

Pick Up the Torch

Updates from Big Mountain Resistance

by Black Mesa Solidarity Network

Late summer rains pour down on the sun scorched sacred landscape known as Dzil’N’tsaa Big Mountain, the vast regional homeland to Dineh resisting relocation since 1978. The rains are sporadic at best and come down in flash downpours that wash off the steep hillsides, cutting the land into deep trenches that cause erosion of grazing land and make roads impassable. In whatever form, the rain comes as a relief from the extreme heat waves, often exceeding 100 degrees, which can be just as dangerous to the elderly community as extreme cold in the winter times. Some of this waterpower is contained by Earthen dams mobilized by the great Dineh leadership of the past and maintained by their children today. At homesites across the resistance territories, water is captured by any means possible from water barrels placed under drop spouts or scattered pots in the yard. Not one home on the so-called Hopi Partition Lands, which was divided by US colonizer law in 1974, has piped water.

Potable water used by Indigenous Big Mountain peoples once came from natural springs and seeps located in close range to homesites and grazing areas. However in the 1970s Peabody Energy in concert with every major utility company of the Southwest started to pump millions of gallons of water through a coal slurry pipeline, named the Black Mesa Pipeline that transported coal mined from Black Mesa to the Mohave Generating Station. For 30 years settler-colonial water extraction caused the water table to drop. The springs dried to a trickle and today, some families use a few of the old springs, but most are dependent upon the wells that are far away, and charge for the water.

Within these colonizer-induced climatic changes, in recent years have also come many losses of loved ones to every community and clan in resistance to forced relocation. Such losses include Matriarchs like Louise Goh and Rena Babbitt Lane, who lived and breathed their entire lives on the land where their umbilical cords are buried, who led their families and held onto their homes and flocks of sheep to survive the worst of relocation. They are also joined by children and

grandchildren of the ones who declared Big Mountain a Sovereign Dineh Nation. May they all be remembered as warriors for The People.

We want to highlight one such person because of his significance to the wider international solidarity network. Many of you may remember him: Danny Blackgoat, maternal clan To’dichinii, paternal clan Tlizi Lani from Thin Rock Mesa, Big Mountain.

“No guts, no glory,” Danny would say as we traversed through a mountain pass, in the mud, hauling a truckload of supplies to his relatives, after rescuing another support vehicle from the elements of his homeland. When we arrived at our destination he was always greeted warmly and with a hot cup of coffee. From there an exchange in the Dineh language flourished, laughter shared, and then it stopped, and he would turn to us in a thunderous tone to reveal the instructions of our host. By the crack in his voice, we burst into action unloading, carrying our loads to the directed spots, bringing in the firewood, water, and food. Danny led so many of us to support Big Mountain by speaking around Turtle Island and abroad. His relentless heart for the struggle hosted several solidarity gatherings between 2004-2022 at his family’s ancestral homesite below Thin Rock Mesa.

From grief comes action. In remembrance of those who walked before us and beside us, there is more walking ahead. There is a torch to pick up. Dineh within the Big Mountain/Black Mesa resistance communities are leading the way forward. It may be just one or two people at each homesite, but they are doing it. These Resisters outlasted the world’s largest coal company, Peabody Energy, that threatened to blast away the land under their feet. They have countered every colonized intention to remove them and force them to join the masses of displaced and dispossessed. Dineh continue to carry out their lifeways, holding onto 900,000 acres in defiance of US law. It is from the direction and example of the people on the land, who continue to maintain their ways of life, that we, the international solidarity community, humbly continue to support.

Updates from the Land:

Black Mesa Resistance Camp Juniper Grove, Black Mesa

We are seeking help with multiple on-land projects. Our cornfield fence is falling from old posts rotting out and the T posts bending over. From our assessment we need to replace the corner posts and about 100 T-posts. We also hear from another Resistor, who had their fence posts stolen. We are monitoring BIA/Hopi Tribal Ranger activities in the likelihood of increased surveillance and harassment of our sheep and homesite. We invite volunteers willing to help us with our workloads in carrying out resistance at our home.

Horse Corral Western Slope, Black Mesa

We need a well or someone with knowledge about windmill engineering. All the nearest windmills we used to harvest water from are damaged. We have no other option but to haul water from Red Lake Chapter House, some 20 miles each way. Our family stands dedicated to carry out the ways of our late parents but some of us need to go back to work so we need help keeping up with the sheep.

Cactus Valley

We are seeking help in maintaining our homesite. One of our homes was damaged and needs repair, drywall, framing, and windows. Tribal officials are of no help in these matters. Enforcement makes us cringe sometimes, but we continue to live out here. We also need a jackhammer to bust up the sharp rocks on the road that is our only access to town and water source.

Red Willow Springs, Big Mountain

It is just me and my two elderly siblings out here. We are the last ones left in our community. We still raise livestock as our way of life, these animals are our food source and income. They support us in these hard times. Since it's just me doing most of the heavy lifting we ask for help, herding sheep and gathering firewood.

Big Mountain Spring, Big Mountain

Same old thing over here, doing the best we can to survive within our home places. We want to get a head start on firewood because last year we ran out early in the middle of winter and it was hard to get firewood then. We are also monitoring BIA/Hopi Ranger activities as we hear of their approach to surveil our animals and homes. We could use a bit of help with the firewood and our sheep and as always Thank you!

Throughout the resistance territories, the children and grandchildren of Dineh Matriarchs are attempting to maintain and restore the old homesites by repairing roofs, fixing hogans, hauling away trash, holding ceremonies, and defending against trespassers. All of these are direct actions against a system of genocide.

In this day and age, communication with the Resistors is relatively easy compared to decades ago. Requests can be made to the outside world by private message or phone call. However, the primary call is for on-land supporters: shepherders. This hasn't changed in 30 years! Back in the day, in the strength of the resistance, Dineh families raised herds of sheep and goats in the hundreds. They would spread out and move around to seasonal camps. This was sovereignty enacted, and it challenged every element of partitioning and attempted removal. Nowadays a handful of families remain with small herds, but those herds are an ancestral tie to the land and a food source for the family. Resistors' maintenance of these lifeways is direct action, and guest herders are invited to take supportive action in the ongoing realization of Big Mountain liberation.

This request is no easy task, as the traverse to Black Mesa alone could be a dealbreaker. Then, one must be prepared for high desert climate conditions without the aid of electric power, central heat, or piped water. Once there, life is not full of leisure; it's like life on a ranch or homestead, except with Dineh rules. The sheep must be walked out into unfenced wilderness—sage prairie, canyonlands, Pinion Pine and Juniper forests. Sheep must be defended against predators, led to a water source, and brought back to the corral.

Through all this one could come away with a life-altering experience. The tradition of Dineh resistance at Big Mountain led by Matriarchs and their families continues. Inspired, strengthened, guided by their unrelenting stand, we respond as we can to support.

To learn more about the struggle for the land and get involved by shepherding, shearing sheep, or planting this spring:

visit: linktr.ee/bmsolidarity
or
email: bmshepherders@gmail.com.