



TRANSLATING GREEN INTO NAVAJO

Alternatives to Coal Mining and
The Campaign for a Navajo Green Economy

YVONNE YEN LIU

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INTRODUCTION

“WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, MY DAD ALWAYS WORKED FAR FROM HOME.

He worked in Phoenix or California or New Mexico to support the family, to give us money to survive. There weren't good jobs closer to home,” said Ryan Johnson, volunteer with the Navajo Green Economy campaign. “So, I didn't spend a lot of time with my dad as a kid. It wasn't just our families. I have a lot of friends and that's how they grew up. There's no jobs on the reservation.”¹

Ryan Johnson was laid off in May 2009 at age 30. He spent four years as a sheet metal worker in Las Vegas and southern California, riding the construction boom of the fastest growing city in the United States. Like many young Navajos, no work was to be had closer to Flagstaff, a border town where his mother lived, or in the reservation where his grandmother made her home. Instead, Johnson lived a nomadic life, following work opportunities, sometimes stationed in a city like Los Angeles for a construction project that took a week, sharing an extended stay hotel room with coworkers. Other times, living for years in a rental apartment with his father in Phoenix, miles away from home.

Johnson's other options were to follow in his father's footsteps and earn a living wage as a sheet metal worker (a union job), or to work in the coal mines in the reservation to be closer to his family. Coal companies are major employers in the Navajo Nation. In fact, more than half of the General Fund was revenue from coal mining. Over five mines are currently in operation in the Nation, employing over 1,942 Navajos.² Activities are not just limited to coal—oil and gas are also collected, which comprised over a quarter of the General Fund budget (see **Appendix A: Background on Navajo Nation**). Uranium is currently banned, but prices have been rising in the marketplace while Obama announces his intention to develop clean nuclear energy, so the ban may not be for long.³

This is the missing generation: young Navajos ranging from 18 to 24;⁴ thousands of young people in their prime not present to have dinners with families, to participate in local Chapterhouse meetings or to help build the Navajo economy. Unemployment in the Navajo Nation historically has been high, at 48.04 percent in 2004.⁵ A typical young Navajo leaves the reservation after high school to continue schooling or to find a job.⁶ The Black Mesa Water Coalition (BMWC) was concerned about the endemic lack of opportunity for youth in their nation, as well as the destruction of community and environmental health due to the national reliance on extractive mining (see **Appendix B: Coal Mining in the Navajo Nation**). BMWC and the coalition they started, the Navajo Green Economy Coalition, won a campaign to diversify the Navajo economy and create green employment for youth. The Navajo Green Economy plan was enacted into law by the Navajo Tribal Council in July 2009.

This case study is a narrative of the Navajo Green Economy campaign, told from the perspective of the BMWC organizers and the Navajo Green Economy Coalition. The grassroots campaign fought an uphill battle against large energy corporations and tribal bureaucrats to envision and realize a green economy

2009 BMWC Staff. Photo courtesy of Black Mesa Water Coalition.



that was equitable and empowered local communities. Coal agreements have always been brokered in secret meetings between tribal politicians and energy corporations. Energy projects that were taken on were large in scale and rapidly developed with the aid of external experts, often without input from surrounding communities. The activists pursued an inside-outside strategy, where they worked with elected officials sympathetic to expanding the use of renewable energy while simultaneously keeping community and Navajo youth engaged and pressuring their tribal representatives to vote in favor of the legislation.

The goals of the campaign were revolutionary: to change the Navajo economy and in the process democratize tribal government. Both economy and government were artifacts of colonialism, external structures imposed on the Navajo peoples by the federal government. And neither met the needs of the people. BMWC realized that their campaigns against coal were only band-aids—systemic change was needed. The Navajo economy and tribal economic development needed to be fundamentally redefined, in a scalable manner that would provide jobs for thousands of Navajo youth such as Ryan Johnson.

*“Green jobs are an extension of the indigenous rights movements of the 1960s and ’70s. They’ll give sovereignty, to live the way we want to,” said Anna Rondon of the New Energy Economy in New Mexico and the Navajo Green Economy Coalition. “Now, our lives are shaped by capitalism and corporate greed. Green jobs are a way to get back on track, to take care of the Mother. Green jobs are a way to decolonize ourselves.”*⁷

Disparities in the Navajo Nation

Population: According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the total number of residents in the Navajo Nation was 180,462. 49.02 percent were male, and 50.98 percent female. Navajos were the largest racial group on the reservation at 96.4 percent, while whites comprised 2.89 percent. Navajos are a young population—the median age of residents of the Navajo Nation was 24 years in 2000, but the median age for the entire U.S. population was 35.3 years.

Poverty: 42.9 percent of Navajo individuals lived below the poverty level, according to the 2000 Census. That was four times higher than the national rate of 12.4 percent for 2000.⁸

Unemployment: Unemployment in the Navajo Nation historically has been high, at 48.04 percent in 2004.⁹ Alternate measures place the rate of unemployment even higher, at 67.87 percent in 2004.¹⁰ The conservative estimate of unemployment, 48.04 percent, was seven times higher than the national rate of 5.7 percent in 2004.¹¹

Income: Per capita income in the Navajo Nation in 2004 was \$7,733. This was four times less than the national per capita income of \$30,547.¹²

Educational attainment: Only a little more than half (54.22 percent) of Navajos in the reservation graduate high school.¹³ A small percentage (less than 5 percent) goes on to finish college or graduate school. This is in sharp contrast to the white population in the reservation, where over 95 percent finish high school and 66.76 percent acquire a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Occupational segregation: Employment in base industries—manufacturing, agriculture and mining—was sorely lacking in the Nation in 2004.¹⁴ Despite its large contribution to tribal revenue, mining employed only 4.57 percent of the population (1,405 Navajos). Both manufacturing and agriculture employed less than 1 percent of residents. Half of the Navajos (50.80 percent or 15,616 Navajos) who lived in the reservation were employed in the service sector.¹⁵ Almost a quarter (23.64 percent or 7,266 Navajos) worked in public sector jobs in the federal, state or tribal government.

Navajo businesses and services: Only 28.83 percent of Navajo monies were spent in the reservation, and the majority (over 71 percent) was used to purchase things in off-reservation communities or cities in close proximity to the reservation (border towns).¹⁶ The Dilkon Shopping Center, a major accomplishment of economic development, was a shopping center that the Nation invested \$4.0 million in.¹⁷ None of the five tenants currently leasing space—a grocery store, pizzeria, hair salon, video store and laundromat—were owned by Dilkon-area residents.

Health status: Disparities for Native Americans were dire. According to a 2004 report by the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights, Native Americans are 770 percent more likely to die from alcoholism, 420 percent more likely to die from diabetes, 280 percent more likely to die from accidents and 52 percent more likely to die from pneumonia or influenza.¹⁸ Life expectancy for Navajos was 72.3 years in 1996-98, four years shorter than the U.S. population’s average life expectancy of 76.5 in 1997.¹⁹

ORGANIZING FOR A NAVAJO GREEN ECONOMY

WHEN RYAN JOHNSON WAS LAID OFF FROM WORK, HE WAS INVITED BY HIS COUSIN WAHLEAH JOHNS TO VOLUNTEER WITH THE NAVAJO GREEN ECONOMY COALITION. In July 2009, more than 50 Navajo youth wearing green shirts and carrying signs marched to Window Rock. Johnson was surprised that there were this many engaged Navajo youth. “It was really an eye-opening experience to see that the movement was youth-led,” he said.

It was a 14-month process to get to this stage. The campaign was spearheaded by the BMWC (see sidebar **Black Mesa Water Coalition**) and their allies, many of the relationships cultivated through mutual work against coal.



Photo courtesy of Black Mesa Water Coalition.

The Green Jobs campaign had three phases:

- 1. Translating Green into Navajo:** Solicit public participation and community input in defining a Navajo Green Economy, a synthesis of new, green technologies with traditional ways of subsistence.
- 2. Mobilizing for Navajo Green Jobs:** Garner support from the community for green jobs and craft a Nation-wide plan. The plan is refined through collaboration with experts and then enacted by the Navajo Nation Council.
- 3. Enforcing Equity in Navajo Green Economy:** BMWC continues to monitor the Navajo Green Economy and demonstrates the success of community-led model projects.

Building the Navajo Green Economy Coalition

The Navajo Green Economy Coalition was the organizing body for the campaign. The organizers wanted the Coalition to be Navajo-led, according to Johns, but it depended on resources from the outside, such as foundation monies. The challenge for groups like BMWC was the disparity in resources. Grassroots groups could not access the same level of funding that national partners like the

Black Mesa Water Coalition

The Black Mesa Water Coalition (BMWC) was birthed in 2001 as a student group at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. BMWC was unique because its cofounders were Navajo, Hopi and Chicano—a multiracial formation not often seen either on campus or off. Roberto Nutlouis (Diné) and Lilian Hill (Hopi) were students in the same anthropology class of Professor Miguel Vasquez who connected over shared concerns about the history of coal mining and relocation. With the son of the anthropology professor, Jeronimo Vazquez, they officially started the organization in their professor’s garage “out of anger for what happened,” said Nutlouis. “BMWC was a constructive outlet, because we were angry that colonialism still continued today.”

For two years, BMWC organized concerts and teach-ins about coal mining on Navajo lands and the endangered water supply used by the energy corporations. The focus of the organization shifted as BMWC gained a better understanding of how to stop Peabody Corporation from expanding their mines. The work of the organization transitioned towards community outreach and mobilization to publicly comment on mine expansion. The composition of the group grew to include more off-campus activists such as Enei Begaye and Wahleah Johns. In 2003, the cofounders decided to make the organization independent of the university and more rooted in the direct communities affected by mining.



“Big environmental and conservation groups have direct access to foundations; [foundations] direct activities. It’s hard as a small indigenous organization to organize this type of work...[Navajo] communities are so different than urban communities. We deal with issues differently,” said Wableah Johns, former codirector of BMWC. “It’s important to support and build leadership within the community. This is a good, equitable foundation to build green jobs...Community groups often look to big environmental organizations for direction. But, there also needs to be room to build the skills and capacity within the community.”²⁰

Sierra Club or the Energy Action Coalition could. For instance, BMWC received insufficient funding for its work on the Green Economy campaign, so staff had to volunteer a majority of their time spent on the campaign.

BMWC and other leaders in the Coalition created a set of principles for Coalition members to work together—principles that respect the different positions that each group originates from and acknowledges Navajo leadership in issues concerning their peoples and Nation. The protocols were based on three historical traditions:

- Navajo culture of Ké, adopting a respectful intention towards others^{21 22}
- The Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing, first adopted in 1996 by a meeting of people of color and white activists on globalization and free trade²³
- Principles of Environmental Justice from the First National People of Color Leadership Summit in 1991²⁴

Not all members of the Coalition have adopted the principles, yet. All have, however, undergone decolonization and anti-oppression training, particularly the non-Native allies. The non-Native allies in the coalition endorsed the prerequisite. According to Andy Bessler, head of the tribal partnership program for the Sierra Club and also a former student of Professor Miguel Vazquez, “There are racial and cultural barriers out there, but there’s room for a diverse array of people.” He added, “I’m about as white bread as they come, German-Irish. But, if you are culturally competent and you’re willing to work on environmental justice issues, then the Navajo know how to move, and they need help.”

TRANSLATING GREEN INTO NAVAJO

At the outset of the campaign, the Navajo Green Economy Coalition wanted to define and translate “green” into Navajo language and in accordance with Diné culture. Navajo tradition is an important aspect of contemporary life. The Fundamental Laws of the Diné (FLD) are a foundational set of principles, much like the Ten Commandments, that govern tribal life.²⁵ Four types of the FLD were codified into the Navajo Nation Tribal Code in 2002.²⁶ One of the four types of law is Diné Natural Law, which approximates traditional and historical notions of the environment. Tribal politicians and non-governmental organizations often deploy the FLD to gain public support for their agendas.²⁷

“You can’t just translate green into Navajo,” said Enei Begaye, the outgoing codirector of BMWC. “It’s a color, but once you relate it to the Navajo identity and our relationship with Mother Earth, it makes sense because it’s life—it’s a normal and healthy relationship with our land, our creator.”

The campaign decided early that the process of envisioning the Navajo green economy would need to be transparent and participatory. The campaign members shared a critique of tribal government and its lack of accountability in making energy decisions for the Nation.

“As a citizen of the Navajo Nation, I have a right to be informed about coal mining and to make decisions about whether Peabody can stay in my backyard. But, the way our current tribal government is set up, it doesn’t have to consult me,” said Wahleah Johns, the outgoing codirector of BMWC. “This is a rights issue, an indigenous rights issue. Our rights haven’t been consulted. To this day, our tribal government has closed-door meetings with industries, so they can build in our backyard.”²⁸

According to Begaye, the focus groups held in April 2008 were informal gatherings in which stakeholders from diverse backgrounds came together to discuss what green in Navajo could look like. Participants included Navajo Nation Chapter presidents, economists, youth in universities and tribal colleges, those who lived in the reservation, and non-Native allies. Many were representatives of organizations that BMWC had developed affinity with through prior work in coal campaigns. As either individuals or representatives of a group, people gathered together for a full day of conversations. Subjects discussed were broad, such as how to transition the economy and how to build an economy.

The younger generation of Navajos saw the traditional way of life, based on subsistence farming, as a model for the green economy. “We are fortunate to have a history and life way,” said Nikke Alex, age 24, incoming BMWC executive director and former Green Jobs campaign organizer. “We have to revive the traditions that we once lived by.”²⁹ This includes food sovereignty, or the growing of corn and livestock without the use of hormones or pesticides for consumption. If families made their livelihoods from the land, according to Alex, then they wouldn’t have to travel hundreds of miles a day for work. Many youth and their parents have lost knowledge of traditional means of subsistence, including farming, herding and Diné arts.³⁰ Reviving traditional ways in green jobs would mean relearning skills that many Navajos, both living in the reservation and away, have never practiced or lived by.

Participants reached a consensus that Navajo green jobs would incorporate traditional ways of subsistence to create good, green jobs that pay fair wages and help the Nation transition to a sustainable economy, independent of fossil fuels and federal payments. Potential green sectors identified by participants included the following:

- Community renewable energy projects
- Green manufacturing, such as wool mills
- Energy efficiency projects, such as weatherizing homes with straw bales
- Local business ventures, such as a weavers’ co-op and green construction firms
- Traditional agriculture, such as farmers markets and community gardens

Democratizing Green Economy Planning

Government transparency and accountability were on the agenda at the focus

Definition of Good, Green Jobs from the Green Equity Toolkit

The Green Equity Toolkit authored by the Applied Research Center defined green jobs as good jobs that not only improve the environmental health of our communities and nation, but also pay sustainable wages and benefits to the worker, provide a safe and healthy work environment, and enable the employee to advocate for his or her interests collectively through participation in a union.³¹ Green jobs were also pathways into stable careers, where employees can start at an entry-level job and work their way up with more experience and skills.

groups, in addition to formulating a plan to build a Navajo green economy.³² It became clear to the BMWC organizers that any strategy to introduce green jobs to the Navajo economy would also necessitate a conversation about government reform. Life for many Navajos is complicated by the need to apply for permits, mostly regarding the use of land.³³ For example, to build a house on the Black Mesa, Johns obtained permits after an eight-year-long process. Roberto Nutlouis, BMWC cofounder and current community outreach director for Indigenous Community Enterprises, faced the same, long process to get permits to build affordable housing for Navajo elders.³⁴ The goals were to introduce the Navajo Green Economy plan as a referendum for all to vote on.³⁵ This would show that the Navajo peoples supported a green turn for their nation, despite the agendas of their tribal politicians.

The indigenous environmental justice movement has a contentious relationship with the tribal governments, with the latter advocating for a continuation of fossil fuel revenue for the Navajo Nation. The tribal government has been an active partner with Sithe Global (a large energy corporation, like Peabody) in developing a new coal-fired power plant, the Desert Rock Power Plant, in the eastern region of the reservation. This plant would differ from the Mojave and Navajo Generating Stations in that Navajos themselves would hold a joint ownership. The tribal bureaucrats genuinely see this as an economic opportunity to create 3,000 jobs overnight for Navajo youth and adults. President Joe Shirley of the Navajo Nation asserted that environmental groups were “misleading the public by saying Navajos oppose it and failing to mention that it is the cleanest coal plant the EPA has ever evaluated.”³⁶ In the same statement, President Shirley called out environmental activists as “the greatest threats to tribal sovereignty.”

For Enei Begaye, former BMWC codirector, the criticism hits her personally. “It’s hard for me,” she said, “because it’s something I feel strongly about.” She added that to be respectful of sovereignty shouldn’t mean holding back critiques of the tribal government. She elaborated on this further in the following BMWC statement, released in response to President Shirley:

“We strongly believe in tribal sovereignty and self-determination. As Navajo citizens, it is our duty to voice concerns about the actions of our government, and we will continue to hold our elected leaders accountable. The President’s statement is a stinging insult and threat to all Navajo citizens who don’t align their opinions with corporate values or President Shirley’s energy agenda.”³⁷

Realizing the Navajo Green Economy Plan

In May 2008, the Navajo Green Economy Coalition consolidated its vision for a green economy into legislation that would be introduced to the Tribal Council by popular referendum. The goal was to get the bill introduced in the October 2008 session.³⁹ However, the organizers soon realized that the time frame was unrealistic and their constituents, Navajo youth, were underrepresented as registered and voting members of the Nation.⁴⁰ That route was scrapped, and they explored venues for introducing legislation via sponsorship by a Council delegate.

Anna Rondon (of New Energy Economy in New Mexico) suggested that the Coalition approach Tribal Council Speaker Lawrence Morgan for sponsorship. Rondon developed connections with the Speaker and his family through her 30 years of experience as a land-use consultant for various Navajo Nation Chapters.⁴¹ She helped to organize a face-to-face meeting between the Speaker

Transparent Planning Process from the Green Equity Toolkit

A fully transparent and participatory process for equitable green job creation was an outcome in the Green Equity Toolkit.³⁸ A participatory planning process includes ample opportunities for input and review during program development and evaluation, especially by disadvantaged community stakeholders.

and members of the Navajo Green Economy Commission in July 2008.

Things moved quickly from there. The Speaker agreed to informally partner with the Coalition to sponsor the legislation. The Coalition crafted the bill, which was pared down significantly before being enacted in its final form. The Green Economy plan carried out the green transition via a Green Economy Commission, established under the legislative branch of the Navajo Nation government, that would administer the Green Economy Fund. The Commission would facilitate renewable energy projects by connecting stakeholders to the appropriate tribal agency, thereby reducing the chance that projects will be tied up while waiting for permits to be approved.⁴² The Commission would also democratize the process of working with the tribal government, by making the process more transparent to those not well-versed in how to navigate the bureaucracy. The Coalition hoped that both monies from the tribal government as well as green job grants, such as those made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) would fill the Green Economy Fund.

MOBILIZING FOR NAVAJO GREEN JOBS

Every Labor Day weekend, thousands flock to the capitol of the Navajo Nation, Window Rock, to attend the Navajo Nation fair. It's billed as the "World's Largest American Indian Fair," and its all-Indian rodeo and arts-and-crafts exhibits by Navajo artists attract large crowds.⁴³ The Fair features a parade where a float sponsored by the Navajo sheriff is pulled by a large pickup truck, followed by the Navajo Nation marching band.

In September 2008, a sight never seen before greeted the parade onlookers. Banners that said, "Navajo GREEN JOBS Now!" sped down Highway 264, pulled by a youth astride a bicycle. Other banners publicized sectors of the Navajo Green Economy plan: "Wind Power," "Farmer's Markets" and "Solar Energy." Little children wearing green shirts held signs that read, "Yeego! Green Jobs!" or "I Want a Green Job!"



Photo courtesy of Black Mesa Water Coalition.

And, with that, the Navajo Green Economy community outreach campaign was launched to the public. From September to October 2008 (the Navajo Nation's tribal fair season), Coalition members were present at every tribal fair and parade to publicize the Green Economy plan and to win popular support. While the plan itself was being refined with the aid of the Tribal Council Speaker's office and experts in tribal law, the campaign pursued an outside strategy to mobilize support for the legislation's passage among two sets of constituents: local Navajo Nation Chapters and Navajo youth.

Outreach to Navajo Chapters

The Local Governance Act was signed into the Navajo Nation Code in 1998 and recognized chapters as "the foundation of the Navajo Nation government." Currently, 110 communities are represented by chapters, ranging from 1,000 residents to only 400 residents. The chapters mostly concern themselves with managing local affairs, but they can also enact resolutions similar to city council resolutions in support of tribal ordinances in the Navajo Nation Council.

From August to December 2008, the Navajo Green Economy Coalition set out to lobby the chapters to pass resolutions in support of the green economy. Four BMWC organizers criss-crossed the Navajo Nation, attending community meetings and giving presentations to local residents in the Navajo language. It was important to get the support at the local level, although the organizers were pursuing passage of a tribal ordinance at the Tribal Council, precisely because the Coalition wanted to create small-scale green projects, from the bottom up.

This was no easy feat for BMWC to commit to. It was a challenge, according to Johns, to raise the money and to cover the vast distances between chapters. Organizing on the reservation is very different from typical, urban neighborhood organizing. Houses are miles apart, and roads are often unpaved, making travel during winter months treacherous. Organizers typically schedule a day for traveling from one destination to another.⁴⁸ Still, BMWC organizers won the support of 23 chapter resolutions and two agency endorsements, an unprecedented show of grassroots endorsement of a measure.⁴⁹

Mobilizing Navajo Youth

Concurrent to the chapter outreach, Nikke Alex and Chelsea Chee created momentum among Navajo youth behind the Navajo Green Economy plan. Both visited schools throughout the fall of 2008, presenting the green economy in workshops, sometimes traveling five hours between campuses.⁵⁰ In January 2009, they organized a Power Shift to Navajo Green Jobs conference in Window Rock, which attracted dozens of youth.⁵¹ The summit drew on the strategies of the Energy Action Coalition, a national network of student and youth organizations, including BMWC, engaged in the climate justice movement.⁵² The Coalition presented the green economy plan and solicited input from the youth in attendance. The gathering also radicalized the youth and presented alternative ways to think about their lives. For many, their paradigms were shifted.

"I was blown away when I attended my first youth summit in 2003," said Chelsea Chee, BMWC's youth organizer. "I was in my first or second year of college and lived my whole life on the reservation. I was never taught these things about fossil fuel extraction....After [attending the youth summit], I changed my life, how I dress, even what I eat."⁵³

Naachid

Historically, Diné peoples were governed by the *Naachid*, a periodic assembly of community leaders.⁴⁴ Communities were made up of 10 to 40 families and directed by a *Naataanii* or leader.⁴⁵ The *Naataanii* were selected by members of the community using a collective process, where the candidate that won the general consensus of the group became the new leader.⁴⁶ The leaders gathered at two- or four-year intervals in a *Naachid* to deliberate on decisions of significance for Navajos such as war or peace with other nations. The assembly had no coercive or binding powers, allowing more autonomy at the local level.⁴⁷



Realizing that most Navajo youth live, work or study off the reservation, the campaign reached out through online social networks. The BMWC organizers created a Facebook page, which attracted over 2,000 fans. An online petition in support of the Green Economy attracted over 130 signatures.⁵⁴ They also created a Twitter account, to alert Navajo youth of campaign actions, such as a letter writing campaign to the Council Delegate asking for support of the green jobs proposal. Once the Council passed the legislation, Alex and Chee also crafted a viral, online campaign for youth to lobby Navajo President Shirley to sign it into law. Youth would photograph themselves with a sign that read "I want a green job!" or "Navajo green jobs now," or "Yeego Green Jobs," and e-mail the photo to President Shirley.⁵⁵



Photo courtesy of Black Mesa Water Coalition.

Finally, BMWC called out to youth to lobby their delegates in July 2009, when the Tribal Council was scheduled to vote on the green economy legislation. Youth were encouraged to wear green clothing that day and to bring their friends to Window Rock. Over 50 young people showed up early the morning of the vote, gathering in front of the Navajo Nation Education Building. They marched a quarter of a mile to the Council chambers, greeting delegates as they entered the building and then filling the front seats reserved for the public.⁵⁶ The room was awash with supporters wearing green and still holding their signs. When the bill passed 62 to 1, the chambers erupted with cheering.

ENFORCING EQUITY IN NAVAJO GREEN ECONOMY

The passage of green economy legislation was historic, by many accounts. It was the first time a grassroots mobilization forced the Navajo Nation to reevaluate its energy and economic policies, the first instance in which many Navajo youth got involved in tribal politics and lobbied their delegate to vote for a bill, and the first tribal law to create green jobs to be passed by a Native American sovereign nation. The Navajo Green Economy Coalition organizers were exhilarated with their success. However, the incorporation of their plan for green jobs came at a cost. The long process to get their proposal ratified by the tribal government meant relinquishing some of their vision for the Navajo Nation (see Table 1).

"The day the green jobs act passed was so powerful. It was the result of a long process," said Krystal Curley, age 20, member of the Navajo Green Economy Coalition and student at New Mexico State University. "When the Council said yes, grandmothers started to cry. Everyone wore green shirts. It was so empowering to see Native youth making a change for our people."⁵⁷

First and foremost was the structure of the Navajo Green Economy Commission. The Coalition proposed a seven-member commission, but the enacted Commission has only five members. Although the enacted Commission meets the requirement to include a representative of a Navajo Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), a youth (age 18 to 30 years), and women, it does not require there to be a community or chapter representative. Nor does it require a *Hataali* (a Navajo medicine man or woman) representative.

The Coalition also proposed regional coordination of green economic development. Each of the five agencies covering the expanse of the Navajo Nation would have a Green Team assigned to it, to aid agency-wide green initiatives and coordinate regional planning. That was cut entirely from the enacted legislation. There is no mediation between the Commission, which sits under the legislative branch, and the constellation of local government units, such as chapters or agencies.

Second, the Coalition designed the Green Economy Fund with \$10 million in allocations from the Navajo Nation in mind. However, the Nation was suffering economically because the coal market was weak for the past two years. The Nation was not awash in cash from coal and fossil fuel mining royalties, as the BMWC organizers had expected. The organizers knew that any push to seed the Green Economy Fund with national revenue would prevent passage of the bill. So, the Coalition conceded on funding in the enacted legislation. Months after the Fund was created, no monies had been added to its coffers.

The act referenced the Recovery Act as a potential source of monies for the Navajo Green Economy Fund, but by the time the law was ready to be passed in July 2009, most deadlines for ARRA grants had expired. The Navajo Green Economy Coalition’s desire to move quickly on the legislation was frustrated by the delays and work sessions imposed by the tribal bureaucrats. A one-and-a-half year timeline for the bill’s passage was not what the organizers expected.

Last, the Coalition’s vision of a green economy as locally based, community-owned green projects was challenged by tribal politicians. The Coalition’s definition of “green” was “energy efficient, low- or non-polluting, sustainable industries [that are] in accordance with Diné Natural Law.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, the version of the Navajo Green Economy resolution vetted by attorneys for the Council viewed green in terms of “green businesses defined generally as businesses and industries that contribute to the economy with a minimum or no generation of greenhouse gases and/or with capabilities to counteract the negative effects of greenhouse gases, in accord with Diné Natural Law.”⁵⁹

Social Entrepreneurship from the Green Equity Toolkit

The Green Equity Toolkit defined social enterprises as businesses that are designed to benefit all people and the full communities they serve, including those most disadvantaged.⁶⁰ Shared prosperity and communal wealth-building are the foundations of green equity.

Table 1. Comparing the Coalition’s Vision of a Green Economy to the Enacted Legislation

INITIAL PROPOSAL BY COALITION	ADOPTED PLAN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 Commissioners • Regional coordination at the agency level • Navajo Nation to allocate \$10 million annually to Navajo Green Economy Fund • Create green jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 Commissioners • No regional coordination at the agency level • No Navajo Nation allocations to Navajo Green Economy Fund • Fund green businesses

In February 2009, the Tribal Council Speaker's office announced the five confirmed Commissioners. Two were organizers in the Navajo Green Economy Coalition: Wahleah Johns and Anna Rondon.⁶¹ This was after a lengthy selection process, largely shrouded in secrecy and with tribal politicians questioning Johns' candidacy because of concerns about conflicts of interest.⁶² BMWC organizers are jubilant to see two of their own seated on the Commission, although disappointed that Nikke Alex wasn't appointed to the youth position on the Commission. The newly appointed Commissioners have been fielding inquiries about green projects from corporations, states and counties a week into their appointments. Johns and Rondon, representatives of the grassroots movement now incorporated into the tribal government, maintained their commitment to locally owned and community-based sustainable development, defined by stakeholders using a democratic process.

Independent of the green economy legislation, green initiatives have been arising across the Nation. For example:

- The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority offered 640-watt solar and 880-watt wind hybrid energy systems for Navajo families for about \$95 a month.⁶⁴
- Native SUN offered low-interest loans to Navajo and Hopi families to purchase and install solar systems, particularly for those who lack electricity,
- The Cameron Chapter (about 50 miles northeast of Flagstaff) is pursuing development of a wind farm, despite competing with the tribal government, which is developing its own farm on a mountain in Cameron.⁶⁵

Current projects are small in scale and often offer short-term employment.⁶⁶ Now that the Green Economy Commission has been seated with all five members, work can begin on building the Navajo green vision. The Commission will enable central facilitation of local projects, scaling it to a level that will benefit the maximum number of Navajos. Tribal coordination of green development also ensures that the control of these ventures stays within Navajo hands, and is not dictated by large energy corporations or the federal government. According to the Tribal Council Speaker's legislative assistant Natasha Johnson, the Speaker's Office eventually hopes that these small, locally owned projects will engender larger-scale initiatives that will replace fossil fuel revenue for the Navajo Nation.

“The Navajo Green Economy legislation was created and structured to support local communities and the grassroots people who want to start green economy initiatives,” Wahleah Johns, outgoing Co-Director of BMWC, said. “And as a commissioner I intend to uphold the goals of this legislation.”⁶³



Photo courtesy of Black Mesa Water Coalition.

CONCLUSION

IN DECEMBER 2009, RYAN JOHNSON JOINED 21 OTHER INDIGENOUS ACTIVISTS WHO WERE IN COPENHAGEN, DENMARK, FOR THE GLOBAL CLIMATE DISCUSSIONS.

He traveled with BMWC as a representative of the organization. Before then, Ryan had never traveled farther than Kansas, just several states over from Arizona. The experience was an eye-opening one for Ryan. Among other things, he participated in the North American indigenous delegation to press for a moratorium of fossil fuel extraction.⁶⁷ Ryan connected the fight for green jobs at home to the global struggle for climate justice.

Now, home from his trip to Copenhagen, Ryan has been changed by his experience. “I recognize a lot more, see things I didn’t before, and I try not to be as wasteful as I used to be,” he said. He tries to get unused metals on his work sites recycled. He’s also excited about the possibilities of using straw bales to insulate homes, a project of Indigenous Community Enterprises, where BMWC cofounder Roberto Nutlouis is currently employed. Soon, that too can be a green project funded by the nascent Navajo Green Economy Commission.

BMWC and the Navajo Green Economy Coalition identify themselves as an indigenous rights movement, concerned with global warming and the destructive impact of fossil fuels, but first and foremost focused on the national question of tribal sovereignty. This has meant redefining the Navajo economy and political structure, using a democratic and participatory process to achieve different ends than what over 200 years of colonialism has imposed on their peoples.

While the specifics of this case study are unique to the Navajo experience, advocates working in disenfranchised communities can extract these lessons to apply to their green equity campaigns:

- **Tailor the definition of green to your community.** “This is the most important advice—create your own definition of green jobs,” says Alex. “Your definition of green jobs will depend on your people and your region.”
- **Solicit community participation and ownership in the green planning process.** BMWC organizers started with community input and gathered Navajo Nation Chapter resolutions while working at the national level.
- **Seek out allies,** but develop clear protocols for working together.
- **Develop an inside-outside strategy** to partner with an elected official to get a policy solution passed while simultaneously keeping up the pressure through mobilization.
- **Know your constituents and meet them on their terms.** Most Navajo youth live away from the reservation, but they can stay connected via social networking. So that’s where the BMWC organizers can set up online presences to appeal to Navajo youth and alert them of actions they could take in support of the Navajo Green Economy plan.

The story of the Green Economy campaign has been one of political and economic reform in the Navajo Nation. It has also been a tale about a rising generation of Navajo leaders—youth who are critical of the status quo and dream of a different direction for their peoples. For Nikke Alex, BMWC’s new executive director, the measure of success for the Navajo green campaign was getting youth involved. No longer will the youth be the missing generation.

Green Equity in Navajo Green Economy

Equity has been key in the envisioning of the Navajo green economy, particularly in the following three domains:

- Defining green jobs as high-road jobs that pay fair wages
- Planning in a transparent and participatory manner with community members and stakeholders
- Rooting the green economy in locally owned projects that build community wealth and ownership

“Our parents have been really affected by boarding schools and colonization; they’ve been shaped by American norms. My generation is challenging these norms,” said Nikke Alex, incoming executive director of BMWC. “We’re trying to build self-esteem in our community and confidence in our youth. They don’t have to choose to follow the American Dream, where the car, house and iPod equal success. They can go back to agriculture and more traditional activities, and that’s a form of success.”⁶⁸

APPENDIX A: Background on the Navajo Nation

THE NAVAJO NATION IS THE LARGEST NATIVE RESERVATION IN THE UNITED STATES, COVERING OVER 26,000 SQUARE MILES.

The Nation has a land base similar to that of Ireland and has a footprint in the corners of three states—northeast Arizona, northwest New Mexico, and southeast Utah. The Navajos (*Nihookaa Diyan Diné* or “Holy Earth People”) migrated to the southwest region from western Canada and Alaska approximately 1,000 years ago, maintaining cultural and linguistic similarities with the Athabascan peoples still found further northwest.⁶⁹ By the 1700s, the Navajos had settled into *Dinétaah*, the Navajo homeland, and combined agriculture learned from the Pueblo Indians with herding. Navajoland was defined by the four sacred mountains, representing the four cardinal directions: Mount Hesperus to the north, Mount Taylor to the south, Mount Blanca to the east, and the San Francisco Peaks to the west.⁷⁰

When the Spaniards attempted to dominate the western hemisphere, the Navajos resisted throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries. In 1864, they were forced to surrender when they were rounded up and forced into the “Long Walk” to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. There, the Navajos were held as prisoners, against their will, until 1868, when a treaty was signed between the federal government and Navajo leaders, which established the Navajo reservation. The land was 10 percent of what the Navajos considered their homeland, expanding slightly over the years. Oil and gas were discovered on the reservation in 1921, and later, uranium, leading the federal government to set up a semblance of a central governing body in 1923 to sign off on mineral leases.⁷¹

Today, the Navajo government is loosely modeled after the federal government, with three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. At the local level, communities are organized into Chapters with local officials who have limited authority over matters such as land usage. Presently, 110 Chapters cover the expanse of the Nation. Economically, the Navajo Nation depends on two sources of revenue: mining (in the form of royalties, rent and taxes) and federal government transfer payments. In 2005, mining comprised \$71.34 million, which was more than half (57.5 percent) of the Nation’s General Fund budget of \$124 million. That figure was expected to decrease in 2006 and subsequent years because of the closures of the Mojave Generating Station and other plants.⁷² Grants from the federal, state and local funds comprised \$300 million, almost two-and-a-half times the size of the General Fund. These federal and state funds are block grants for various social services, such as health, law enforcement and education.⁷³

In many respects, the Navajo Nation continues to the present day as a colony of the federal government, with raw materials flowing out of Navajo land and manufactured and processed goods coming back in.⁷⁴ Although Navajos owned the resources on their land, the U.S. government, through the Department of Interior and Bureau of Indian Affairs, held them in trust and was responsible for approving mineral leases, contracts and other regulations.⁷⁵ The struggles that the Navajo Nation faced were similar to that of a developing nation, according to indigenous historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.

“This is a national question of sovereignty, similar to what nations in Africa and Cuba face, in gaining control over your own energy resources and your usage of them,” said Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, indigenous historian and author.⁷⁶ “The Navajos have the right, the moral authority, to self-determine how their natural resources are to be used.”

APPENDIX B: Coal Mining on the Navajo Nation

FOR THE PAST THREE GENERATIONS, LIFE FOR THE NAVAJOS WAS CLOSELY LINKED TO COAL MINING. Energy demands increased during the oil crisis in the late 1970s, and large corporations such as Southern California Edison cast about for other sources of fuel. A majority of Native American lands were designated “National Sacrifice Areas” by the federal government⁷⁷, meaning that these resources would be used to generate electricity for large cities in southern California and the southwest, forcing the Native peoples to forgo their own energy needs.⁷⁸ When the corporations learned of the black gold on Navajo lands, the energy companies colluded with the U.S. federal government to raise questions about Navajo claim over the lands. The land was transferred to the Hopis, and 12,000 Navajo families were displaced from their ancestral homes. This was a divide-and-conquer strategy—the federal government instigated conflict between the Navajo and Hopi communities so they would not unite to oppose mining.

Coal mining has also shaped the natural landscape of the western region. Apart from the low wages and hazardous working conditions of the mines, the operations polluted the township and surrounding environment. The impact of strip mining, a technique of removing coal, has been documented since the late 1970s as eliminating existing vegetation, destroying the genetic soil profile, displacing or destroying wildlife and habitats, degrading air quality, altering current land use and permanently changing the general topography of the area mined.⁷⁹ Author Judith Nies described the consequences for the Black Mesa: “The land has turned gray, all vegetation has disappeared, the air is filled with coal dust, the groundwater is contaminated with toxic runoff, and electric green ponds dot the landscape.”⁸⁰

Starting in the early 2000s, water reserves in the Black Mesa started to dry up. Peabody had dried up the springs that dotted the mountain by using the water to move the coal from the mines to the power plants. Next, they wanted to use the aquifer that provided drinking water for Flagstaff and the northwestern areas of the reservation. Navajos and Hopis rose up in protest. Through the work of groups such as the Black Mesa Water Coalition, Peabody’s Black Mesa mine was shut down in 2005, along with the Mojave Generating Station.

The 2005 curb on coal mining on Navajo lands was a bittersweet victory for many on the reservation who are still dependent on the low-wage jobs the mines provide. Black Mesa Water Coalition and their allies spearheaded a green jobs campaign, beginning in April 2008, to diversify the Navajo economy and create opportunities for employment in renewable energy for youth. In July 2009, the Navajo Green Economy Coalition was successful in advocating for passage of green jobs legislation by the Navajo Tribal government. The green jobs act establishes a Navajo Green Economy Commission and Fund, which can apply for federal and local funds to create green jobs as well as sponsor small-scale, green developments that will help to create jobs for Navajo youth and provide needed services to the community.



Photo courtesy of Black Mesa Water Coalition.

“The Navajo Nation wasn’t ready to shut down the mines,” said Wahleah Johns, former BMWC codirector. “They didn’t have a plan in place to take care of the mine workers who would be out of jobs. They didn’t have a plan for a transition. So, we felt it was necessary to talk about a just transition plan, to help to really take care of our people. These same workers are in our families, and we didn’t want to leave them high and dry.”⁸¹

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Any errors are the responsibility of the Applied Research Center.

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