LESSONS IN SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SERVICE ON THE DINE (NAVAJO) NATION

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ABSTRACT

A LESSON IS OFFERED IN THIS PAPER REGARDING SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF AN APPRECIATION FOR DISTINCT CULTURAL VALUE SYSTEMS AS WELL AS THE LARGER ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM IN WHICH DEVELOPMENT TAKES PLACE. ECONOMISTS FREQUENTLY WRESTLE WITH QUESTIONS OF VALUATION IN REGARD TO BOTH CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND THE NATURAL WORLD. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLANS CAN BE CALLED INTO QUESTION WHEN NATURE AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS ARE NOT GIVEN SUFFICIENT CONSIDERATION. IN SPENDING SOME TIME WITH THE DINE, WORKING ON DEVELOPMENT PLANS, AS WELL AS LISTENING TO STORIES, THIS AUTHOR LEARNED A VALUABLE LESSON CONCERNING SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. IT IS A LESSON WHICH IS TRANSMITTED IN THE CONTEXT OF A STORY.

INTRODUCTION

The venue of a story, to transmit a lesson in sustainable economic development, was chosen for a reason. Economists and other professional academics who wish to work with indigenous peoples and other non-mainstream cultures must learn to listen intently to stories if they are to have any hope of success. It is through stories that many indigenous people frequently and richly communicate their values and sense of self. In order to reach beyond Environmental Economics to Ecological Economics, in order to incorporate the values of the very people who are to be benefited by economic development, economists must go beyond the standard models, perhaps beyond any models at all. A lesson is offered in this paper, in the context of a story rather than in the standard academic form, as a metaphor for what must be transcended in order to discover a sustainable economic development in harmony with indigenous cultural values both on Indian nations in the United States, as well as across the globe.

THE STORY

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When traveling the interstate highways which transverse the arid American Southwest, one is hardly aware of the patterns of life which permeate the dry arroyos and desert canyons, beyond the distant mesas and buttes. Along the interstate, one is still ensconced in the plethora of goods and services of the preeminent consumer economy in the world today. Beyond the distant mesas and buttes that adorn the landscape with magnificence along Interstate 40, a different world emerges. It is not a world of difference, in terms of the lay of the land, the vegetation, the surrounding mountains, or the climate. It is a world of difference in terms of culture, of tradition, and in terms of Economic Development.

Spanning the Northwestern corner of New Mexico, the Northeastern corner of Arizona, and a small section of Southeastern Utah, is the largest Indian Nation in the United States. It is called the Dinetah or the land of the Dine. The Dine are more commonly known as the Navajo. The Dinetah is referred to on maps as the Navajo Nation. It is a different nation with a different culture, with different goals, and with a different level and type of economic development from the United States as a whole. The unemployment rate is roughly 44% for the entire Dinetah. Half of households or better fall below the poverty level. One third or more of all households have no indoor plumbing. The Dinetah has many economic statistics more reflective of a third world nation, than of a typical city or region of the United States of America.

The Dinetah is divided into 110 local chapters. The individual chapters are responsible for local economic development. In the far eastern reaches of the Dinetah, bordered by Cabezon peak (the monsters head) to the South, the San Pedro Mountains to the East, Chaco canyon to the North, and the San Mateo Mountains to the West, is the Torreon-Starlake Chapter; also know as the Na Neelzhiin. There are almost 2000 Dine who live on this chapter. The unemployment rate is slightly higher on this chapter than for the Navajo Nation as a whole.

Ponies and horses wander freely on the open range of the Na Neelzhiin, as do sheep and goats. These domesticated animals are owned by various families on the chapter, and provide a small measure of supplemental income. They wander and graze close to the roads, crossing at their pleasure. The stretch of paved and earthen two and one lane roads that cross the chapter allow the few travelers who happen by, an introduction to a world far removed from the typical sites one would encounter along I-40. In the center of the chapter is Torreon, the site of the chapter house, which provides offices for tribal officials, a meeting place for tribal government and community groups as well as a service center for seniors. Also located at Torreon are a clinic, a thrift shop, and a grade school.

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As I write, I am sitting with the Land Use Plan of the Torreon-Starlake Chapter of the Navajo Nation. My students, in my Economic Growth and Development class are using this land use plan as a case study in sustainable economic development. The plan contains a list of possible economic and business projects which students will analyze using benefit-cost analysis. In the land use plan of the chapter many benefits and costs are considered important. The preservation of cultural and communitarian traditions and sacred sites, as well as the protection of endangered species and wild indigenous foods are explicitly listed as goals along with business and commercial development. Ultimately the results of the analysis will be provided to the tribal council of the Na Neelzhiin. The results of the analysis are as yet, a work in progress. How I came upon the land use plan of the Chapter, and how I came to use it in my class, is a story worth telling, for it contains significant lessons in the problems and issues associated with sustainable economic development.

Several years ago, one of my colleagues at Wilmington College began a series of contacts with the Torreon-Starlake chapter. This was part of the mission of the College to foster and shape values and concerns for social justice, community activism, and humanitarian service in our faculty and students. In the fall of 2003, I and several members of my department were asked to go to the chapter in the summer of 2004, to conduct classes and workshops in management, entrepreneurship, basic finance, and economic principles for those members of the chapter who had some interest in starting a business or other commercial endeavor. At one point nearly every member of my department was committed to making the journey. Then, around February of 2004, we received word that we were no longer needed to do workshops, that workshops had already been arranged with and through the Small Business Administration. We were also told, that we were actually needed to help repair roofs and that our service would be appreciated.

Doing the workshops, essentially would have involved academics merely performing in their accustomed roles. Repairing roofs on the other hand would require stepping outside of accustomed academic roles. Almost immediately, everyone who had been willing to make the journey was no longer interested. Still, one other colleague and I were still interested in making the trip. By the time May came, the need was no longer for us to repair roofs but rather to work on a road crew. Part of me, and a fairly significant part at that, was now in revolt against the whole idea of going. As a Ph.D. economist with so many years of

teaching experience, I thought I had a higher value than working on a road crew. Internally, I was snarling, "I didn't get a Ph.D. in Economics so I could do that." Nonetheless I still felt drawn to go.

Much earlier in my life, I had had an intense interest in labor conditions for migratory farm workers in the United States. I had spent some time working with the United Farm Workers in their boycott of first grapes and later lettuce. I chose to spend a summer harvesting tomatoes in southern California, in order to have a first hand experience with the issues of concern to me, to really see what the work was like. The reality of working with the earth enhanced my understanding of the struggle of the farm-workers and why that struggle was important. As I waited to undertake my journey to the Dinetah, I began to recall all that I had gained from the practical experience of doing field work when I was young. I also recalled the many news reports from the 1960's and 1970's of American professors working in rice paddies in China, or cutting sugar cane in Cuba. Gradually the thought of working on a road crew, or repairing roofs, began to seem, at least partially appealing. If nothing else, I thought it would provide a respite from the complexities and abstractions of the academy. It began to feel refreshing.

The need for flexibility, I began to realize, was crucial if I was really going to be of service. "I can help, but I can only help in this way," began to appear to me to be nothing more than an exercise in self-indulgence. Being of service means being willing to step outside of accustomed roles, in order to do what is needed at the time. In addition, stepping outside of accustomed roles, frequently provides an opportunity for seeing realities and circumstances that might remain hidden when not venturing forth beyond them. I began to contemplate the advantages of working on a road crew, having everyday conversations with the Dine workers and so getting to know their values and what they hold dear and sacred. Stepping outside of the academic role was starting to seem as though it would provide a great deal of insights.

I had had a research interest in American Indians, for a variety of reasons for quite some time. My specialization in graduate school had been Economic Development. At the time I was writing my dissertation I remember desiring to go for a visit to some of the countries which I had been researching for my dissertation, in order to obtain first hand information, to really touch and feel the place I was about to write about. I remember broaching the subject with my committee chairman. He said, "Why would you want to go to those places, you could get killed, you have all the data you need right here." So I forgot about going and actually experiencing the people and the places that I was to write about in my dissertation. At least to some extent, I have always regretted not going.

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As an economist, I was trained to look at theories, and models, and data. There was no need to actually go to a place myself. There was no need to touch the earth and her people in a place, in order to understand what is needed. This is how I was taught as a graduate student. Becoming personally familiar with a place and her people was relegated to sentimentality. Only later did I become convinced that in order to understand a people, in order to understand what they value, what they derive benefit from, what they experience as a cost, one has to understand and touch the earth they walk upon. I am even more convinced of this now, after spending some time this summer on the Dinetah. I do not think this is mere sentimentality. It is absolutely essential to garner intrinsic understanding, to foster authentic connections, and to gain an appreciation and insight into how to truly be of service.

If academics are to be of service to others, whether in community activism involving social justice or just for the sake of humanitarian service, bridges have to be built between the academy and the community. Touching the earth in a place is essential to touching and understanding a people in that place. It is precisely how the gap is bridged between the academic and the community.

Nonetheless, when I finally arrived at the Chapter house, I had no idea what to expect. At first there was no one to talk to. The one colleague from my department, who had still been willing to make the journey with me, had to cancel. I was alone. I felt uncertain. I was there at the chapter house, waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone to speak with, and thoroughly doubting the wisdom of the whole journey to this place. As it turned out, there was no road crew to work on and no roofs needing repair. Here I had come all this way from Ohio and for what? First I was going to do workshops, then it was roofs, then it was a road crew, and now it looked as if I had come all of this way for nothing. Yet, ever so gradually there were opportunities to speak with various individuals in tribal government, as well as many of the people who were at the chapter house for a variety of reasons. I asked questions and I had questions asked of me. I still did not know what if anything I was going to do at the chapter that was going to be of any value.

I asked Leo Charlie, a member of the chapter, how to pronounce Na Neelzhin. Rather than answering me right away, he took me outside the chapter house. He eventually told me that Na Neelzhin meant 'marked in dark'. It was the name for a dark fence line erected between two nearby buttes where deer and antelope were trapped and shot with bow and arrow. But first he told me a long story of how each butte

got its name. He spoke of many of the high places in all of the four directions from the chapter house. It seemed that each one had its name, its story, and was in some way connected with the sacred and the spirit world. The high places where the earth and sky meet are special places for the Dine. He told me how the grass used to grow tall and lush in the river valleys and in the canyons.

Leo Charlie told me of how his Great Grandmother was forced to walk by Kit Carson, on the Long Walk of the Navajo where they were eventually interned at Fort Sumner. He pointed on the horizon from where the people were forced to walk from. He traced their path to where they were made to walk. He told me how his Great Grandmother was carrying his Grandmother who was a baby at the time. Eventually the Great Grandmother could no longer carry the baby and placed her in the arms of a Juniper tree for protection. Later, a mountain man found the baby, his grandmother, and took her to a settlement. "It took her many years to be reunited with her people, but if it wasn't for that mountain man, I wouldn't be here," said Leo Charlie. Leo Charlie took me outside to help me connect with the earth, so I could touch it. I didn't know why he took me outside until much later. At the time, I just thought he was an old man, with a gift of gab, telling long winded stories. What he did was connect me to the earth. In his words, I could touch the earth, and in touching, feel and sense the history of this place, which was his home, and the home of his ancestors. Every Dine with whom I spoke, had a family story to tell which involved harm or hurt done to them in a personal way by the dominant culture. Every Dine I spoke with related their story back to the earth.

I heard a lot of stories from a lot of people at the Chapter House about a wide variety of things. Sometimes it was in response to a question I had. Sometimes, the stories just sort of came on their own. I heard all of these stories long before I knew why I was there or what if anything they were going to put me to work on. I began to wonder what all this story telling was about. I began to devise several theories. Maybe, I thought they were just trying to entertain me, giving me what they thought I wanted to hear. No, the stories were too filled with energy, too much passion for that. The stories did contain their everyday concerns, their issues. Their stories contained worries about economic sustenance and provision of basic necessities. Their stories contained a lot of concern about the depletion of the water table and other harm done to the earth. There was too much energy and authenticity and passionate concern for today's issues, for the stories to just be entertainment for me.

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Then I thought that perhaps some people were deliberately telling me such long stories as a form of revenge, to afflict me for asking a question, or to avoid an answer. Or perhaps it was some sort of test of my patience, like yes we will tell you eventually but only if you first have the patience to listen to the story. No, that couldn't be either, because I realized after the story was over, that it did answer my question. It answered my question in a whole and complete way. Maybe they were thinking that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. In order to give an answer to a question about something today, much has to be said about yesterday, and what had been, because the past is still present and is alive in the moment. Time is vertical or cyclical. All events whether they occurred last week or many years ago are layered upon each other and exist in the present moment. In order to explain the present, much has to be said about the past as well as the present. My questions were answered not in a way to which I was accustomed, but in a way that is better and complete.

As an economist I have been trained to build models. I have been trained to isolate key variables and ignore everything else. One of the things, which I learned from my experience on the Dinetah, was that nothing should be ignored. Every person I met, every story told to me, every question answered, every place visited was woven into the fabric of my understanding of what life is like on the Reservation. It was all essential. Nothing was unimportant. Nothing could be ignored.

Much of what I heard and saw and experienced at the time did not strike me as important, but amazingly I remembered it all. Every little morsel of information, of contact, every thread of connection, is part of the tapestry of my understanding. All of it has given profound insight into how the people in this place value the earth, the landscape, the community, the Dine, the traditions, the animals, the vegetation, as well as their hopes for economic and business development. Without that insight I would have no idea what they really value and how much, because in the end it has to be their plan, their benefits, and their costs. Values are subjective. A host of non-pecuniary benefits and costs are enormously important to the Dine. Touching the earth and her people in a community is absolutely essential in order to have even an inkling of understanding of what is valued and how dear it is, for that community.

Over the course of several days, I met with many of the people who lived and worked on the Na Neelzhiin, as well as a few from Indian communities nearby. Most had stories to tell me. All had issues to raise about life on the reservation, about hopes and dreams and frustrations. All of them played an important role in shaping and forming my understanding of life in the northwestern corner of New Mexico.

Alvin, Alberta, Sal, Hope, Wally, Joe Lee, Lucy, and Laverna were a few of those I was privileged to meet and speak with. Still, at the time, I had no real idea how my understanding was being shaped or how the stories and issues the people spoke of would become etched in my memory. I had no idea whether or not I was going to be able to do some work, or to serve in some capacity.

Finally one of the tribal officials brought me into the main office and handed me the Land Use Plan, as well as several other documents and reports prepared by the tribal government. I was requested to do an analysis of the economic development plans and projects contained in the report, and more specific ally to look at ways to reduce unemployment on the chapter. I spent several days looking through these reports. My expertise, as an economist, was to be used after all. I went home with the Chapter's Land Use Plan to use as a case study in my Economic Development Class. I was able to walk away with the Land Use Plan precisely because I was willing to be flexible, to do what was needed. Since I was willing to touch the land and soak up the various aspects of life on the Na Neelzhiin, as they were presented to me, I was trusted to review the plans and reports. Since I was trusted and because I made a connection and forged a relationship with the land and the people, I have some appreciation for what the people of the chapter truly value and how they value it.

Yet, I remained troubled after I left the reservation. Economic development in this location is a daunting challenge. When I thought of the incidence of poverty, the remote location, and the ways in which the Dine are at a strategic disadvantage vis a vis corporations who might have an interest in leasing land on the chapter to do business or increase employment, the challenge of economic development seemed formidable if not impossible. As I looked at the list of projects contained in the land use plan, they seemed so marginal and so modest. How could any of these projects significantly reduce the unemployment rate or raise living standards? The answer is that they can not. If economic development were so easy to do, it would have already been accomplished long ago.

So I became content with the thought that my students and I would not come up with any sort of project or solution that would dramatically alter living standards or reduce unemployment. Yet, we could be of modest help. If nothing else, connections would be made and relationships would be forged. That, in and of itself, would be our success. Yet I remained haunted by the specter of failure. I had hoped to be able to find some solution, to more significantly raise material betterment for the people of the chapter.

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I was still disappointed, even while clinging to the idea that building relationships is in itself a success. I attended a Symposium on Environmental Justice in Mid-September in Tucson, Arizona. While there I presented a paper on my experience on the Na Neelzhiin chapter. I spent a good deal of time at the conference in conversation with Indians from many southwest tribes. We spoke of many things, but I did not share my feelings of lingering disappointment. The morning after the conference was finished, I awoke surprisingly freed of my lingering feeling of disappointment.

I recalled the lay of the land on the Na Neelzhiin, how the buttes are bathed in light at the brink of morning, how the desert smells with the fragrance of sage, while the cadence of birds and cicada carries on the wind. I recalled the horses with their tails fluttering and striking at the air as they graze. Actually, the reservation is quite beautiful just as it is. In the Economic development plan, sacred places and cultural traditions are to be preserved. The Dine are not looking for transformation. They are looking for modest improvements in education, in health care, and in senior services. They are hoping to preserve a communitarian spirit, while providing greater marketing opportunities for the arts and crafts of individual artists on the chapter. They are hoping to extend water lines and electricity lines so that more homes can have electricity and water. In addition, the plan calls for specific possible sites on the chapter to be developed with specific possible alternative enterprises in mind. All of the projects on the list work towards modest economic development.

The goal is to make modest improvements on the chapter. The goal is not to transform the chapter into the typical All-American suburb. The goal of the Plan is not to sacrifice traditional cultural values or compromise sacred sites, but rather to identify and preserve tradition and sacred sites. Any improvements which do not preserve tradition and sacred sites; any developments that do not recognize the web of life would not be genuine improvements or authentic developments according to the values of the Dine.

The Dine traditionally believed the earth should be left alone, unless there is an extremely good reason to disturb it. This does not preclude use of the earth, for raising crops, grazing or even mining. It does suggest that the ability to use the earth in some manner does not automatically justify such use. The earth, like animals and like people, exists for its own reasons. The earth is a living being and should be respected. Humans can legitimately use the earth for sustenance and for making a living. Use should always involve reciprocal relationships.

In contradistinction to the Judeo-Christian tradition of exploiting and dominating nature, Dine approach the earth with respect, as people who belong to the earth. The earth is Mother or sometimes Sister. Instead of seeing the primary or sole purpose of nature in its use by humans, in the traditional belief system of the Dine, all of the elements of nature have their own reasons for being. All the elements of nature are alive and have being. All the elements of nature have and are spirit. Humans have a web of kinship with all of the elements of nature interconnecting as brother and sister. The Dine would never say when contemplating a possible use of a mountain, a river, a forest, or an animal, "Well, what else is it there for?" All that is, the earth, the mountains, the rivers and forest, has value in and of itself. It has value in its own being and spirit. In touching and respecting this spirit and being, Dine develop reciprocal relationships with all that is.

Economic Development which does not take into consideration all of the things that the people, of a place, value and derive benefit from is not authentic indigenous economic development. Deepening the appreciation of cultural tradition, the Dine language, arts and crafts, and sacred sites is in and of itself, positive economic development. In addition, deepening respect for these things can easily be shown to reduce alcoholism, suicide, and infant mortality by heightening self-esteem and self-worth. There are also spillover effects, which positively impact economic development in the more narrow or pecuniary sense. The projects on the list will yield only modest material improvements precisely because these are the material improvements, which are possible when the full range of benefits and costs are considered. They are the types of things, which would minimally affect the earth and traditional culture in an adverse manner.

CONCLUSION

The people of the Na Neelzhiin knew what they were doing in coming up with their list of projects. The projects in their plan balance the wide array of things that the people derive benefits from. Economics broadly defined considers everything that people value. Economics narrowly defined concerns itself with only goods and services traded in a market. Economic development must concern itself with the broad definition and consider everything that people value or it is be incomplete analysis at best and hopelessly false at worst.

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The Dine chose for themselves a set of projects that have a chance to modestly raise material living standards. The task of my students and I, is even more modest. It is to identify which projects have the potential for higher pecuniary rates of return, and which have a higher or lower potential to positively or adversely affect the quality of reservation life in terms of preserving culture, sacred sites, and other things of value.

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