

# Indigenous Communities Set Border Environment Agenda

By Talli Nauman | January 16, 2006

Representatives of the first peoples of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States have issued a joint communiqué they hope will set the new year's agenda for protection of the environment they have shared since long before a national border separated them.

Negotiators for 26 Mexican indigenous communities and U.S. tribes who felt their concerns were sidelined in a 2005 binational declaration on border environment, released their own statement in response.

Last year marked the first time the Indian populations participated in the U.S.-Mexico Border 2012 National Coordinators Meeting, where they had a voice in the cross-boundary programs sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet they deemed it necessary to distinguish their priorities from those outlined at the meeting by the representatives of other jurisdictions in the 2,000-mile-long border area.

The Native American leaders put forward recommendations for conservation of land, air, and water. Some of the counsel differs from that given by non-Indian citizens, while some of it reflects worries held in common.

One common cause is the need to reduce the litter resulting from thousands of migrants clandestinely entering the United States from Mexico and by the U.S. Border Patrol attempting to hold them back. The Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona and the Campo Indian Reservation in California claim to be seriously impacted by the migration phenomenon, as do many military reservations and non-Indian communities on the border. Illegal trash burning, car dumping, and drug labs on Indian land are among environmental complaints related to other border contraband and smuggling.

The Tohono O'odhams estimate more than 300 wildcat dumps on their vast reservation, while the Cucupa Indians in Baja California exemplify many Mexican indigenous communities, having not so much as a garbage transfer or disposal site in their tiny town. But some tribal entities are showing the way to clean up. For example, the Pala Band of Mission Indians has removed

34,000 tires from its reservation, as well as starting a recycling program for waste oil and consumer recyclable items.

The Cocopah Tribe in Arizona is conducting a demonstration project for improved tilling of farmlands to decrease exposure to dust emissions. The Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Tribe in Texas is sampling ambient air for volatile organic compounds and other hazardous pollutants, in partnership with the EPA and the University of Texas School of Public Health, to provide baseline assessment of exposure and to identify potential health risks. The Los Coyotes Band of Cahuilla Indians is paving dirt roads to reduce air pollution. U.S. tribes with monitoring stations will continue to observe for ozone and particulate levels, which are largely determined by off-reservation activities.

On the Mexican side of the border, the small O'odham community of Quitovac has received funding for a potable water system. Nearly all the indigenous communities in the Mexico border region lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, making them extremely susceptible to impacts of proposed new water usage fees. Indigenous spokespeople are calling for a Lower Colorado River Task Force to be set up in the Border 2012 Program. They also want continued funding of the U.S. Tribal Border Infrastructure Program to include money for Mexican indigenous communities.

This demarcation of indigenous concerns is a welcome component in the ongoing process of drawing support for solving the neglected and burgeoning environmental problems of the border, which should be an international trade relations concern for the entirety of Mexico and the United States.

The increased involvement of Indian leaders in meeting the challenges jointly is due to individuals committed to



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maintaining traditional indigenous environmental values and sharing them with other constituencies.

It is also an outgrowth of a concerted effort by federal program administrators and non-governmental organization members to help empower local level stakeholders in the decision making on environmental issues. It reflects foundation donations and tax dollars at work over the years.

For example, the EPA has funded tribal liaisons in the U.S. border states of California, Arizona, and Texas, where tribes' territories transcend the international border. The liaisons have organized tribal caucuses to encourage participation in Border 2012 activities.

This groundswell can lead to greater self determination and effectiveness of grassroots environmental initiatives, in turn diminishing dependency and misled development strategy.

Still, a lot more energy needs to go into collaboration between and with border area indigenous communities to speed progress in applying homegrown resolutions for sustainability. If steps are taken in that direction during 2006, it will be a promising year for cross-border environmental policy.

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