

RESISTING DESERT ROCK

Indigenous resistance against the proposed Desert Rock coal fired power plant continues despite intimidation and harassment.

By Nathan Coe

On the Navajo Reservation of New Mexico, indigenous elders and youth have been battling energy giants—and their plan to construct a new coal-fired power plant on Navajo lands—in an attempt to protect their lands and traditions. In December of 2006, resisters erected a barricade and engaged in a tense standoff with law enforcement. Though the barricade has since been removed, indigenous resisters remain on site to vigil and protest against the destruction of their sacred lands, while others seek to educate, organize, and rally their people, as well as the public at large.

In the deserts of the Southwestern United States—the area known as the Four Corners—energy and resource wars are nothing new. Locals say that there is nothing pettier than water politics in the Southwest. The legacy of coal and other mining and oil and gas drilling is a long one, as is the legacy of colonialism and the battles fought by the indigenous to protect their sacred lands.

Over thirty years ago the Four Corners area was designated as a "National Sacrifice Area" by the National Academy of Sciences, by which they meant that the area was to be sacrificed to corporate interests and the extraction of natural resources, from oil and gas to coal to copper and other minerals and metals. The lands of the American Southwest have long suffered the ravages of heavy mining and oil and gas drilling.

Now, on the Diné (Navajo) reservation, at a site near the town of Burnham, New Mexico, twenty five miles Southeast of Shiprock, Sithe Global Power

and Diné Power Authority plan to build a 1,500 megawatt coal-fired power plant that has been dubbed "Desert Rock." Despite claims to "clean coal," coal-fired power plants produce the highest emissions, at 13.7 million tons of carbon dioxide per year (anywhere from 10 to 15 million metric tons per year, according to [various estimates](#)). The plant would use approximately forty seven gallons of water per minute, leading to dangerous levels of mercury emissions into the streams and rivers, the ground water, and the water table. Desert Rock could potentially increase state mercury emissions by 40%. According to various estimates, Desert Rock would increase the total net emissions in the state of New Mexico by anywhere from 14% – 20%. The Environmental Impact Study due January of this year has been delayed, and is expected to be released some time around the end of May.

Many involved in the fight against Desert Rock argue that the history of exploitation and appropriation of their sacred and ancestral lands amounts to environmental racism, and—because their culture and traditional way of life is bound to the land—ethnocide and genocide. The activities of energy corporations on tribal lands has always violated and disrupted traditional indigenous culture and values, by destroying sacred sites and ceremonial grounds.

While Joe Shirley, President of the Navajo Nation, sides with Sithe & the DPA, arguing that the new power plant will bring much needed money and jobs to the reservation, the people know better. Though a certain number of jobs would indeed be created,

some question whether this is worth the cost of the destruction of their sacred lands, and thus, their traditional way of life. There are two other coal-fired power plants in the region (Four Corners and San Juan), and they have brought nothing but decimation. Driving through the Four Corners areas one can see the haze created by these generating stations. And while Desert Rock would burn [Black Mesa](#) coal to generate electricity for Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Tucson, the majority of the residents in the area of Desert Rock are without electricity or running water.

taken away, their camp dismantled this afternoon in clear violation of their constitutional rights and in absence of any form of restraining order or other legal mandate... They have committed no crimes, were not interfering with any work going on at the location, and were acting within their rights to gather peacefully in the hopes of persuading our Navajo Nation government not to make this kind of mistake again.

According to another report:

Sithe, in collusion with our Navajo Nation executive office, have strong-armed, threatened, lied to and otherwise coerced our local population to accept this proposed power plant throughout the past two years. Families have had their land taken from them with insufficient compensation to move anywhere else. We've been told, as we've been told many times in the past, that this polluting monster will bring "hundreds of jobs" to the Navajo Nation, and lots of economic benefits. Time after time, we've heard this same lie for too many projects just like this one. After over a hundred years of such development the Navajo people are among the poorest people in the entire United States.

DPA went as far as to request restraining orders against ten of the blockaders, but a deal was eventually struck that allowed the resisters to remain on site as long as they did not blockade the road (perhaps a tactically unfortunate compromise). Today, the Resistance Camp still stands, and the resistance to Desert Rock and all decimation of the sacred Earth continues.

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