

A Publication Dedicated to Mining and Aggregates Worldwide

May / June Vol. 42 No. 4

MINING *People*

Underground Mining Buyer's Guide



Underground Mining

New Program Gives Tribes a Voice Before Mining

by Debra McCown Thomas



Tribal Monitor Trent Tu'tsi (Hopi Tribe) records ancestral sites as part of baseline studies for the Resolution Project.

Ask Bernadette Carra about the tribal monitor program, and she'll tell you about the plants native to the Sonoran Desert, the stunningly beautiful Arizona spring, and the traditions of her ancestors. For her, that's where the story begins.

"For us as tribal monitors, something that's important to us is that we're continuing to use our traditional ecological knowledge, which we grew up with, what was passed down from our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, on the way of life that they had generations ago," says Carra, a member of the Ak-Chin Indian Community and field director for the program.

Set up two years ago by Noni Nez Lyndon of the U.S. Forest Service (Tonto National Forest) with financial support from Resolution Copper (which is owned by Rio Tinto and BHP), the program trains tribal members to work alongside

archaeologists to survey for cultural resources – and then employs them to work in areas where mining is planned, cataloging sites and resources that have cultural value to the tribes.

"One of the primary issues Native Americans have with mining projects is not being involved from the beginning in baseline cultural resource studies and project design," says Avi Buckles, director of cultural resources for WestLand Resources, Inc. and managing director of the program for the Tonto National Forest.

"Tribal values about the land are not often captured in baseline archaeological reports written by non-natives; rather, they are described in the traditions and stories of community elders. By involving tribal monitors early in the process, the tribes are able to work with the federal agencies and project proponents on avoidance and mitigation in a more timely

and collaborative manner."

"That's kind of the impetus for why it began," he says, "is that the tribes felt like they were not involved enough in cultural resources baseline studies."

The concept of tribal monitors is not new, but Buckles says this is the first time they've been used on this scale in collaborative roles in the American Southwest.

For tribal members, having a voice is a big deal, says Carra, who served as a cultural resource specialist for her tribe before the program was started. It was always frustrating, she says, reading reports about planned federal undertakings that left out meaningful cultural sites from a Tribal perspective.

Generally speaking, federal undertakings are projects that either require federal approval or are funded by the federal

government – a category that includes major mining projects. Under the National Historic Preservation Act, the federal government must consider the projects' impact on historic properties and traditional cultural places.

The tribal monitors are tribal members sent by their communities to participate in the process, Buckles says. Bringing their tribal perspective and traditional knowledge, they work side-by-side with Western-trained archaeologists, collaborating to inform decisions about mine development.

As a result, says Buckles, there are meaningful changes – for example, a planned power line might be relocated so it doesn't impact an important ancestral site, and tribal members might have an opportunity to remove plants with traditional medicinal value before the land is disturbed.

An added bonus, Buckles says: for tribal monitors, the skills and training gained through the program can lead to future employment in cultural resources management – and, meanwhile, increase the voice and presence of tribal members in the field of archaeology as a whole.

It took time at first, Carra says, for everyone to get on board with the program, which began two years ago in early 2018 – but since then it's been a win for everyone.

"I think the majority of us as tribal monitors know that these federal undertakings are going to take place," she says. "It's just how we play a role in it that gives our tribes the opportunity to make conscious decisions on how they would like that land to be taken care of."

Since its start, Buckles says, the program has expanded to include tribal monitors doing biological baseline studies, where they have the opportunity to go beyond cultural sites and identify culturally significant plant species, such as those used in medicine, food, and traditional basket-making – and recommend mitigation, whether that means re-seeding the site after mining or just harvesting the plants before it takes place.

"In the end, the Tonto Tribal Monitor Program is about respect for the tribes," says Buckles. "There's been a lot of positive feedback from the tribes about this because they're being respected and asked their opinion from day one."

So far, he says, the program has trained 54 tribal members from 9 tribes. WestLand Resources, an engineering and environmental consulting firm contracted by Resolution, currently employs 31 of them in its cultural resources group. To date they've surveyed over 32,000 acres and been involved in construction monitoring to ensure that ancestral sites are not impacted. They've also been involved in thousands of acres of biological surveys.

The program currently exists in Arizona (although it also includes New Mexico tribes), and Buckles says he's been able to expand it beyond just Resolution. The tribes involved are the White Mountain Apache Tribe, Yavapai Apache Nation, Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, Gila River Indian Community, Ak-chin Indian Community, and Mescalero Apache Tribe.

For them, it means a seat at the table in decision-making and something important that's often been denied: a voice.

"As Native Americans, we're totally against destroying what we call in our culture Mother Earth. It is in our culture to only take from her what we need and nothing more, to take care of her," Carra says. "If the undertaking is in an area with cultural significance, with plants that we still use... most tribes will ask that what is destroyed will be replaced, so that way it continues to grow."



The Tonto National Forest Tribal Monitor Program works closely with WestLand archaeologists and biologists during baseline studies for the Resolution Copper Project. Left to right: Gaylen Tinsley, Bernadette Carra, Daniel McNair, and Rachel Evans.



Tribal Monitor Lance Wells (Gila River Indian Community) takes in the Superior area near the proposed Resolution Copper Mine.



White Mountain Apache Tribal Monitor Jacob Henry at the site of the proposed Resolution mine at Oak Flat.



Tribal Monitor group manager LeRoy Shingoitewa (Hopi Tribe) discusses the days findings with his interdisciplinary team.