

April 14, 2009

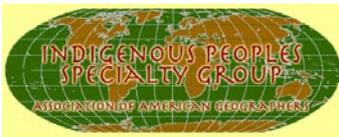
John Agnew, President
Carol Harden, Vice President
Association of American Geographers (AAG)
1710 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009-3198

Dear AAG Executive Board,

This letter is to inform you of several decisions made by the membership of the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group at our March 24 meeting in Las Vegas and verified by our larger membership and board since the AAG annual meeting.

First, the IPSG has established a Subcommittee on Research and Indigenous Peoples, to develop ethical protocol on research involving Indigenous peoples (with a first draft available for our review by July 1). Executive Director Doug Richardson indicated to us on March 23 that the AAG would be open to referencing any new IPSG ethical research guidelines in the AAG's own guidelines. We feel it is both crucial and timely that geographers develop a system of accountability for geographic researchers working with Indigenous nations and communities.

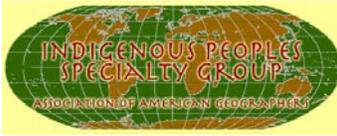
At our business meeting, members addressed our Discussion Paper on Research and Indigenous Peoples (attached), to open the dialogue. Our members found existing academic ethics standards to be inadequate in an Indigenous context (for example, by relying on individual rather than collective consent, written rather than oral consent, public access to data rather than Indigenous community control, property orientation rather than values orientation, etc.). The recent passage of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples set new international standards, recognizing that Indigenous communities have to give their "Free, Prior and Informed Consent" on actions that affect their well-being. Our members proposed that our guidelines be process-oriented, and take into account unintended consequences and larger political/military contexts. They also made clear that part of any standards is not only to set high standards for our discipline, but also to hold each other accountable to these expectations, a stance which led to the Specialty Group's second action.



Second, the IPSG membership has endorsed the letter by Joe Bryan and Joel Wainwright, calling for an AAG inquiry into the Bowman Expeditions' México Indígena project, and particularly into the central role of the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO). We took this action after receiving the March 17 statement by the municipal authority for the Oaxaca community of San Miguel Tiltepec (attached), which asserted it had not been fully informed of FMSO involvement, and called on the research team to "cease and desist" and return the project data. No matter what our opinions about the specifics of this project, there is no doubt that it has drawn the attention of the global Indigenous community. Maori scholar Dr. Helen Hayward responded with a letter (attached) pointing out that "For many Indigenous communities the nexus between research and state warrants continual vigilance and scrutiny." We have made documents from all sides of this debate available to our members (and any other geographers) at <http://academic.evergreen.edu/g/grossmaz/bowman.html>

At our business meeting, our members expressed concerns that even the perception of unethical behavior by geographers may complicate future geographic research efforts in many regions (past and present experiences in anthropology serve as an object lesson for us). Members also expressed concern for the well-being of Indigenous communities in conflict zones, who may be tarnished by inadvertent affiliation with a U.S. military-funded project. We understand the fear of Indigenous communities that data gathered by one part of the military for benign purposes is then available to be used by another part of the military to disempower their autonomy, or even to aid forces or interests repressing their rights. Some discussion centered on the awareness of any data sharing on the part of the researchers, but it was generally agreed that consequences and outcomes were more crucial than researchers' (perhaps well-meaning) intentions. We found it ironic that military and intelligence agencies are seeking to harness the great success of Indigenous participatory mapping (which yields data superior to their research) to use it for their own purposes. But the sense of the group was that we do not want Indigenous geography to be used as tool for gathering military intelligence in conflict zones. We want any research data to be determined and controlled by Indigenous communities, to meet their own interests and concerns.

We recognize that the AAG does not have any legal authority to hold the Bowman Expeditions' México Indígena project accountable, however we request that any action taken by the AAG executive committee include representation by the IPSG, whose members have first-hand experience in the unique and nuanced nature of Indigenous-centered research. One of the reasons for the existence of the IPSG is to function in such a reciprocal accord with the AAG. Any AAG taskforce should not simply address the rights of academic institutions or individual researchers, but also foreground the rights and self-determination of Indigenous peoples involved in research projects. The process should respect and trust Indigenous peoples and their leaders at least as much as it trusts the word of fellow members of our academic community. There was also opinion voiced that any inquiry should be narrowly specific to this project, rather than casting a wide net that would critique all government-funded research, which may not be detrimental to Indigenous communities (and may even be welcomed by some of them).



Third, we feel that the AAG should pass a resolution strongly recommending that the University of Kansas conduct an inquiry into the Bowman Expeditions / México Indígena project, as part of its Institutional Review process. This action would put the AAG on record that questions have been raised about the project that should be settled in a fair and open forum. By being silent, the AAG will be perceived as a body that has been complicit with the parameters of the Mexico Indígena Project to the detriment of an Indigenous community. The *status quo* leaves both the researchers and the affected Indigenous communities in a state of limbo with no resolution of these serious questions. Setting the record straight should be welcomed by all sides in the debate.

Fourth, we have sent a response to the municipal authority for the Oaxaca community of San Miguel Tiltepec (attached). We invite the AAG to send its own letter to the municipal authority, outlining the actions it is taking in response to their concerns. This gesture would communicate in a positive way that U.S. geographers are listening to the perspective of Indigenous peoples, and taking them into account. Dealing honestly with the past is critical to building beneficial relationships in the present. This issue is a defining moment for the AAG and for U.S. geography and geographers in general. Our reputation is now at stake in many Indigenous communities. The AAG should not be seen as doing little to address their legitimate concerns, at a time when the whole world is watching.

Sincerely,

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