

Draft for Discussion
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Engaging Traditional Knowledge in the Rio Grande Basin

Background

The cultural values and ethical assumptions underlying water policies are gradually being recognized as a critical component of sustainable water resources management. Water policies reflect ethical assumptions which need to be examined as a core task of the policy reform process. Contemporary water policy, governed by the doctrine of “maximum utilization”, is largely an artifact of the rapid resource development imperatives that accompanied the United States’ settlement of western lands. Embodied in state legal codes, the policy base is clearly proving inadequate to address such modern challenges as resource over-utilization and the ability to maintain river-based ecosystems. Considering the long tenure of western tribes, consideration of tribal practices and perspectives may have considerable value to policy-makers confronted with such dilemmas as sustainability and climate change.

The proposed project aims to bring Pueblo Indian perspectives into effective dialogue about water policies affecting the Middle and Upper Rio Grande and its tributaries. The anticipated outcome will be (1) a background White Paper on best practices from the international literature on incorporating indigenous value perspectives into river policies; (2) documentation of Pueblo perspectives about the Rio Grande which can contribute to the education of tribal youth, and (3) an overview of Pueblo perspectives on the river aimed at both tribal and non-tribal policy-makers.

The Region

The Middle and Upper Rio Grande Basin on New Mexico comprises the Eastern flank of the Four Corners Region. The 18 federally recognized tribes are predominantly Puebloan, along with part of the Jicarilla Apache Reservation, and two small groups of Navajo (Canoncito and Torreon Chapters). The robust cultural traditions of this region, the large expanse of land under tribal jurisdiction, the relative homogeneity of the bio-region, and the undisputed primacy of water as the single most critical natural resource, provide a favorable environmental, political, and cultural context for seeking to integrate indigenous value systems into state and federal water policies.

Actions and Outputs

1. **White Paper:** *Integrating Indigenous Values into Water Policies: Lessons for the Rio Grande in New Mexico.*¹ The report will survey best practice cases where water plans and policies have incorporated indigenous cultural values to some degree. Cases will be examined from Australia, South Africa, the Andean Region, Canada, and the Western United States. The analysis will address both the process (methods) and outcomes (How closely do the policies reflect indigenous values?). The report's conclusions will distill lessons relevant to the Rio Grande.
2. **Scoping Study:** The considerable amount of existing material, both published and unpublished grey documents, would be studied for useful statements about the Rio Grande or relevant water issues.² New interviews would be conducted with tribal leaders and tribal technical specialists to document the operative water policies and emerging issues. On the basis of this study, a detailed set of questions will be prepared for use in the interviews and workshops (see #3 below):
3. **Interviews and Workshops.** Interviews will be conducted with tribal elders to document traditional knowledge and perspectives about the Rio Grande and its tributaries. On the basis of the Scoping Study (above) and the interviews with tribal elders, a series of one-day workshops will be held in each Pueblo participating in the study (one or two workshops per pueblo). Participants at the workshops would include a cross section of the community (including technical water specialists, youth, women, and council members) but with a special emphasis on participation by tribal elders. The focus of the workshops would be on developing a river/water vision for the community. Techniques of "Appreciative Inquiry" are anticipated to be used in structuring the workshops.
4. **River Vision(s).** The river visions and key statements from each workshop will be compiled into a summary document that will seek to capture the common elements of the visions, and identify conflicting issues as well. The aim will be to develop a statement which authentically reflects the views of the participants, and which can be shared with other river stakeholders.

¹ The area to be included in the Scoping Study will extend from Isleta Pueblo just South of Albuquerque, upstream to Taos Pueblo (specifically, to the confluence of the Red River about 10 miles north of Taos).

² The study will draw on recent interviews conducted under the recently completed "Thinking like a Watershed" project conducted by Jack Loeffler.