

We Are Nature Defending Itself: Restoring Indigenous Environmental Health

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2021 NIHB National Tribal Public Health Summit

**Preserving & Defending Our Tribal Lands: Climate Change &
Environmental Health**

UNM – Native American Studies MA Program

April 28, 2021

11:45-1:00 pm MDT





Acknowledge/thank:

- My family, mentors, & supporters
- Co-researchers/relatives
- UNM NAS Department

Dedicate my work to/for:

- Late great-grandmother Zonnie-bah
- Late cheii Sonny Jim
- Our Indigenous Peoples
- Our Ancestors
- Our future generations
- Our Mother Earth



NIHB History – 2014

Native Youth Health Summit (Window Rock, AZ & Albuquerque, NM)

“Honor Our Ancestors” digital story by Zunnehbah

<https://youtu.be/wXYmVI4woOM>



NIHB History – April 2015

Public Health Summit (Palm Springs, CA)



May 2015

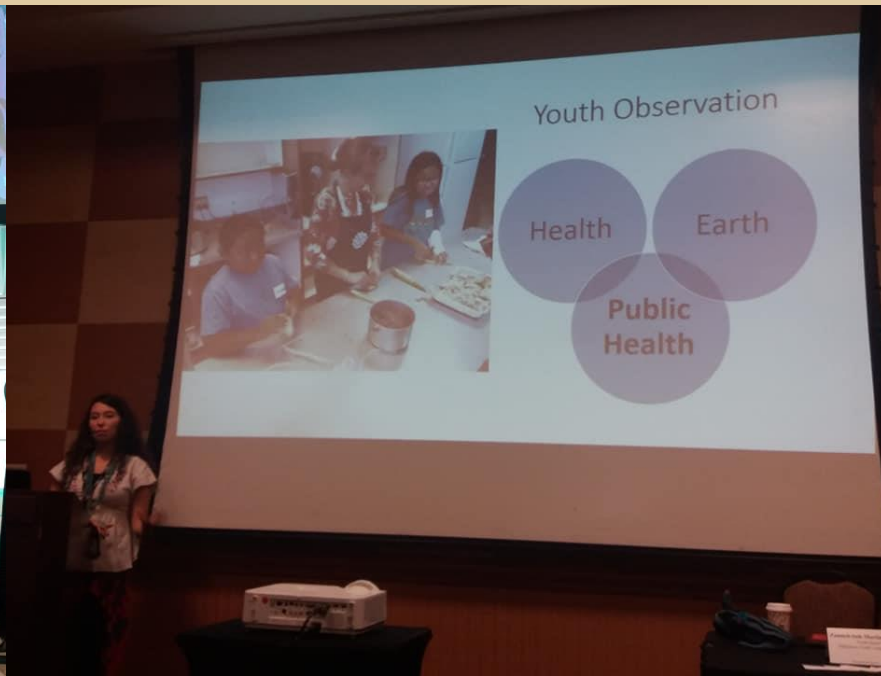


NIHB History – 2017



NIHB History – 2018

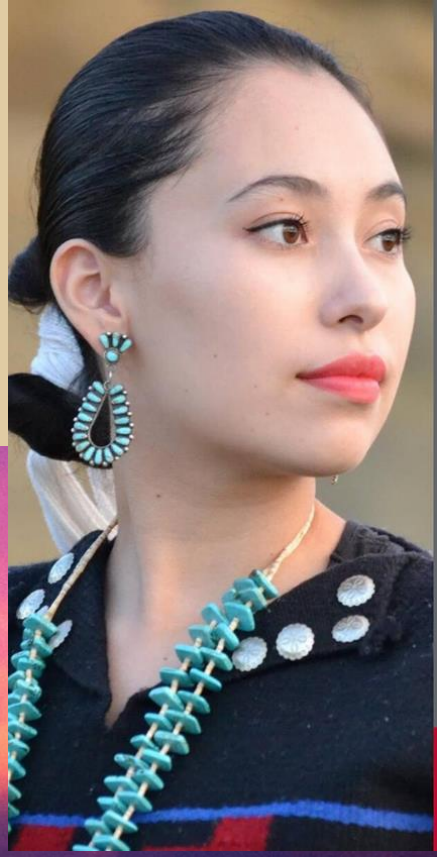
Sept. 2018 – NIHB National Tribal Health Conference (Oklahoma City, OK)



May 2019



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ZUNNEH-BAH MARTIN

- DINÉ AND MODOC
- BA, COLORADO COLLEGE, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO
- GRADUATE ASSISTANT FOR UNM NAS AND THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN INDIAN RESEARCH

Zunneh-bah is a M.A. student in Native American Studies in the second cohort at the University of New Mexico. She focuses on graduate research in socionatural/historical/intergenerational trauma and she continues to promote awareness about socionatural health and healing.



NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES
MASTER OF ARTS (M.A.) DEGREE

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Initial Questions

- What are some **interconnections between environmental health and Indigenous Peoples' public health?**
- What are some **interconnections between trauma that is inflicted on the environment and trauma that is inflicted on Indigenous Peoples?**
- What are some **solutions to restore Indigenous-environmental health in our Indigenous/Tribal communities?**

Why is Indigenous Socionatural Health/Healing important?

- Where do our **languages** come from?
- Where do our **cultures** come from?
- Where do our **teachings** come from?
- Where do our **identities** come from?
- Where does our **health/healing** come from?





NAS MA POE Research Questions

- How can the Diné way of life promote healing from socionatural trauma that is occurring in Diné Bikéyah?
 - Why does socionatural trauma exist?
 - What does the socionatural relationship look like in Diné Bikéyah?
 - How & what does the Diné way of life heal?
 - Why is revitalizing the Diné way of life necessary for the socionatural healing process?



What is unknown about socionatural trauma and health/healing?

- Lack of discussion/awareness/research about how trauma to the land is related directly to the trauma of people, especially Indigenous Peoples
- Indigenous knowledge can be used to address socionatural trauma (e.g. climate change)
- The Diné life way can offer healing for those who need healing, but only if they want to be healed



Purpose/rationale

- My research project aims to fill in the gap & make connections
 - Interdisciplinary – connects environmental, Indigenous, public health, & other fields/areas of study
 - Indigenous Public Health world/conferences are not connecting our human health to environmental health
 - Environmentalist world/conferences are not connecting environmental health to human/Indigenous health
- Address current Indigenous health crisis & environmental health crisis & seek/create solutions
- Show that the Diné way of life needs to be revitalized/protected so it can help heal socionatural trauma

Terminology

- **Socionature** – idea that humans & the environment are one & the same
 - They can both be thought of as one concept
- What is **socionatural trauma**?
- What is **socionatural health/healing**?



Examples of Socionatural Trauma

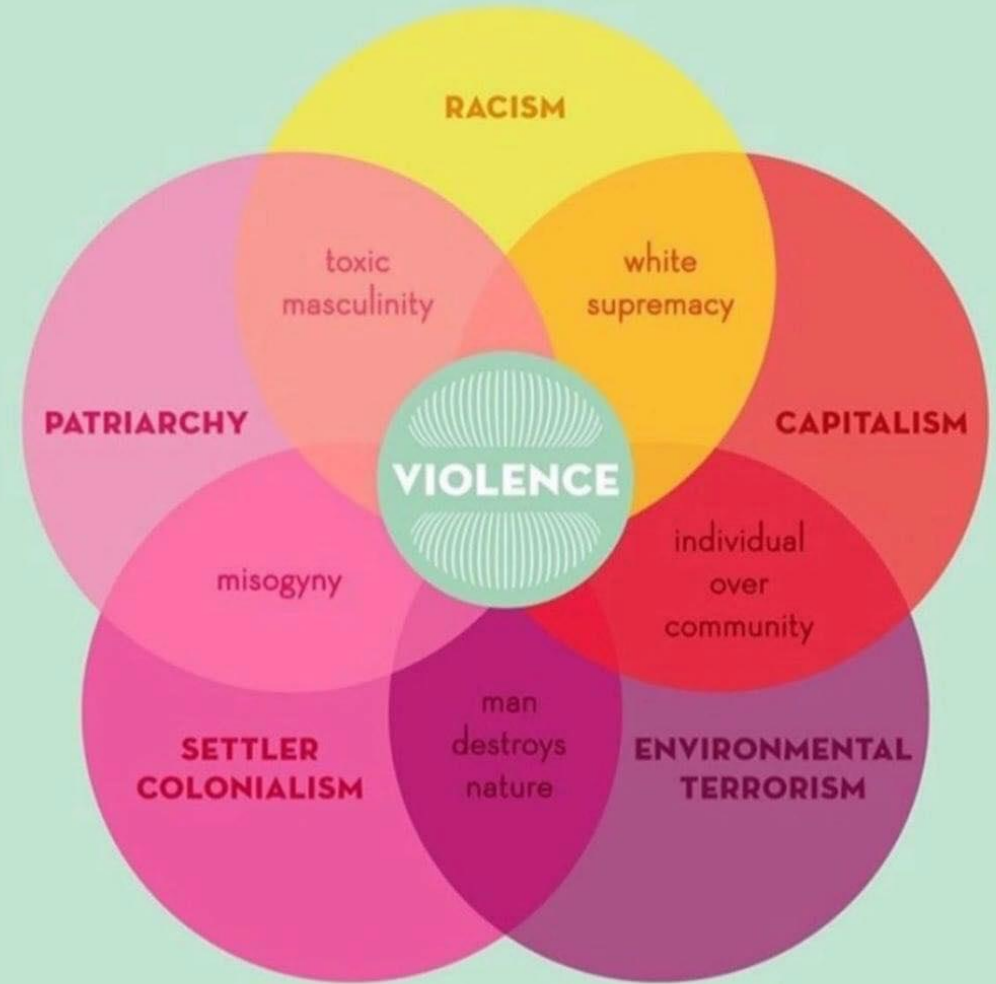
Indigenous Peoples' Trauma

- Social injustices/racism
- Different forms of violence/abuse
- Genocide
- Colonialism/Neocolonialism

Environmental Trauma

- Environmental injustices/racism
- Environmental destruction
- Ecocide
- Biocolonialism

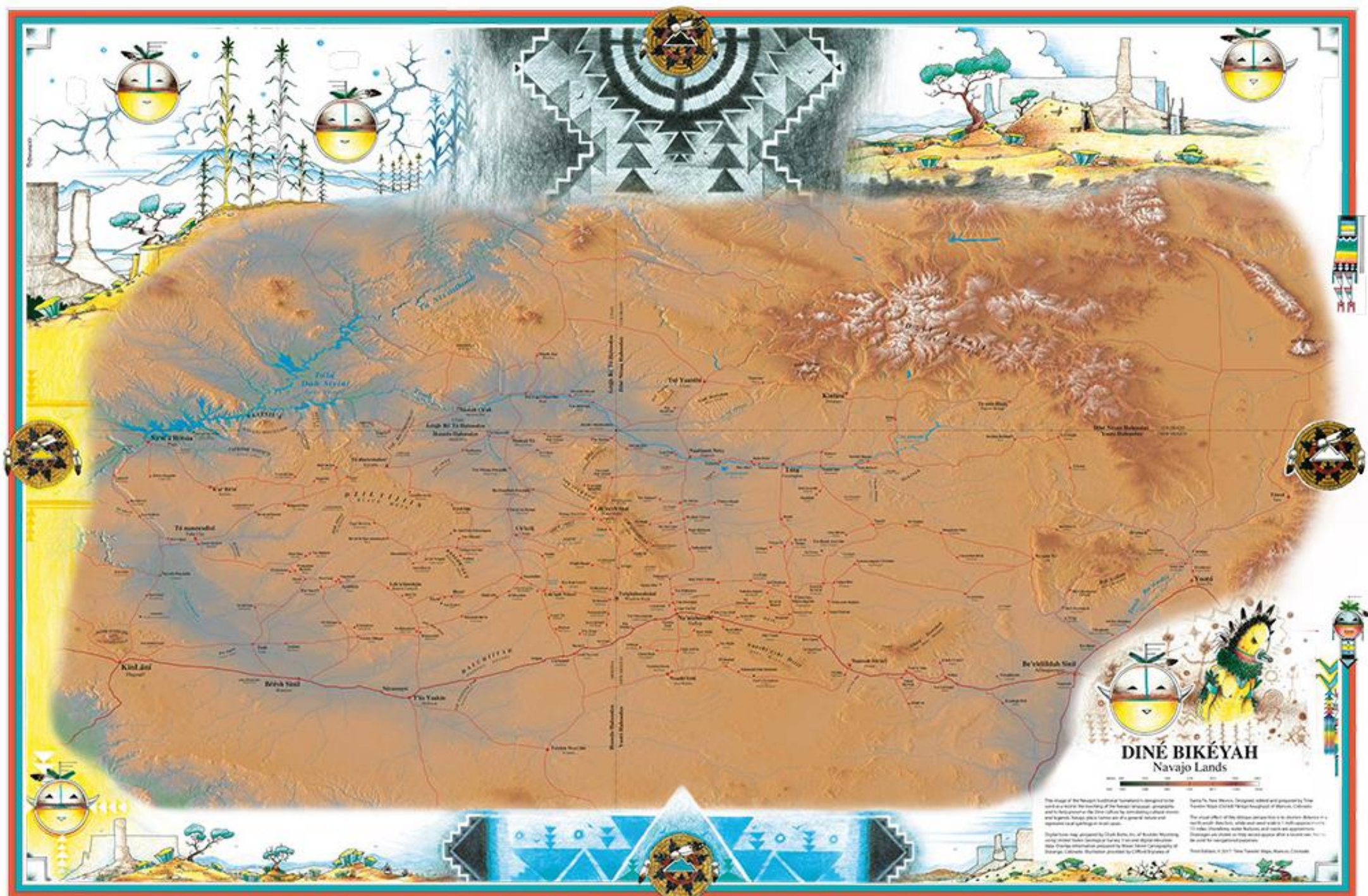
IT'S ALL CONNECTED



Example of Socionatural Trauma

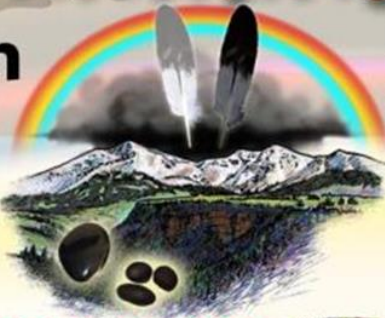
- “Indigenous leaders may believe they are carrying out economic development when they allow **resource extraction on their homelands that destroy the environment & places workers at risk.**”
- Our pre-contact philosophies have preserved finite resources





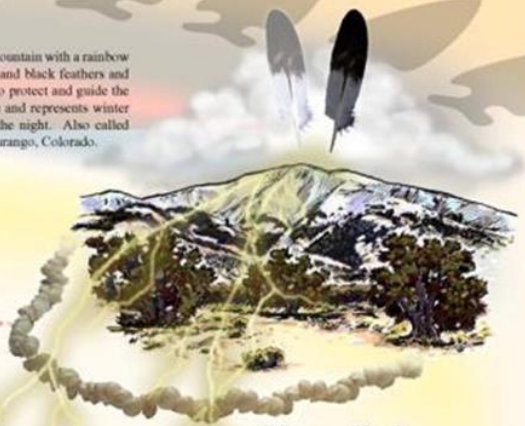
The Sacred Mountains

of the Diné Nation



Dibé Nitsaa

The Holy People fastened the north mountain with a rainbow beam. They decorated it with white and black feathers and jet to symbolize self-awareness and to protect and guide the Diné. The north mountain is female and represents winter and old age. It is the protector of the night. Also called Mount Hesperus, it is located near Durango, Colorado.



Sisnaajini

The Holy People fastened the east mountain to Mother Earth with a lightning bolt. They adorned it with white and black feathers for purity and gentleness and white shell for positive thinking and intelligence. Sisnaajini is male. It represents the dawn, spring, and the beginning of life. Also known as Sierra Blanca Peak, or Mt. Blanca, it is located near Alamosa, Colorado.



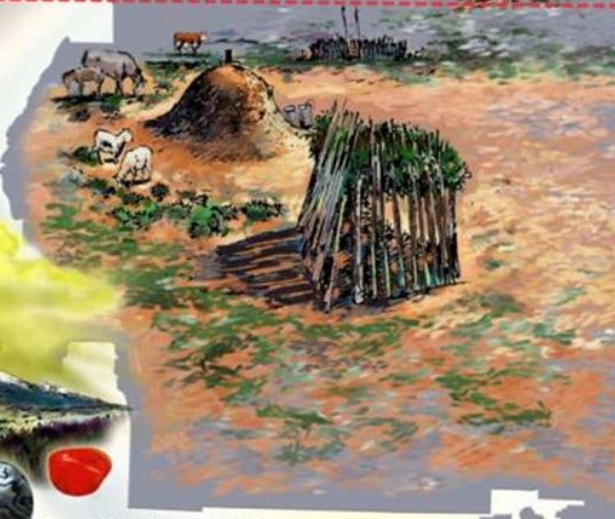
Ch'ool'í'í

Doorway to the sacred mountains, Ch'ool'í'í is used for ceremonial purposes. This is where Talking God found Changing Woman and gave her to First Man and First Woman to raise. Diné go to Ch'ool'í'í to make offerings, say prayers, sing songs and gather herbs for ceremonial purposes. Also known as Gobernador Knob, it is located in the heart of Navajoland.



Dzítiná'oodííí

Dzítiná'oodííí is where the migration of the Navajo started and where they first settled. It is where the Navajo way of life began. The first hooghan and the twelve hooghan songs were created here. Changing Woman raised her sons the Hero Twins at the foot of Dzítiná'oodííí, and they left from here on their journey to slay the monsters. Also known as Heurlano Mesa, it is located near Bloomfield, New Mexico.



Dook'o'oshtíid

The Holy People fastened the west mountain with a sunbeam. They decorated it with yellow and white feathers and abalone shell to symbolize autumn, evening twilight, adulthood, and physical strength. The west mountain is female. Also called San Francisco Peak, it is located near Flagstaff, Arizona.



Tsoodzil

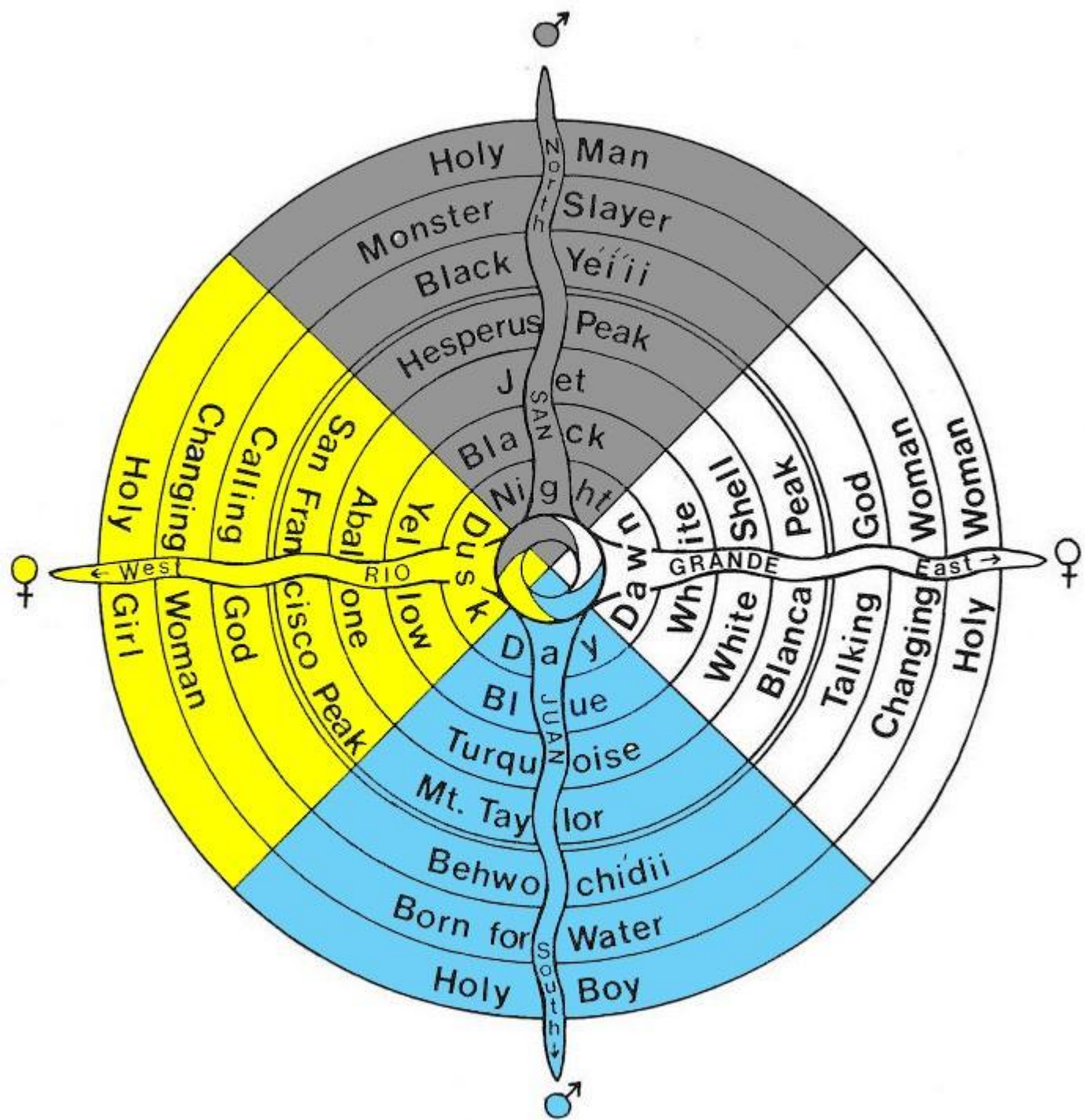
The Holy People fastened the south mountain to Mother Earth with flint. They adorned it with turquoise for health and positive learning. It is male and represents power and authority over the sky and moisture. It symbolizes summer, youth, leadership, and strength. Also known as Mount Taylor, it is located near Acoma, New Mexico.

Diné Sacred Mountains

When the Holy People were preparing the Fourth World for habitation by the Diné, they took mountains that had been formed in the lower worlds and replanted them in this, the Fourth World. Their placement forms the boundaries of the land of the Diné. Sacred ceremonies, songs, and prayers surround the histories of these mountains. They are a guide to understanding, strength, courage, and endurance for the Diné. The word *dzil* in Navajo doesn't mean mountain as in a pile of dirt. When translated literally, it becomes *dziil*, which means "strength." To the Navajo, it refers to the physical, mental, and spiritual strength of a person and his possessions. In reality, the sacred mountains aren't located in the four cardinal directions as they are often depicted. They are actually more parallel to each other. The map shows the actual physical location of the six sacred mountains in the Four Corners area.

Diné Way of Life

- Language
- Culture
- Spirituality
- Sense of place
- Identity
- Environmental ethics/teachings



Diné

Epistemology/ Knowledge

- Navajo Philosophy of Learning
 - Respect for nature
 - Standards for life
 - Social competence
 - Making a living
 - Hózhó, Nahasdlíí – restore balance, harmony, health, & beauty

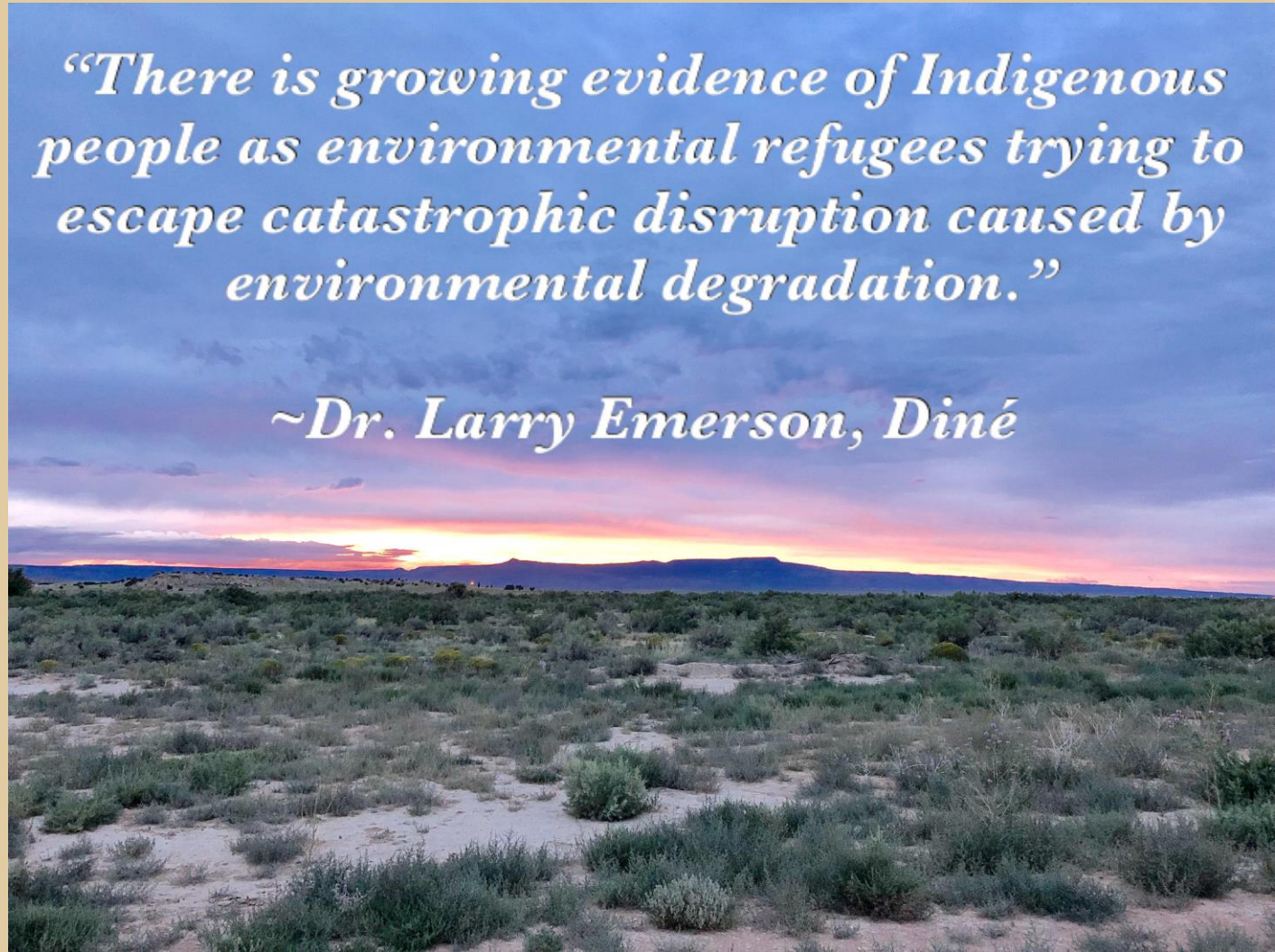


Socionatural Healing Process (Emerson, 2014)

- “We have a responsibility to **identify ways of knowing that can help us understand the nature of our struggle & quest for freedom.** My quest is not limited to a local one. Instead, the local intersects w/ the global. This intersection is clear regarding the **growing global population, climate change & global warming, environmental pollution, increasing demands on finite water sources, & fossil fuel-driven political economies.** There...”

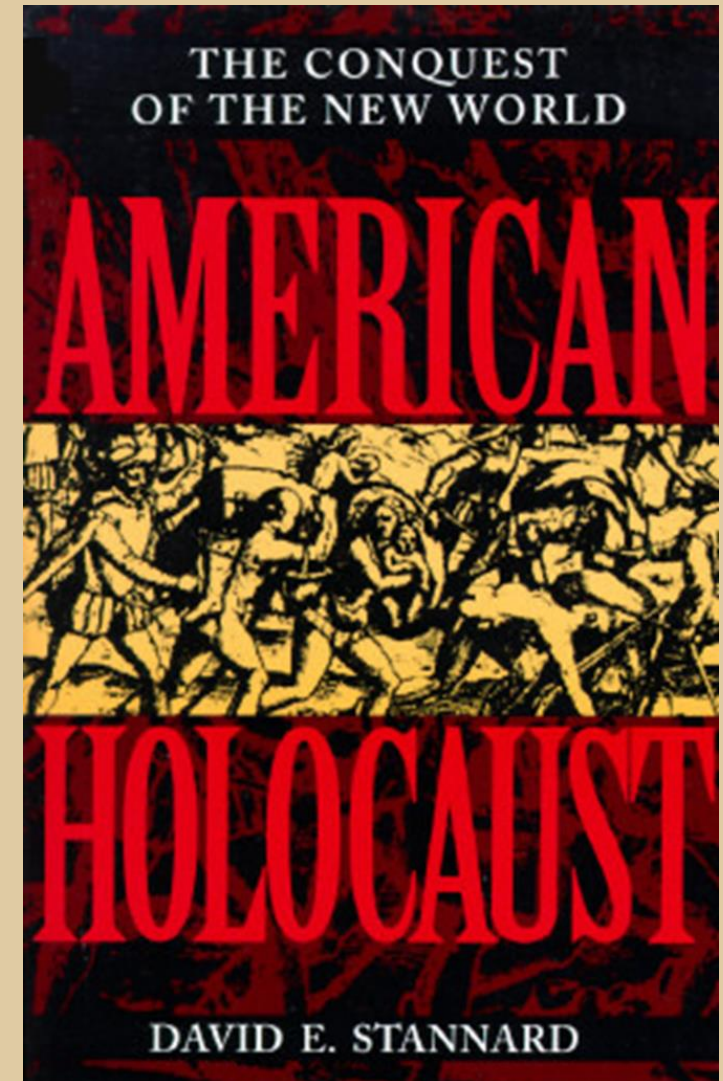
“There is growing evidence of Indigenous people as environmental refugees trying to escape catastrophic disruption caused by environmental degradation.”

~Dr. Larry Emerson, Diné



Postcolonial Healing from Trauma

- “Postcolonial” world
 - Site of **social suffering**
 - Site of **personal/collective healing**
- Encounter of Europeans & Native Americans in the so-called “New World” resulted in what has been called the **greatest genocide in human history: the American holocaust**



Postcolonial Healing from Trauma

- Present-day traumas from:
 - Biological warfare/onslaught
 - Mass murder
 - Forced removal/displacement
 - Subjugation
 - Forced labor/slavery
 - Cultural destruction
 - Boarding schools





Health Issues from Colonization

- Need to decolonize wealth in order:
 - “to **heal what hurts**
 - To **come back together** as one human race, &
 - To **restore balance to the land**” (Villanueva, 2018, p. 2)
- 1960s – beginning of Indigenous activism & tribal self-determination era
 - Major reforms in policies directed at Indigenous nations/peoples in the U.S. to **improve Indigenous health, safety, & well-being**
- Native peoples face many health challenges/disparities
 - From having the **highest rates of health issues among any racial/ethnic group** to experiencing ongoing barriers to health care & insurance
 - Example of poor health care: **mass sterilization of Native women w/o their informed consent by the IHS**, which is defined by the United Nations as a **tactic of genocide**

Restoring Indigenous Health is Resiliency

“So, although **Native American people** who are alive today **are proud, strong survivors against all odds**, we continue to face some of the most dire socioeconomic conditions of any group in America. There is no question that the complicated set of **issues facing us today are rooted in hundreds of years of colonization, suffering, & trauma.**” (Villanueva, 2018, p. 31)





Indigenous Peoples/Communities & Our Environment Are Facing an Ongoing Health Crisis

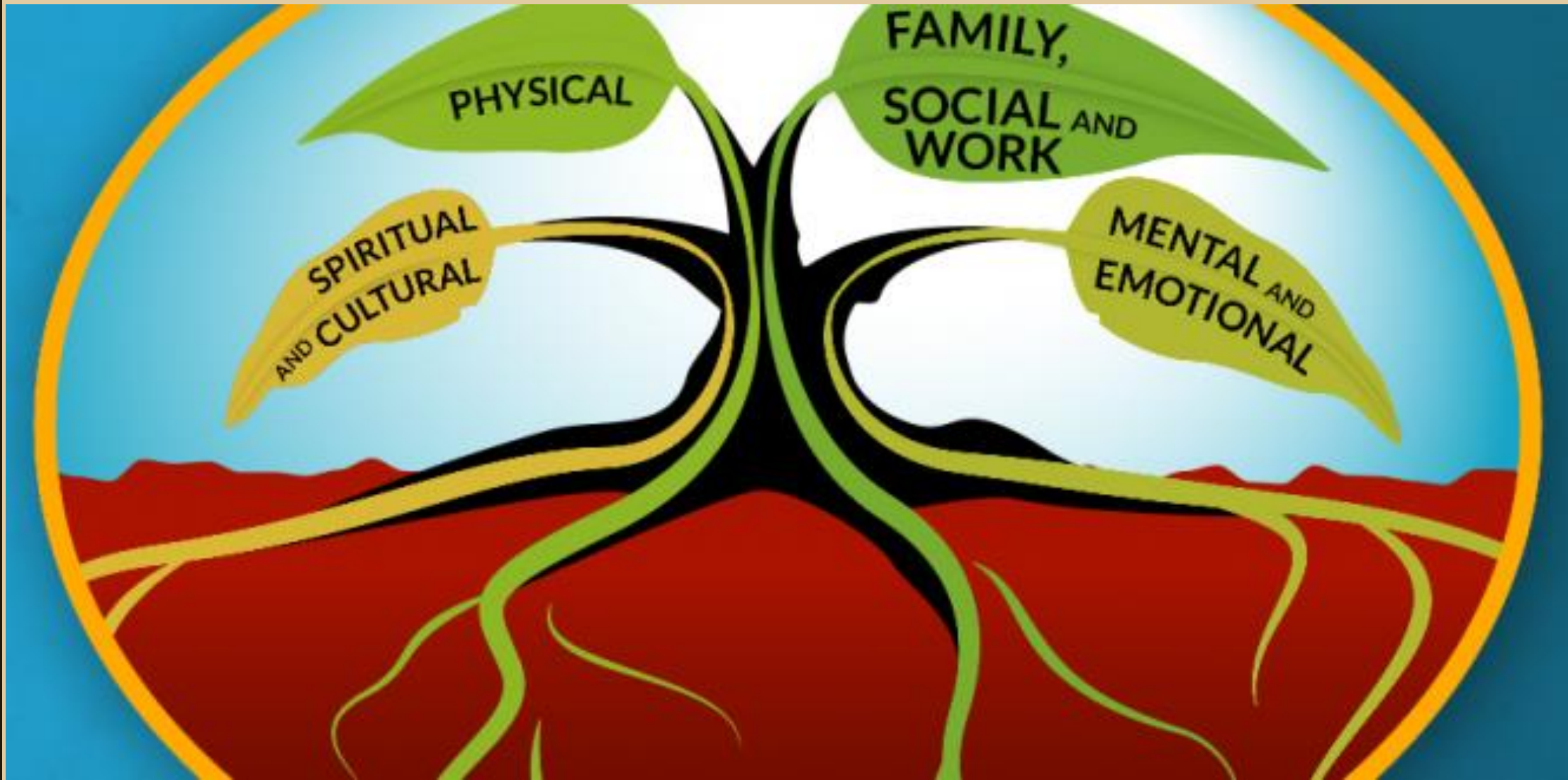
- Health is a human right & AN ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHT

HEALTH
is a **HUMAN**
RIGHT



World Health
Organization

Adapting, revitalizing, & sustaining Indigenous nations/communities for the future through Indigenous socionatural health/healing





Listening to Natural Law (Nelson, 2008)

- “What happens to you & what happens to the earth happens to us as well... **We need to take a more responsible direction & to begin dealing w/ the realities of the future to ensure that there *is* a future for the children, for the nation.**” (p. 22)
- We need to renew our socionatural health to find/regain peace/balance in our communities



First Nations Survival & the Future of the Earth (Nelson, 2008)

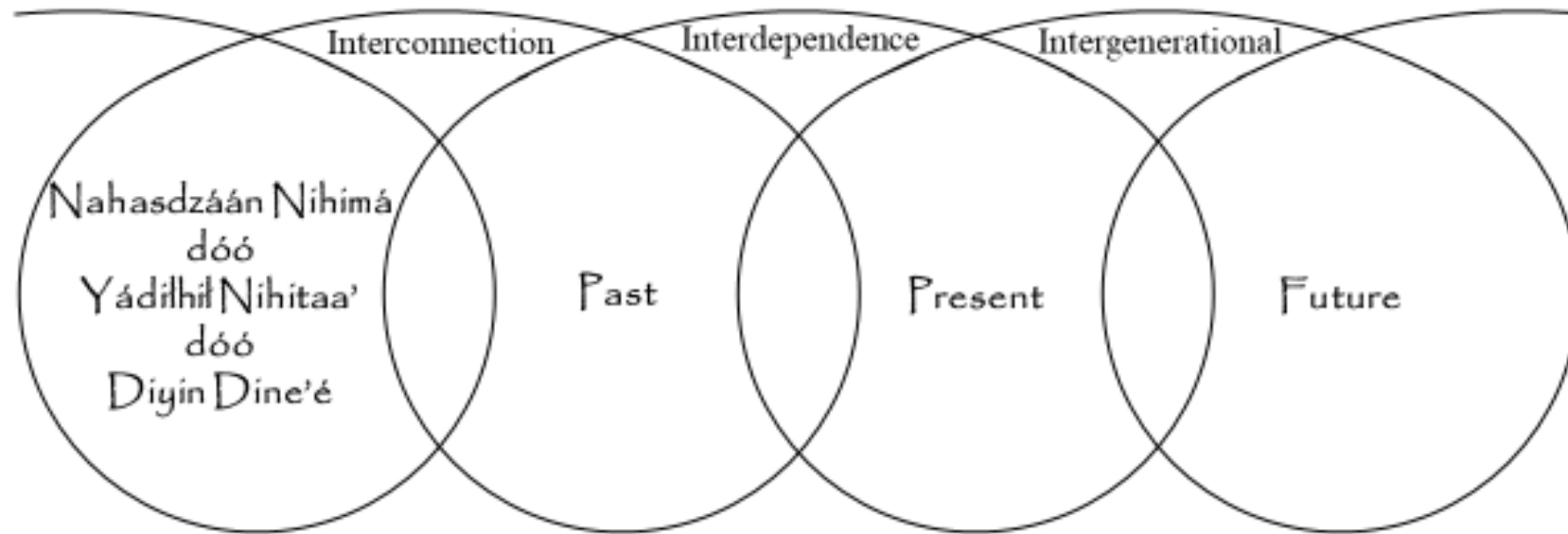


**WE DO NOT INHERIT THE
LAND FROM OUR ANCESTORS,
WE BORROW IT
FROM OUR CHILDREN.**

NATIVE AMERICAN PROVERB

Framework Model created by Zunneh-bah

Hózhó Nahasdlii – Restoring Balance Indigenous Leadership Framework



T'ahdiikóó honiidlō



Activism
Collective Action

Transformational
Social Influence

Restoring
Restorative

Responsibility
Collaboration

Reciprocity
Power of the People

Environmental/Ancestral
Interconnection & Wisdom

Unity
Commitment

Healing
Reclamation



Mind
East

Blanca Peak/Sis Naajini



Body
South

Mt. Taylor/Tsoodzil



Emotion
West

San Francisco Peak/Dook'ooliid



Environment
North

Hesperus Peak/Dibe Nitsaa





'Ahxéhee' (thank you)!

- Community input survey:
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