

Video as a Campaign Tool

Notes from the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming, USA

By Stalin K. and Jessica Mayberry

Stalin K. and Jessica Mayberry of Video Volunteers are currently on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming setting up a Community Video Unit. The Northern Arapaho Tribal Council hired Video Volunteers for a project to use video as a tool to give people a voice and to increase participation in tribal affairs.

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Want to know how to make a bunch of 15 year olds wake up in class? Tell them that each one of them is actually worth \$41 million. On the Wind River Reservation, this isn't far from the truth. Even though the average household income is \$6,000 a year and there is 70% unemployment.

We told this to the students signed up for the Video Elective at Wyoming Indian High School, along with their assignment for the month. They are to going to make a short video to tell their people how much water they own, and just how valuable it is. They own enough water to fill up 300,000 football fields with water every year, which is the equivalent of 30% of Los Angeles' yearly water supply. And at a time when a gallon of water is more expensive than a gallon of gas, that water is worth a lot of money. And what did the kids discover on their first day of doing video polling at their school? That most people on the Reservation don't have any idea how valuable the water is, and think that the government, not the Tribes, own the water. They gave "F's" to seven out of their ten teachers on their knowledge of the Tribes' water rights.

Video Volunteers is here to design an awareness-raising Water Campaign and to produce a video informing every tribal member of their water rights. The goal is to give people a voice in the decisions on water development. We were hired by the Tribe's Hydrologist, Kate Vandemoer, who wrote their Water Code and has been instrumental in safeguarding the Tribe's water right. She was initially interested in simply making a film, but during the planning stages of this project we got her and the tribal government's support for a full-fledged Campaign—and for a Community Video Unit, which the tribal government sees as a way to increase participation in tribal affairs, and to spread awareness of critical government issues.

THE BACKGROUND

The Wind River Reservation, home to the Shoshone and Arapaho Tribes, is one the biggest and most beautiful reservations in the country. Chief Washakie, the 19th century leader of the Shoshones, was an ally of the US, making the Shoshones the only tribe in the country to get to choose their reservation. They chose the Wind River (over nearby places like the Tetons) because of its proximity to three sacred mountain ranges—The Owl Creeks, Absarokas and Wind Rivers—and because of its abundant resources, chief among them water. Unlike tribes elsewhere in the world, Americans tribes have sovereignty, which should guarantee them their water rights. And, like Tribes

everywhere in the world, American Tribes have just as often had the water used as a weapon to displace and/or bankrupt them. 345 out of 400 of the major Dam projects in India are on Tribal land; 7 out of the 9 dam projects on the Missouri river in the US are on Indian lands. In the late 80s, the tribes were sued by the State of Wyoming who wanted to prevent them from using their water. The Tribes ultimately won that case, in a historic verdict that went all the way to the US Supreme Court, setting Water Law precedent to the benefit of tribes across the country. They were given the right to 500 000 acre-feet of water every year, to be marketed, leased or sold and put to any use they saw fit. But by that point, the Tribes were bankrupt from all the litigation, and couldn't afford to develop with the water. And the state just kept taking their water anyway.

Today, fifteen years later, nothing has changed. 90% of the Tribes' water is diverted at a Dam built by the Bureau of Reclamation to supply water to non-Indian farmers settled on the reservation. What little water remains then flows into a Reservoir (filled 60% with Indian water) that the State uses to supply drinking water to a nearby city and also sells to power companies without ever returning a penny of that money to the Tribes. Meanwhile, on the Reservation, many people lack running water and those who do are often giving boiling orders. It's no longer possible to fish on the Wind River, and the cultural toll of the loss of the water is enormous. This is a culture where children are not allowed to play with water guns because water is sacred, and where water is intrinsic to all ceremonies and creation stories. Indians with cattle don't get enough water to sustain their crops, because the Bureau of Indian Affairs only maintains the non-Indian irrigation ditches, but if Indians refuse to pay their Operation and Maintenance charges on those ditches they are sometimes arrested by BIA police.

It's hard to pinpoint one reason why things are so bad here. In the 19th century, a Wyoming general fighting the Indians wrote that the government should do two things to subdue the Indians: destroy their way of life by killing the buffalo, and give them just enough food to survive. The current system promoted by the BIA does exactly that—per capita handouts of revenue from the reservation's abundant oil and gas reserves, which the BIA sells at 1/10 its market value, assure each Tribal member \$325 a month. Enough to survive, but never enough to flourish. The Bush administration believes that welfare is deadly to initiative and self-sufficiency, which is undoubtedly why they promote it on Indian reservations. Today, there are less than 20 college graduates in a population of over ten thousand.

HOW WILL VIDEO HELP?

Why, with rights to one of the biggest and most valuable watersheds in the country, do these two Tribes still lack sufficient water to even nourish their horses? Major reasons nothing has happened are lack of information, disenfranchisement, and lack of participation. The Community Video Unit—in which tribal members will produce videos on critical issues and then screen them back to the community—is aimed at addressing these three factors.

USING VIDEO TO ADDRESS LACK OF INFORMATION:

People here are totally unaware that they even own the water—let alone how rich the water could make them. Our video aims to reach every person on the Reservation with information on what their rights are, and information on different options for water

development—which include reservoir-building, bottling, recreation, hydropower, conservation and restoration. 10,000 copies of the video will be made, and, in order to ensure it reaches every member of the tribe, our distribution strategy targets school kids and teachers, who will distribute the video to each child along with a homework assignment to watch the video with their families and to complete an enclosed survey, which asks them to rate the various options for water. The results of the survey will be given to tribal leaders, and the video thus becomes a way for a community to push their leaders to action on water.

USING VIDEO TO ADDRESS DISENFRANCHISEMENT

People here have never been asked what they want to do with the water. They have never been asked to voice their opinion on this, or most other, critical issues. We have spoken to over 100 tribal members, many of whom come from far-flung parts of the reservation and never attend General Council meetings. In our brief time here, we have started to see what some enlightened development agencies around the world are starting to recognize: that indigenous people, who have lived in harmony with their environments for millennia, have valuable knowledge which we (who have managed to destroy these environments in a little over two centuries) should pay attention to. There are also important reasons to give people a voice in terms of the Tribes' immediate political struggles. The Tribes are likely to make a decision to 'turn off the spigot,' as the Tribal Chairman Rick Brannan says, meaning they would build upstream storage and force non-Indians to pay for the water they use. They will undoubtedly end up in court again, which is what usually happens when Native Americans try to exercise their rights. At that point, the goal of the water campaign will be to have an activated Tribal membership, ready to get on a dozen buses to march on Cheyenne or DC protesting on national television the theft of their water, in a claim that has now passed the \$9 billion mark. The campaign will involve the Tribal radio station, the school curriculums, the local press, and use billboards and posters. We've finished designed the t-shirts and bumper stickers. "Hands off. It's our water!"

VIDEO TO ADDRESS LACK OF PARTICIPATION

One reason for hope is the extraordinarily democratic system of Tribal government. The supreme governing body is the General Council, made up of every tribal member on the reservation. Because this is a small community, with common needs based on their attachment to this land, efforts to create a strong sense of unity should, in theory, be likely to succeed. But participation is very low: sometimes as few as 100 people show up at General Council meetings out of a potential 8000. People discuss on camera various reasons for this, including distrust of a Tribal government that is perceived to be ineffectual or corrupt and the belief that the BIA is the only body that can make decisions. The video ends with a call to action from the Business Council, urging people to come to the meetings on water and to voice their opinions on what should be done. Our hope is that this video will increase attendance at the water meetings to at least a quarter of the Tribal membership, and that will be one of the main ways we measure our impact.

CHALLENGES

One of the greatest challenges we see here is the lack of any program—whether undertaken by the Tribal government, an NGO or the BIA—aimed at people's empowerment. In many ways, India is a much easier place for community involvement

than Indian country! Kate Vandemoer, the Arapaho Tribe's hydrologist who brought us in, is committed to raising funds for such programs, and the Tribal government recognizes the need for them. No campaign (or democracy, for that matter) can succeed without people's participation, and it is hard to see where the Tribal government would find volunteers and leaders. As one tribal member puts it, "How do people who are struggling to survive day to day envision, let alone participate in creating, a future for the Tribe?" We hope that the video will generate some awareness of the importance of people's participation in Tribal affairs, and anticipate that some very eager high school students will play a role. As one of them says, "we're young and it's our future. We're not old and tired, we're modern and we know the modern world."

THE COMMUNITY VIDEO UNIT

The equipment we are using was bought by the Arapaho tribe just before the project for use by tribal members of the Community Video Unit we were intending to set up. However, although we have done some training of Tribal members who've been guiding the project and conducting the interviews, we couldn't find people to train in all aspects of production. The plan is to send volunteers for several workshops over the course of the year in video, as a curriculum offering of the Tribal College. The goal of the project would be for tribal people to produce videos that generate participation in tribal affairs and that act as a bridge between the people and government, with the videos being distributed via DVD or community screenings, or, when appropriate, as part of a larger campaign. As Rick Brannan, the Tribal chairman says, "I'd like Meth addicts to make videos on the dangers of Methamphetamine, or Native kids to share video stories with non-Native students as a way to overcome the racial tension here. This could be a way to empower our people and increase participation. And participation is the very essence of our sovereignty." This tribe, like many communities around the world, needs to look at its overall communications systems, because two-way communications is critical to people's empowerment and to democracy. We hope that the Water Video and Campaign, and the Community Video Unit, will be an impetus for them to make a decision on water that brings prosperity to all tribal members, and that it will be a model for this reservation to address other community issues in the future.