The Siege of Chaco Canyon

It will not be simple.
It will not be fast.
It will be a slow, steady river that braids our communities together.

Visiting Chaco Canyon, the pinnacle of the ancient Anasazi civilization, is an experience that makes such a deeply lasting impression on your psyche that it will continue to haunt you in dreams for the rest of your life. This is not the hyperbole of a runaway imagination; this is Chaco’s intended effect, and it does that job well. Prayers, mysteries and clues are hidden in its landscape, left there for generations far into the future—to discover and integrate into our own world. We need this guidance. Because, greatest of ironies, underneath the Anasazi legacy lies a different kind of wealth, one of oil and gas. And as extraction encroaches closer and closer to this sacred site and all the public and tribal lands surrounding it, a flurry of passionately determined and dedicated individuals are fighting to save it before its annihilation. Some days, that job seems—even to this army of protectors, many of them women—hopelessly naïve. And no wonder; they live with it daily, progress is so slow, and what if they fail? What they, and we, have to remember is: We are a part of something much larger than ourselves.

New Mexico’s no stranger to the fossil fuels industry—fracking’s going on right in our backyard. And although our current tourism slogan is “New Mexico True,” we’re fiercely in denial of our relationship with it, simultaneously co-dependent upon and severely environmentally abused by insatiable corporate greed. An economically impoverished state, we depend heavily on tax revenues from extreme energy extraction activities such as fracking. Fossil fuels exploration and initial excavation here started in the 1920s but, says WildEarth Guardians’ Senior Climate and Energy Campaigner Rebecca Sobel, “this activity was greatly accelerated in 1968 by the Nixon Administration, who officially declared the northwest Four Corners area an ‘Energy Sacrifice Zone,’” meaning, essentially, no holds barred in New Mexico. Maps show the progression as 91 percent of all public lands existent in this ‘zone’ are leased for drilling. A large portion of the last 9 percent is in what’s known as Greater Chaco Canyon, the vast area outside the protected confines of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. On Jan. 25, after agreeing last October to postpone sales pending further consultations with Navajo tribes, the Bureau of Land Management, Greater Chaco’s supposed protector, went ahead leasing three of its four parcels there—nearly 850 acres—for drilling; the auction was held online, a first, which Rebecca contends was done in order to avoid public scrutiny. The BLM netted close to $3 million from winning bidders (whose parcels won’t be released until protests filed against the leases are resolved).

Today’s Chaco Canyon is what remains of a vast ancient Anasazi ceremonial and agricultural complex, with 75 surrounding settlements, built and occupied in the heart of the San Juan Basin between 850 and 1250 AD. Three hundred miles of carefully constructed roads connect these outlier villages. Using various masonry styles, the Anasazi buildings were passive solar heated, massive but graceful structures standing five stories high—until the 19th century, the tallest buildings in North America. A large quantity of storage bins were filled with food, easily enough for all who lived there. Art and worship flourished; traders came from as far as South America. ‘I’ve heard many Natives call Chaco ‘The Original World
Trade Center.” Rebecca says. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is an internationally recognized architectural and engineering wonder; among its phenomenal accomplishments is a complex astronomical system that played a major part in their agricultural and religious practices connected to the sun, the moon and the stars. Many archaeologists have found that what the Anasazi culture was able to create here would be impossible for us to replicate today without technology. Because the Anasazi had no written language, the story of their culture and the history of the Pueblo peoples, principally the Navajo, the Hopi and the Zuni, are recorded in the beauty of this impossibly fragile landscape, the skyscape, the architecture, the petroglyphs. This, their ancestral birthright, is at the mercy of ravages wrought by fracking.

For those Navajo living in the Twin Pines community, within this Energy Sacrifice Zone, where fracking is and has been continual, “it’s like being in an invasion all the time,” says Kendra Pinto, a young Native activist. She and others have gone door-to-door in affected areas collecting Health Impact Assessment Report surveys and stories of the impacts on her neighbors. “In many cases,” Rebecca of WildEarth Guardians says, “the Navajo Nation is paying for services they don’t have;” those without electricity, heat or even water pay with their health so others may have them. Fracking brings elevated cancer rates, heart attacks, permanent lung damage and seizures, among other hazards. Not to mention myriad environmental damages. The Chaco region is becoming an industrial wasteland as a result of fracking and its newest variant, horizontal drilling, which occurs in a 360-degree radius with far greater subsurface impacts. In 2015, according to sanjuanincitizens.org, four spills a day occurred in New Mexico alone.

“Our community is all spread out,” Kendra says. “The company’s water trucks, that they need to do the fracking, are beating up our dirt roads. They leave two-foot ruts and some of our elders literally cannot leave home. This winter, we took emergency firewood and boxes of food to them. One of the elders is on dialysis and he couldn’t get out. It makes me so mad! Because of historical trauma, people were afraid to speak up. They’ve been quiet about it for 30 years. But the well sites are moving closer and closer to homes.” Activists like Kendra are encouraging neighbors to change this. “We’re starting to have a community focus now. We’re mobilizing.”

In 2014, WildEarth Guardians declared enough is enough. Along with support from other environmental groups, they filed a lawsuit against the BLM. Currently in litigation, oral argument is scheduled to begin this summer. Subsequent legal actions have followed, including H.R. 1902, The Protect Our Public Lands Act, introduced in 2015—that died in Congress—and HJMS, a House Joint Memorial reintroduced to another legislative committee by House Speaker Brian Egolf which, if passed, would grant a moratorium on land leases until BLM’s 2003 Resource Management Plan is updated to address the issue of fracking. HJMS also asks for a full Environmental Impact Statement on fracking locations. Such a moratorium is vital: without it, the BLM has proceeded to add more than 365 new wells and counting on tribal and public lands. The BLM’s updated plan is expected to be completed by 2018.

“The WildEarth Guardians lawsuit,” Rebecca believes, “is our best hope. The BLM is in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act. Fracking also violates the National Historic Preservation Act. As a result of the No DAPL movement, the American public is broadly supportive of Indigenous rights and keeping our collective water clean.” So many justice issues, she notes, are similarly struck “in the BLM’s onslaught in the Greater Chaco Area,” and this she finds greatly encouraging. Rebecca calls for all of New Mexico’s “mosaic of cultures”—rural, urban, Indigenous, Hispanic, Anglos, rich, poor, millennial, baby boomer—to “stand up for the diverse heritage and culture of our state.”

National organization Food and Water Watch Senior Campaign Manager Eleanor Bravo, who was active in implementing New York State’s 2015 ban on fracking, says, “It took us eight years and lots of political pressure to make that happen, including taking out full-page ads, doing a tremendous amount of research, identifying local elected officials’ aspirations and then bird-dogging them, petitioning and lobbying.” Last year, she says, New Mexico Senator Martin Heinrich received the biggest number by far of his calls from constituents supporting no fracking in Chaco.

“Contact Congressman Ben Ray Lujan, too,” Eleanor recommends, “and Representative Tom Udall. The Land Commissioner. And who are the
Chaco Canyon

County Commissioners in San Juan County? “Visit them personally; bring along lots of supporters’ signatures while you’re at it. You can also bring visual aids. Photos are effective; or, like Santa Feans Bobbe Besold and Rae Domenico, fill baby food jars with simulated contaminated fracking water and deliver them to the offices of Republican senators and representatives, as a way of engaging them in discussion. Get neighbors together around the kitchen table for brainstorming, asking, “What is it we’re for, not against?”

Most New Mexicans agree; the proposal to frack beneath the Earth around Chaco Canyon, sacred to the Anasazi and all their relatives, is deeply irresponsible. “We’ll ultimately triumph—because we have to,” Rebecca concludes. “We will succeed because of the strength of diverse allies working together across tribes, across environmental organizations and communities. The challenge ahead of us demands unity as we fight for clean water, clean air, healthy lives and a livable planet for all of us.” The land doesn’t belong to us; we, each of us indigenous to a place, belong to it. “Everything we do,” says Native artist and activist Cannupa Hanksa Luger, “has weight. Move from inspiration.”

At Chaco, the Anasazi reached the heights of their civilization, heights we have yet to reach. At the rate we’re going, our own legacy will be a smoking dystopian ruin; the outlines of the Anasazi world are so camouflaged you might walk straight into it before seeing it.

In Terry Tempest Williams’ essay The Wild Card, in which she entreats women to stand up for the Earth and wilderness, she writes:

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“Don’t give up,” Kendra Pinto says. “Don’t rest.” That is the Anasazi’s clarion call to us. Now they’re watching to see which path we choose.