community, as functioning parts of the landscape.”⁵⁰

The love of environmentally significant places, sometimes called geopiety, provides some of the closest parallels between Native and non-Native views of sacred space. Many rural whites value the land based on longstanding family and community history and a transcendent memory of a free way of life. A white student in Chester, Montana, for example, wrote of his childhood growing up at the base of the Sweetgrass Hills: “I really enjoyed riding horses with dad on the mountain surrounded by the beauty of the hills. [Mom] would also take me for hikes in the hills to see what kind of new flowers we could find. . . . When we would find a deep spot in the creek we would stop and lie on our stomachs and feel for the fish under the bank. . . . [T]he joy I felt inside was awesome. . . . I love to . . . watch the elk and deer graze while sitting on the side of the mountain in the grass. . . . Growing up in the hills is so peaceful. . . . On top of these hills I pretty much feel like king of the mountain.”⁵¹

The writer incorporated memories of freedom, yet his perspective is not escapist or centered on a non-human “wilderness.” His memories instead closely resemble Indian views of a landscape alive with family relationships that bond human beings to a place. Though they have different ties to the rural landscape, both indigenous people and white farmers and ranchers hold in common a sense of a place under siege from globalizing forces, be they government agencies, agricultural commodity markets, or resource corporations. Both Native and non-Native people value place not simply as land, but as a connection to their ancestors and a refuge for an endangered way of life.

Despite vast differences in their histories and cultures, Indians and farmers/ranchers in Montana and South Dakota had more in common in the 1970s–1990s than they initially had assumed. Native people wanted some control over territory not simply for political or economic power, but for the ability to continue practicing traditional subsistence practices and land-based spiri-

50. Vine Deloria, “Reflection and Revelation: Knowing Land, Places, and Ourselves,” in *The Power of Place: Sacred Ground in Natural & Human Environments*, ed. James A. Swan (Bath, U.K.: Gateway Books, 1993), 29–34.

51. Joe Wolery, “The Sweetgrass Hills,” *Essay of Place* (St. Ignatius, Mont.: Montana Heritage Project, 1999), <http://www.edheritage.org/bulletin/99summer/su99jw.htm>.

tual ceremonies. White agriculturists wanted control over territory not simply to continue making money (especially under poor economic conditions), but to be able to practice family farming and ranching. The disruption of the agrarian way of life not only threatened individual families with property foreclosure but threatened the sense of community life. This identification of the land with continuity of a *gemeinschaft*-style family and community life was perhaps one of the strongest bonds between rural Native and non-Native people.

But the key difference between Native and non-Native residents was the degree and quality of their attachment to the land. Native peoples can claim genealogical and cosmological roots to the land stretching back centuries (or even millennia, according to many origin myths), during which they have developed an intimate knowledge of the terrain and its resources. Non-Native farmers and ranchers can perhaps claim family roots, based on land ownership dating back only a century or two.

Indigenous peoples describe their kinship ties and land-based spirituality and culture as giving them a deep sense of place. Among whites, the sense of belonging in the place is deepest if the family had a longer length of residence, more extensive social networks locally, and greater knowledge about the landscape.⁵² In the construction of Indian and white environmental alliances, Native Americans often identified white mobility as a key difference within the alliance. Indians could not easily move away from an environmental threat to their ancestral "homeland," yet non-Indians can move away to another beautiful or productive area (although such unpolluted areas are disappearing throughout North America).

Given these differences, how can Native Americans and European Americans possibly hope to share the same sacred places in the present, much less protect them in the future? Native nations often shared sacred places, even if they had different kinds of ties to the places. The Lakota and Cheyenne, for example, jointly view Bear Butte as one of their most sacred locations, but owing to very different legends; each group performs tribal-specific ceremonies in their shared sacred space. Christians, as well, have shared sacred

52. Robert Hay, "A Rooted Sense of Place in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Canadian Geographer* 42, no. 3 (1998): 245.

space despite their historical schisms and doctrinal conflicts. Even some sacred Holy Land sites have been shared by different religions despite conflicts over other sites. Sharing sacred space may involve reaching a détente between religions over use of an area significant to both, especially to protect the area from an outside threat.⁵³

Common protection of the Black Hills as a “sacred” place continues to the present day. In 2002, the Defenders of the Black Hills group was founded, partly to appose a planned shooting range near Bear Butte. The group described itself as “without racial or tribal boundaries, whose mission is to ensure that . . . the Fort Laramie treaties . . . are upheld. . . . Until the treaties are upheld, the actions of the Defenders are to restore and protect the environment of the Black Hills.”⁵⁴

The Native Americans and white ranchers and farmers who have joined in protection of various sacred ranges view the island mountain ranges as oases of life in the northern plains. Although they have differed over control of the ranges and the reasons for their significance, their common bond is their strong cultural attachment to place. When they oppose corporate or governmental projects, they are not merely critiquing environmental or economic change. They are questioning the right to determine the land’s future by outsiders who do not share their place attachment nor believe in the sacredness of the landscape. A group’s bond to the land is no longer simply being used to “prove” its superior nationhood—either the nationhood of Native American homelands, or the nationhood of the white settler society. A claim can be made in the name of all human beings who value its natural features. Control over the place has become less important than what happens there or whether land-based cultures can continue to survive.

In the perspective of these Indian and rancher/farmer groups, a threatened place must be protected by all who respect it. They have emphasized not their exclusive cultural or linguistic bonds or systems of political citizenship, but their common “place membership.” They describe cultural understanding not

53. Deloria, “Reflection and Revelation,” 39–40; Chad F. Emmett, “Sharing Sacred Space in the Holy Land,” in *Cultural Encounters with the Environment*, ed. Alexander Murphy and Douglas Johnson (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Chad F. Emmett, “The Status Quo Solution for Jerusalem,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 16–28.

54. Defenders of the Black Hills. <http://www.defendblackhills.org>. Accessed January 2003.

merely as a way to learn about a people with different lifestyles and past histories but to identify ways to live together in the future. Both Native and non-Native rural cultures are challenged by monumental economic and environmental change. Their continuing ties to the local landscape are what make them different from much of the rest of the country and the world, and what is starting to provide a common frame of reference for two ethnic groups that have been divided for so long. In defending the land together, they are also beginning to look toward sharing the land in the future.

ABSTRACT

Native Americans and white ranchers/farmers in eastern Montana and western South Dakota have often been in conflict over natural resources, such as water and grazing lands. But in the 1970s, the two groups began to develop a common interest in protecting the rural environment from large-scale development. Since the 1980s, they developed a series of interethnic environmental alliances that successfully opposed coal and uranium mines, bombing ranges, and other "outside" threats to their lands and cultures. A common defense of the local place provided a path out of historic natural resources conflicts. Alliances tended to be initiated by traditionalist and activist Native Americans who strongly asserted their tribal identity at the same time as they built bridges to white neighbors around common environmental concerns. This approach simultaneously strengthened a recognition of difference and similarities between Native and non-Native communities. The grassroots alliances promoted a territorially based, multiethnic "place membership" to build cooperation across racial lines, rather than state-sponsored "reconciliation" programs. Continuing cultural and economic differences made individual alliances difficult to sustain, although the series of alliances progressively improved relations between certain local communities.