

The Community VOICE


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Saturday October 26, 2013

Volume 21 Issue 39

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Hopi teach how water is life

By Andy Roth October 4, 2013 12:00 am



The sun is low on the eastern horizon as I climb the final steep steps to historic Walpi Village atop First Mesa on Hopi land in Arizona.

I feel fortunate to be here as a participant in the annual Paatuwaqatsi Run. Paatuwaqatsi is Hopi for "water is life."

Our course is approximately 30 miles on trails that connect Walpi with seven natural springs. In the past, all of Walpi's water was brought up to the mesa by foot along these pathways. Today, the springs remain important in Hopi cultural life. Ceremonies centered around the springs link community members to each other and their ancestors.

According to traditional interpretation, the pathways that connect Walpi and its springs are like veins, and our running on these paths keeps those veins open and healthy. The Hopi also believe that running helps bring the rains that are essential for a good harvest of the corn, squash and other crops that many in the community still raise using traditional dry farming methods.

Although 30 miles may seem like a long run, it is a short day's effort compared to the run that the event's founder, Bucky Preston, and a group of Hopi undertook in 2006 when they ran nearly 2,000 miles from the Hopi mesas to Mexico City to attend the fourth World Water Forum. They ran not only to deliver the message that indigenous people faced crucial water issues of their own, but also to offer Hopi wisdom based on centuries of experience living in dry lands.

They addressed others from around the world, which for a first time were beginning to appreciate water's preciousness and the insecurity that all humans risk when it becomes scarce.

At the time, the Hopi and their Diné (Navajo) neighbors were engaged in a long legal battle over water rights with Peabody Energy, the world's largest privately owned coal-mining company. In the 1960s, Hopi and Diné leaders had signed deals with Peabody, giving it access to rich coal deposits on native land in exchange for revenue and jobs. The deals included a provision, which subsequent generations of Hopi and Diné have disputed, that allowed Peabody to pump water for coal processing from the aquifer that serve as the Hopi and Diné communities' only natural source of fresh water.

By the time that the Hopi ambassadors ran to the Mexico City World Water Forum, Peabody had depleted the aquifer so much that natural springs across native lands were going dry. Preston and other Hopi elders recognized that water scarcity threatened the Hopi way of life and decided that they must act to protect the water and honor its importance.

Though Hopi lands usually receive less than 12 inches of rain each year, as I make progress along the paths, water and its life-giving effects are evident everywhere. Below First Mesa, we run past cornfields full of tall, green stalks, thanks to strong monsoon rains earlier this season. A few miles later, the trail nearly disappears in a field of wild sunflowers. By midday, clouds begin to gather overhead, shading us briefly from the sun's heat and suggesting the possibility of more rainfall later in the day.

All along the course, even in the most remote stretches, members of the community who are not running themselves have come out to thank both Hopi and visiting runners for our efforts and to give us water. At the finish, a Hopi woman, the head cook for the feast awaiting us, offers each finisher a drink of water from a ceramic pitcher and then pours the rest over the runner's head. Like the springs themselves, this gesture combines the practical and the ceremonial. The cool water washes away the salt and grit from my sweaty head, and it feels like a blessing.

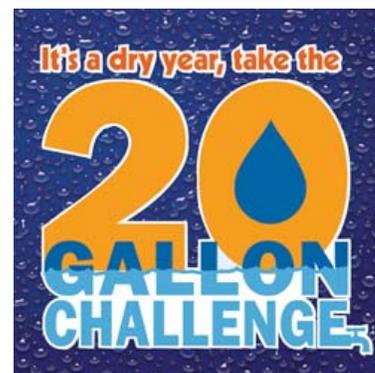
Although the arid lands of the Hopi mesas are far from the verdant terrain of the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed, we too depend on waterways. Our daily actions as individuals and our choices as communities reflect our understandings of water's role in our lives. When clean water is plentiful and easily available, we may take it for granted.

Then we are vulnerable to making bargains that seem to promise future prosperity, but conflict with the reality of our finite water supplies. Visiting the Hopi mesas to participate in the Paatuwaqatsi Run reminds me that it is wise to make choices informed by the fundamental understanding that "water is life."

For more on the Paatuwaqatsi Run and its history, go to www.waterislife.org. The Black Mesa Trust (www.blackmesatrust.org) works to protect and honor land and water the Hopi deem sacred.

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