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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07x7c46v>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2000-09-01

DOI

10.17953

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Will Big Trotter Reclaim His Place? The Role of the Wolf in Navajo Tradition

STEVE PAVLIK

The wolf was long an important factor in Navajo life. With the destruction of the wild wolf in the American Southwest, a vital link to the past—and perhaps the future—has been lost to the Navajo people. In recent years, however, an effort has been made to restore wolves to their native habitat. If the wolf recovery program is successful, what effect will it have on the Navajo people? Will the return of the wolf help restore the balance and harmony that once existed?

THE WOLF IN THE SOUTHWEST AND NAVAJO COUNTRY

Sometime shortly after his arrival into the Southwest in 1917, US Forest Service biologist Aldo Leopold participated in the killing of a wolf somewhere in the White Mountains, which stretch across the borderlands of south-central Arizona and New Mexico. Leopold and a number of companions were eating lunch on a high rimrock position overlooking a river when they spotted a female wolf and her six grown pups playing in an open area below. Immediately, the men pulled out their rifles and “with more excitement than accuracy,” began blasting away at the family. When the rifles were empty and the shooting stopped, only the female wolf was down and one pup was seen dragging its leg into a rockslide. Leopold, who would go on to become perhaps the most famous conservationist in American history, described the death of this wolf—and his own personal transformation—in one of the most quoted passages in the literature of wildlife conservation:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her

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and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.¹

The gray wolf, *Canis lupis*, had long been part of the Southwest American landscape—and an integral part of Navajo mythology and culture.² The Leopold incident described above took place during the heyday of the war of extermination against the wolf. With the arrival of cattle ranchers and sheepherders in the 1880s, and the subsequent destruction of the native herbivore species on which the wolves preyed, wolves became a serious threat to the livestock industry. Consequently, a program of wolf extermination was soon initiated by the Predatory Animal and Rodent Control (PARC) branch of the US Biological Survey, predecessor to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Using firearms, traps, poisons, and denning—digging wolf pups out of their dens and clubbing them to death—the professional “wolfers” of PARC were relentless in their efforts to eradicate the wolf. By 1925 the wolf ceased to be a major predator in the Southwest with all resident animals eliminated except for a few holdouts on isolated pockets of land such as the San Carlos, White Mountain, and Jicarilla Apache reservations, and on the Navajo Reservation. By the 1940s the wolf was all but extinct in the Southwest with the last wolves killed in Arizona and New Mexico in the early 1970s. Although documentation is scarce, it is believed that wolves were once relatively abundant on the Defiance Plateau and in the Lukachukai and Chuska mountains of the Navajo Reservation.³ In all probability the last wolf on the Navajo Reservation was killed before 1950.

In 1973 the United States Congress passed the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This law directed the secretary of the interior to develop and implement a recovery plan for species and subspecies of wildlife that were in danger of human-caused extinction. The act also mandated the reintroduction of endangered species when feasible. In 1976 the Mexican wolf, *Canis lupis baileyi*, or the lobo as it was once commonly called, was listed as an endangered species under the ESA. Two years later the entire gray wolf species in North America south of Canada was listed. The listing of the entire species served to initiate efforts to reintroduce wolves to the West.

In 1996 wolves captured in Canada were released in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, and in Montana and central Idaho. Encouraged by the success of this program, plans were made to reintroduce Mexican wolves to the Southwest. In the spring of 1998, three family groups of eleven captive-bred Mexican wolves were released in the White Mountains of Arizona—the site of Aldo Leopold's encounter with a dying wolf almost eighty years earlier. Other family groups would be reintroduced over the next three to five years until the recovery goal of one hundred wolves was sustained through reproduction within the wild population.

Although the return of the wolves has been highly controversial, public opinion surveys have shown overwhelming support for reintroduction programs. Environmental groups view wolf reintroduction as the cornerstone of their efforts to promote biodiversity and restore balance to the natural world.

However, livestock ranchers, hunting organizations, and a number of other special interest groups see no place in the modern world for wolves and have posed stiff opposition to reintroduction.⁴ Regardless of one's position, wolves have certainly re-entered the minds, hearts, and lives of the American public.

One indication of the resurgence of interest in wolves is the proliferation of books and articles written about the animal. A visit to any decent-size bookstore usually reveals an impressive selection of wolf-related publications, most published since 1980. One author has termed the past ten years the "Decade of the Wolf."⁵ Most of these books include some reference, and often at least one or more chapters, regarding wolves and American Indians.

Writers, especially environmental writers, tend to emphasize the special and positive relationship between wolves and this country's Native American inhabitants. In general, the literature reflects on the fact that most American Indian tribes hold the wolf in high regard. For many tribes, the Cheyenne, Sioux, Pawnee, and Nez Perce, to name a few, the wolf is an important figure in their origin stories and is usually portrayed as a powerful being possessing admirable qualities such as courage, strength, wisdom, family devotion, and the ability to work cooperatively with others. Many tribes have wolf clans and some tribes have warrior and hunting societies that associated themselves with the wolf and draw power from this animal. An extensive list could be compiled of Native American warriors, hunters, spiritual leaders, and diplomats who adopted or were given wolf-related names of honor.

One tribe stands in sharp contrast to others regarding views and attitudes toward the wolf: the Navajo. In writing about the relationship of the Navajo to the wolf, some writers, most notably Barry H. Lopez and Robert H. Busch, unfortunately focus on the question of witchcraft.⁶ In doing so I believe these writers are perpetuating a false impression of the relationship that actually existed between that tribe and the wolf. In reality, the wolf, Ma'itsoh, or Big Trotter as he is known to the Navajo, was an important and positive figure in tribal tradition.

One purpose of this article is to provide a deeper analysis of this relationship. The second goal is to provide a close examination of the wolf-witchcraft association and how it came into being. By doing so, I hope to correct what I believe to be a misinterpretation of this issue. Finally, I will offer a few observations and comments regarding the future relationship between the Navajo and the wolf.

Three books have been published in recent years specifically on the Mexican wolf: David E. Brown's, *The Wolf in the Southwest: The Making of an Endangered Species* is the standard work on this subspecies and provides basic background in regard to natural history and especially man's efforts to eradicate the animal.⁷ Brown, however, does not address the topic of the wolf's relationship to Native people in the Southwest. James C. Burbank's *Vanishing Lobo: The Mexican Wolf in the Southwest* does focus more on the nature of the wolf-human relationship and includes excellent chapters on the role played by the wolf in Pueblo and Navajo cultures.⁸ Most recently, Rick Bass has written *The New Wolves: The Return of the Mexican Wolf to the American Southwest*.⁹ As the subtitle suggests, this book documents the early efforts to reintroduce the

Mexican wolf back into its historic range in the Blue Range of the White Mountains. Again, no mention is made about the role of the wolf in Southwest Native American cultures and lifeways.

THE DIVINE WOLF

The people who we now know as the Navajo are a result of the coming together of two traditions: the Athabascan or Apachean hunters who migrated into the Southwest around 1500, and the largely agricultural-based Pueblos with whom the hunters made extensive contact after 1680. What we now recognize as "traditional" Navajo is a syncretism of these two traditions with most religious and ceremonial beliefs, including their emergence stories, actually deriving from the Pueblo side of their heritage. However, the role of Wolf in the Navajo stories originates mostly from the Athabascan hunter tradition. This aspect of the relationship between the wolf and the Navajo has been studied by W. W. Hill and Karl W. Luckert and will be discussed in the next section of this article.¹⁰

In the Navajo emergence story, the earth was first inhabited by Holy People, beings of supernatural power, and some Animal People, who preceded and then coexisted with humans. Anthropologist Gladys A. Reichard summarized that:

The Holy People might well be considered those who, in mythological times, were able to help man in cases where he could not help himself. In those days snakes, birds and other animals could speak and behave like men and to human powers they added supernatural powers. Nowadays they no longer speak but their powers remain for good or evil to man depending on how he receives them and upon the side which they allied themselves in ancient times.¹¹

Wolf, the deity, and wolf, the animal, fall into such categorization. In the beginning he existed as an anthropomorphic figure, a being possessed of considerable supernatural power. Today we see him only in his animal form retaining only a remnant of the power he once held. However, these powers are still considerable. Consequently, wolves are thought (along with bears and coyotes) to be among the so-called dangerous animals in terms of their potential to harm humans. The danger they present is largely in terms of the sickness they can bring to people who have offended them in some way. More will be said about wolf sickness later in this article.

In Father Berard Haile's version of the Upward Moving and Emergence Way myth, as told to him by Gishin Biyé, the Red Underworld is the home of Wolf who lives in a white house in the east. In one of his first appearances in the narrative, Wolf attacks the house of First Man, whose guardians, Wildcat and Puma, catch the arrows he shoots at them. First Man then uses those arrows to kill sixteen Wolf People. In return for First Man restoring life to their slain kin, the Wolf People create four songs for each member restored, a total of sixty-four songs, which they give to First Man. Haile notes that this story explains the presence of wolf songs in Navajo ceremonials.¹²

In another emergence story, again recorded by Haile from Gishin Biyé, a separation of sexes occurred when Wolf, chief of the east, finds his wife to be irresponsible and disrespectful. Because of this he leads the other male beings to the opposite side of a great river to live away from the female beings. In time, however, the two sexes find they need each other. It is Wolf who calls a meeting of the chiefs and proposes a reconciliation. This series of events suggests that Wolf is held in the highest esteem and was considered the leader of the other chiefs who are quick to accept his proposals.¹³

Wolf is also the first to raise the alarm over the omens, which ultimately foretell a great flood brought on by Coyote stealing Water Monster's baby. As the floodwater rises, Wolf, along with Mountain Lion and Bear, help dig a hole through the roof of the Underworld so they can escape into the Upperworld.¹⁴ Upon entering the new world, Wolf continues his role as chief.¹⁵

The other side of Wolf's character is his impatience and short temper. In another emergence story, Wolf becomes angry over the introduction of foods he sees as inferior, including certain plants and salt. In his anger he offends Salt Woman. This story explains why people today take offense at different things.¹⁶

Another origin story, as recorded by Washington Matthews, deserves mention because it draws a comparison between Wolf and his cousin Coyote. In this story, Coyote visits Wolf who buries two arrows with wooden heads in the hot ashes beside his fire, then pulls them out to reveal two fine pieces of meat, which he serves his guest. Later, Wolf visits Coyote, who tries to impress him by attempting the same magical act. However, when Coyote pulls the arrows out of the ashes, he has only burnt wood to show for his efforts.¹⁷ Clearly Wolf and Coyote do not share the same character and abilities.

Wolf's most prominent role in Navajo mythology can be found in the stories associated with the Beadway ceremony and the related Eagle Way ritual. In the version of the Beadway story as told by Miguelito to Reichard, the hero, Scavenger or Holy Boy, wanders off and is buried under a pile of rocks. The Eagles, who have befriended Scavenger, call upon the hunters, Wolf, Mountain Lion, Lynx, and Bobcat, to rescue him. Although the hunters fail in their attempt, Badger eventually recovers his bones. A ceremony is then held to bring him back to life using four feathers from different birds: bald Eagle, Blue Hawk, Yellow Hawk, and Magpie. These feathers are transformed, respectively, into Wolf, Mountain Lion, Beaver, and Otter. When the transformation is complete, Scavenger is restored to life. It is for this reason that the skins of these four animals are used in the Beadway ceremony.¹⁸

Wolf appears several other times in the Beadway story. At one point, in Haile's version, Wolf is chosen as the meal sprinkler and, traveling supernaturally on sunrays, is sent to spread the word of an impending Beadway ceremony.¹⁹ In Reichard's version, Wolf is portrayed as traveling to perform a Beadway himself. In both versions Wolf encounters his friend and fellow hunter, Mountain Lion, who is on a similar mission. Since neither wants to miss the other's sing, they agree that Mountain Lion should postpone his ceremony for one night. To bind this agreement, the two great hunters exchange

quivers. A sandpainting used in Beadway depicts this event, showing Wolf wearing a quiver made of mountain lion skin.

Another sandpainting from Beadway shows the Wolf People joining the Mountain Lion People in a Fire Dance performance. Yet another Beadway sandpainting shows both the Wolf People and the Mountain Lion People dancing while wearing packs of corn on their backs—corn secured by the Hunters through use of their magical powers to plant, cultivate, and harvest the crop, all within minutes, before performing their dance.²⁰

Wolf also plays an important role in another life-restoring origin story associated with the Flintway ceremony. In this story, White Thunder destroys the hero, Holy Young Man. Wolf is one of the deities summoned to help restore him. Wolf, because he did not devour the hero's flesh at the time of his death, is asked to regulate the Flintway method of administering liquid medicine. An accompanying Wolf song is also sung. One such song imitates the growl of Wolf and mentions him four times in which he represents both himself and other animals whose fur and body parts are used in the Flintway ceremony. Dark Wolf represents the bear, White Wolf represents the wolf itself, Yellow Wolf represents the mountain lion, and Glittering Wolf represents all three collectively, the wildcat, or possibly the otter.²¹ The wolf, along with the mountain lion, is one of the key animals whose death blood, tallow, marrow, and menstrual flux are utilized in Flintway.

In looking at the role played by Wolf in the emergence story, and subsequent stories leading up to various ceremonies, it is clear he is a figure of considerable power and prestige. He is highly respected by the other Holy People for his wisdom and powers and is looked to for advice and often given important assignments upon which the welfare of the people depends. Consequently, Wolf must certainly be ranked as one of the important Animal People. Most critically, Wolf appears throughout Navajo mythology as a divine personage who, on the whole, is a positive and beneficial figure to the Navajo people.

WOLF AND THE NAVAJO HUNTER TRADITION

Of his many attributes and abilities, Wolf was formally recognized for his skills as a hunter. It is not surprising, then, that in the stories of the Navajo hunter tradition, Wolf plays a major role. Indeed, the Navajo use the word *naatl'etsoh*—which literally refers to wolves—for all hunters and predators, including man.²²

As noted earlier, the origin of these hunter stories traces back to the Athabaskan period of Navajo prehistory. Luckert, whose work I draw from extensively, credits this period with providing the foundation for Navajo hunting stories, especially regarding the role of animal elders and hunter tutelary. Later contact with the Pueblos, with the consequent incorporation of an emergence mythology, elaborated and enriched the Navajo hunter tradition. This contention is supported by the fact that the Navajo did not arrive at many of the geographical places mentioned in their hunter stories until the late 1700s.²³

In the Deer Hunting Way, as told by Claus Chee Sonny to Luckert, the deer gods themselves provided the divine hunters, Wolf, Mountain Lion, Tiger (Jaguar), Bobcat, and Cat, with the necessary knowledge to hunt them. In time, men appeared and soon acquired this knowledge to pass down through the generations.²⁴ Presumably, the deer gods taught man how to hunt them, but man also acquired his specific knowledge of hunting from the divine predators.

In a second version of the Navajo hunter tradition, as recorded by Luckert from Billie Blackhorse, a definite hierarchy of gods exist who preside over animals: Black God, who ranks highest, Talking God, and Calling God. Since these gods presumably preside over the hunt, they are theoretically the leaders of the *naatl'eetsoh* as well. Blackhorse gave Luckert the impression that these three gods were regarded no differently than other *naatl'eetsoh*. Consequently, Luckert feels that all *naatl'eetsoh* should be called gods. However, it should be noted that the animal gods predate Black God, Talking God, and Calling God. Since Wolf bestowed his mythical name on all hunters, of both animal and human form, he was in the truest sense the highest ranking of the hunter deities.²⁵

The Navajo traditionally distinguished between two types of hunting: ritual and nonritual. The wolf itself, whose body parts are sometimes needed for certain ceremonies, was killed nonritually. Only deer, antelope, bear, and eagles were hunted ritually.²⁶ Perhaps a dozen specific hunting rituals or "ways" existed. These animals were apparently singled out for ritualistic hunting due to their importance in Navajo tradition and lifeway and certainly because of the degree of power they possessed. For example, deer were very powerful and could cause deer sickness called *ajitee*.²⁷ For these ritual hunts, the hunter was obligated to follow certain procedures that regulated all aspects of the hunt, from preparation and planning through breaking camp when the hunt was over. Only by strictly observing ritualistic procedures could the hunter honor the game he hunted, ensure his success, immunize himself against *ajitee*, and cleanse himself of the guilt associated with taking a life. Most of these procedures were used to hunt deer—the most important of the game animals.²⁸

The Wolfway was one of the most popular of the hunting rituals and was primarily used to hunt deer and sometimes elk in the fall, especially from the first of November until the full moon of December. Usually four to ten men made up the hunting party. This party was under the direction of a medicine man or singer who initially called for the hunt and would instruct and lead the hunters throughout the activity.²⁹

The Wolfway hunt began with the participants retiring to a sweathouse. In doing so, they not only purified themselves, but also, through prayer and the recitation of songs, entered the mythic world of preemergence and animal gods, which gave birth to the hunter tradition. Hill states:

The most outstanding feature of the ritual hunt was the complete reversal of the psychology of the participants. Through the hunt, they found release from ordinary restrictions. In everyday life around the hogan, the hunters were normal individuals of the group. They

shunned speaking of death, blood or killing. Their hunting songs could not be sung because of their danger to women, children and sheep. However, as soon as the party left on a hunting trip, the individual behavior underwent a complete change. The hunters did everything possible to emulate the animal in whose way they were hunting: eating from branches, sleeping like animals and using animal cries to call other members of the party. Topics that dealt with blood and death, which, under ordinary circumstances were avoided, were spoken of with the utmost freedom. The hunters were charged to keep their minds on killing and things pertaining to death.³⁰

In summary, the hunters emerged from the sweathouse transformed into the predator whose power they sought. Those who hunted in the Wolfway did not simply imitate the wolf, they assumed the wolf identity. During the hunt they referred to each other as *naatl'etsoh*. They thought, behaved, and even communicated like wolves. In the story behind the Wolfway ritual, Wolf gave permission for hunters to use his voice. If a hunter howled like a wolf four times to the north, he could fend off bad weather. Also, hunters used the howl of the wolf to signal each other. Indeed, it was the only form of communication permissible while on the hunt. As one hunter familiar with hunter tradition stated:

[T]he Wolf's voice may be used in hunting to signal one another if more than one person is hunting together. The wolf gave them that and today those people who know about this make use of it in their hunting. You never talk to another hunter in your own voice. You always imitate the voice of the wolf. If you recognize the importance of this in hunting, you will observe it. If you do not, then you may see deer all around you but you will never hit one.³¹

When a hunter killed a deer, he used the call of the wolf to attract the attention of his fellow hunting partners. Reportedly this tradition traced its original to an earlier story in which the wolf, after running down a deer, gave a call to signal others of his success. "This was to invite everyone to come and eat of his meat, crows, coyotes, etc."³² It is interesting to note that among Chiricahua Apaches, who had their own "wolfway" of hunting, howling was also used to communicate after a kill was made.³³ In addition, both Navajo and Chiricahua warriors used the howl of the wolf to communicate with each other in times of war.³⁴

In most ways, other than those aspects already discussed, the Wolfway did not differ significantly from the other hunting ways. However, one additional element that deserves mention are the songs associated with this hunting ritual. It is thought that at an earlier time, the Athabascan Wolfway had a long litany of songs attached to it. Unfortunately they no longer exist. Nevertheless, the following wolf identification is found in a Stalking Way song and might originally have been a Wolfway song:

He goes out hunting
Big Wolf am I
With black-bow, he goes out hunting
With tail-feathered arrow he goes out hunting
The big male game through its shoulder that I may shoot
It death obeys me.³⁵

The Wolfway hunt ended as it began, with a purifying sweat. Luckert notes that hunting involves the "...dirty business of killing." It was for this reason that the initial sweat was held to turn man into a predator. The closing sweat allowed the hunter to cleanse himself of the death,; to shed his wolfish identity, and to transform himself back into a man. With the hunt over and the transformation completed, Blessingway songs were sung to bring closure to it all.³⁶

THE WOLF AND THE SKINWALKER TRADITION

In 1987 I was an administrator at a high school on the Navajo Reservation. One day our secretary walked into my office to show me the following note from a parent excusing her son for missing school:

To Who It May Concern:

Please excuse my son, Wilson [pseudonym], from being absent on Thursday and Friday, the 6th and 7th. He was very ill and we took him to a medicine man. The medicine man told us that a Skinwalker had witchcrafted him, so we took him to another medicine man so he would be OK.

Mary Yazzie [pseudonym]

This note provides testimony to the Navajo's strong belief in witchcraft and its most popular manifestation—the skinwalker—a human witch who dons the skin of an animal and goes out at night to wreak havoc, destruction, and even death on its human victims. Clyde Kluckhohn, who has written the definitive study on Navajo witchcraft, notes that skinwalkers take the shape of many animals: the bear, mountain lion, fox, owl, or crow, but most commonly, a coyote or a wolf.³⁷ The Navajo word for the skinwalker is *yenaldlooshi*, a term that translates to "it walks on all four feet." Kluckhohn states that he found this word, as well as the Navajo word for wolf, which will be discussed shortly, to be the common colloquial term for *witch*.³⁸ However, Will Tsoie, a Navajo orthodox traditionalist and noted traditional scholar, states that the word *yenaldlooshi* would be used for any form of were-animal, and would not necessarily mean a wolf. If a person said they saw a *yendaldlooshi*, a typical Navajo response, according to Tsoie, might be "What kind did you see?"³⁹ Navajos generally believe that witches are initiated by others of their kind, commonly relatives, in secretive rites usually held in a cave. After putting on the skin of one of the aforementioned creatures, these were-animals then set out to do

their evil deeds. They are said to frequent cemeteries where they dig up the dead, sometimes for the purpose of performing sexual acts with corpses. In addition to necrophilia, skinwalkers also engage in incest and cannibalism. Most commonly, the skinwalker climbs on top of a Navajo hogan at night and drops powder made from the ground bones of dead children down the smoke hole. This powder causes its victims misfortune, illness, and death.

The Navajo skinwalker phenomenon is well known to the general public. In large part this is due to popular fiction writers, especially Tony Hillerman, who wrote a best-selling murder mystery entitled *Skinwalker* in 1986.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, some environmental writers have chosen to single out the relationship of wolves to skinwalkers and witchcraft as their primary focus regarding the role of the wolf in Navajo culture. Two such examples deserve special mention.

In his classic work *Of Wolves and Men*, Barry Holstun Lopez dedicated three chapters to documenting the close, special, and often sacred, relationship that existed between Native Americans and the wolf. The Nunamiut, Naskapi, Pawnee, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Bella Coola, Sioux, Arapaho, Cherokee, Nez Perce, Arikara, Crow, Ahtna, Kwakiutl, Blackfoot, Nootka, Quillayute, and Makah are all tribes Lopez discusses or mentions for their positive attitude toward the wolf. Only the Navajos are singled out as a contrast. Lopez writes: "Other tribes, notably the Navajo, feared wolves as human witches in wolves' clothing. The Navajo word for wolf, *Mai-coh* is a synonym for witch."⁴¹

Another writer, Robert H. Busch, in his otherwise excellent *The Wolf Almanac*, states: "Almost unique in North American Indian wolf mythology is the Navajo werewolf myth. The Navajo word for wolf, *mai-coh*, means witch."⁴² Both books are outstanding publications and, along with L. David Mech's *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*,⁴³ probably stand as the three most popular books written about wolves. It is unfortunate that the information they give on Navajos and wolves is so scant. Moreover, the distinction they give for *mai-coh*, or more correctly *ma'ütsoh*, is inaccurate and misleading.

The Navajo name for coyote is *ma'ü*, and the wolf is called *ma'ütsoh*, or simply "large coyote." The origin of this word is probably *ma'i*, an Apachean term for "animal." For example, in the Chiricahua Apache language the word for coyote is *mbai* and the wolf is called *mbai'tso*. That this Athabascan or Apachean term extends to all animals can be seen in the Chiricahua word for lizard, *mba'ishoi*.⁴⁴ None of these words in themselves have anything to do with witches.

In one version of the Navajo creation stories, Aileen O'Bryan states that First Man and First Woman named the Wolf *ma'ütsoh*.⁴⁵ According to this version, Wolf had stolen something and, although a chief, would from that time be called *ma'ütsoh*, the "big wanderer," because he now had to "travel far and wide over the face of the earth." O'Bryan offers no explanation as to the exact origin of the term but, again, no inference is made about werewolves or witchcraft.

The verbal concept of the wolf as Big Trotter comes from the mythical name for Wolf as used in ceremonies: *naall'eetsoh*. For this reason *naall'eetsoh*

is usually considered the ceremonial or sacred name for the wolf. This term brings together the words *nadleeh*, which means “to become or revert to,” and *tl’eeh* which translates to “trots.” *Naatl’eesoh* thus translates to “big one who becomes a trotter,” “big one who trots,” or simply “big trotter.”⁴⁶ Again there is no inference of werewolves or witchcraft in this term.

Interestingly, Gladys A. Reichard, in her classic 1950 study, *Navajo Religion: A Study in Symbolism*, does make such a connection. In describing the ceremonial usage of words, she writes:

The special terms of one chant may differ from those of another; all are not necessarily understood by every singer. In one chant the names of characters may be lay terms; in another, they may be completely or partly changed. For instance, the ordinary name for ‘wolf’ is ‘large coyote,’ but ceremonially he may be called ‘large-one-who-trots-like-a-person,’ *doubtless a reference to the werewolf.*⁴⁷

It is difficult to determine how Reichard came to her conclusion that “large one who trots,” refers to a werewolf. To anyone who has ever seen the long-legged, mile-eating gait of a wolf the term *trot* comes quickly to mind. I am confident the Navajo, who were keen observers of the natural world and tended to relate what they witnessed in a highly descriptive manner, were simply describing and naming the wolf as they saw him. In the Navajo language he was *ma’iitsoh*, big coyote. In Navajo ceremonies he was *naatl’eesoh*, the big trotting animal-god.

How then did the wolf become associated with witchcraft? What is the origin of the Navajo werewolf tradition? Unfortunately no scholar or writer has yet addressed these questions.

The belief in witches and witchcraft is almost universal, and was certainly common among most Indian tribes. In Navajo culture, witchcraft goes back to the earliest times. The most commonly accepted belief is that Navajo witchcraft traces back to the emergence stories and, specifically, to First Man and First Woman.⁴⁸ Another view is that witchcraft originated with Coyote.⁴⁹ The association between Coyote and witchcraft might also explain what I believe to be the much later association of the wolf with witchcraft. Wolf and Coyote were traditionally viewed as two very different deities, especially in regard to their character and the way they used their powers. This diametric view of Wolf and Coyote carried over to their animal counterparts. However, this distinction became blurred in later times when Navajo life turned toward livestock and farming and away from hunting and its traditions. As a consequence of this move the wolf came under attack, both physically and in thought. In time, almost all traditional knowledge of the animal was lost. At that point, the wolf, now extinct in Navajo country, was remembered and viewed simply as “big coyote.”

The Athasbascans who entered the Southwest undoubtedly brought with them their own set of witchcraft beliefs. Moreover, as hunters who ritually transformed themselves into predators, they probably recognized that a fine line existed between humanity and the rest of the natural animal world. It is

exactly for this reason—namely that this fine line needed to be maintained at all costs—that I believe the Navajo concept of were-animals, and specifically werewolves, does not trace its origin to the Athabascan hunter tradition. Evidence for this view can be seen in that other southern Athabascans, various Apache tribes, possess strong beliefs in witchcraft but have no werewolf tradition. For example, the Western Apaches, who are closest to the Navajo in terms of shared traits, including similarities in witchcraft beliefs, have no werewolf tradition.⁵⁰

Luckert believes what he calls the “defamation” of the divine predators, such as Wolf, began when the Athabascan hunting culture came into contact and consequent conflict with the agriculture-based Pueblos. Luckert notes “all hunter gods eventually suffer defamation if their human proteges cease to be hunters and if they learn to answer to different types of gods.”⁵¹ After the Athabascan-Pueblo merger, and the subsequent transformation into the people we now know as Navajo, a new worldview emerged. An accompanying religious and ceremonial system, one that was more a product of an agricultural rather than a hunting way of life, emerged. I do not believe, however, that this alone explains the defamation of certain Navajo animal gods, especially the wolf. Nor does it explain the association of the wolf with witchcraft. The Pueblos, like most tribes, tended to view animals rather favorably. Wolf, in particular, played an important and positive role in many Pueblo stories. He was the only canid, for example, to be considered one of the Beast Gods. He was the Beast God of the East, playing the role of warrior, guardian, and healer. Most Pueblos also had hunting societies whose members drew their powers through association with the wolf.⁵² Since hunting societies remained strong well into the 1900s, it can be assumed that the Pueblos with whom the Navajos made contact three and four centuries earlier, had little direct influence in defaming the divine predators of the Athabascans. Indeed, the knowledge of Pueblo hunters may have enriched, at least initially, the stories and rituals associated with the Navajo hunter tradition.

Pueblo mythology contains many witch-related stories. Animal transformations, which may or may not be associated with witchcraft, usually involve Coyote and are central themes in Pueblo stories. It is interesting to note that among some Pueblos witchcraft is believed to have begun with Coyote, which is similar to a version of Navajo witchcraft origin mentioned earlier in this article. For example, in one Tewa tale Coyote married Yellow Corn Girl and taught her how to transform herself into a wolf by jumping through a hoop. Before this mythical event took place, the Tewa say that there were no witches.⁵³ Other Pueblo stories credit witches with transforming into animals and prowling cemeteries to rob graves of their possessions and corpses.⁵⁴

In summary, it seems highly probable that the Navajo skinwalker tradition came at least in part, from a Pueblo origin. But what about wolf defamation? The most likely initial source for this seems to be Christianity passed through the Pueblos to the Navajo.

Parsons states that while the precontact Pueblos undoubtedly possessed their own “black magic,” such traditional Native beliefs and practices, including wearing animal skins and taking on powers associated with these animals,

were certainly “enriched by Spanish witchcraft theory.”⁵⁵ Spanish witchcraft beliefs, founded on the Christian tradition, included animal transformation. Moreover, Christianity, in contrast to most Native American religions, has long associated particular animals (snakes, bats, owls, lions, and wolves) with evil. Schaafsma reports finding Spanish crosses carved on boulders in the West Mesa area near Albuquerque, New Mexico, in association with Tewa rock art images of mountain lions and snakes.⁵⁶ This, along with written documentation, reveals Spanish attempts to exorcise, or at least neutralize, what they perceived to be demonic symbols. Without doubt the Spanish transferred their fear (and defamation) of certain animals to the Pueblos. This attitude might have then been passed from the Pueblos to the Navajo.

Will Tsosie, a Navajo traditionalist, sees a later, more direct connection. Since the Navajo wore animal skins as hunting disguises and for personal adornment well into the present century with no apparent negative associations, he believes it is more likely that wolf defamation and the skinwalker tradition is a twentieth-century response to Christian missionary activity among his own people.⁵⁷

Elsewhere I have written about the history, development, and impact of Christianity on the Navajo people.⁵⁸ For the purposes of this paper it is enough to say that missionary work among the Navajo began in 1868, increased in intensity after 1912, but did not really take hold until the 1940s. Early missionary efforts were made by various Protestant churches and were characterized largely by their attempts to discredit, condemn, and suppress traditional culture and religion. By the 1930s, the Native American Church (NAC), a pan-Indian religious movement based on the use of peyote and incorporating elements of Christianity, began to attract large numbers of Navajo followers. Alarmed by what they perceived to be a threat to their traditional lifestyle, the Navajo Tribal Council banned the use of peyote from 1940 to 1967. Despite such obstacles, the NAC increased in popularity to become the dominant religion on the Navajo Reservation with perhaps as many as 70 percent of tribal members involved to some degree in peyotism. Today most Navajo engage in multiple affiliation; that is, they belong to a primary religion, and also practice a second and often a third religion. Most often the NAC serves as the primary religious affiliation, with members also attending Christian church services, or perhaps, traditional ceremonies. In addition, NAC peyote meetings may incorporate elements of traditional Navajo beliefs. For the most part there are few orthodox traditionalists—individuals who strictly adhere to the original teachings and ceremonial practices associated with the Holy People—left today on the Navajo Reservation. The new traditionalism now prevalent is far removed from the knowledge and values once passed down through the generations from the emergence stories and the Navajo hunter tradition. Along the way, much has been lost to time, including, I believe, the sacred knowledge, understanding, and respect for animals like the wolf.

THE FUTURE OF WOLVES IN NAVAJO COUNTRY

A 1908 survey conducted in the Chuska Mountains of the Navajo Reservation noted that "wolf tracks were found common in the trails over the tops of mountains where most of the cattle and great numbers of Navajo sheep ranged during the summer. Evidently they were thriving there unmolested by the Indians and with an abundance of food."⁵⁹ However, this situation soon changed as efforts were made to exterminate predators on tribal lands. It is difficult to document this event because most written records have been lost to time. The pattern, however, seems to generally have followed what was then taking place throughout the American West. Market hunting, carried out to satisfy the needs of border towns along the Santa Fe Railroad, reduced the deer population to less than one hundred on the entire reservation. With the deer gone, predators were forced to predate Navajo livestock, especially sheep. As both the human and livestock populations grew, conflicts with predators increased. Predators were a threat to Navajo livelihood. It was a threat that had to be eliminated. PARC hunters, with the support of the Navajo tribe, initiated a serious predator control program on the reservation. This soon resulted in the extermination of wolves and grizzly bears. Black bears, mountain lions, and coyotes were also hunted relentlessly.

The purposeful destruction of predators was not without its price. The coyote was hunted because of his predatory raids against sheep and because of his association with witchcraft. Luckert noted so many coyotes were killed in the Black Mesa area in the 1940s that an epidemic of "coyote sickness" broke out in the area, a problem serious enough to create an increased demand for medicine men to perform the Coyoteway healing ceremony. Luckert's Navajo consultant explained the situation in the following manner:

When a Coyote person is shot and left to die, his last spasms and twitchings, as they suddenly cease in the animal person, leap onto the killer. This happens most easily if somehow in the process of killing the hunter has eye contact with his victim—Coyote continues to recognize and the haunt the offender. But this can also happen through physical contact with the dead animal's body or even with the decayed remains of a Coyote person. And, in this regard, no shepherd who strolls through the sagebrush pastures can be sure of his personal immunity. Killing a Coyote person means offending him. The symptoms of the animal's suffering which are thrown onto the offender continue as a sort of nervous malfunction, a shaking of the head, hands or of the entire body.⁶⁰

Coyote sickness, and related wolf sickness (the two are actually the same) can be remedied through the same Coyoteway ceremony. These illnesses are not caused by the animal but by the transgressions of man. It is a sickness caused when man shows disrespect toward one of the animal people. In a sense, it is an example of defamation coming full-cycle back to the offender.

In Navajo thought, at least the way it has been taught to me, no animal is inherently good or bad. Like man, other beings with whom we share this

earth, including the wolf, generally go about their lives in a manner ordained by the Creator and other Holy People. Over the course of time, however, and for whatever reasons, Navajo attitudes toward the natural world, and particularly toward some animals, have changed. Once, the howl of a wolf or the call of an owl was interpreted as a warning sent from a more powerful but benevolent being. It was a warning to be heeded. With the loss of knowledge and change in attitude, these same howls and calls came to be interpreted as omens of evil and sounds to be feared.

The howl of wolves can still be heard echoing in the red rock canyons of Navajo country. The source of this sound, however, is not the beautiful Chuska or Lukachukai Mountains, but the confines of the Navajo Nation Zoological Park in Window Rock. For the past ten years the tribal zoo has been the home to Mexican wolves, the most endangered of the gray wolf species. These animals—there are two females at the zoo today—are the descendants of two of the last wild Mexican wolves known to have existed in the Southwest: a male live-trapped near Tumacacori, Arizona in 1959, and a female captured in Sonora, Mexico two years later. Together this breeding pair served as the nucleus of what is known as the Ghost Ranch Lineage. Initially, some question existed regarding the genetic purity of this bloodline.⁶¹ However, subsequent DNA testing verified the status of this bloodline and today the Ghost Ranch descendants are one of only three DNA-certified genetically pure lines of Mexican wolves in existence. In all, there are only about 180 Mexican wolves on earth. With the exception of the animals that have been reintroduced in the White Mountains, there are no other Mexican wolves left in the wild, either in Mexico or the United States.

The Navajo Nation Zoo is one of thirty zoological parks in the world that has Mexican wolves. More importantly, it is one of only a handful of zoos approved as a breeding facility for the purpose of the reintroduction of Mexican Wolves into their native habitat. Over the years the Navajo Nation Zoo, like other zoos throughout the world, has been criticized for keeping wild animals locked in pens. Some tribal members have expressed their concerns that zoos are not consistent with Navajo cultural values. On 26 December 1998, two Navajo deities, or Holy People, reportedly visited a family in the remote community of Rocky Ridge. Included in their message to the Navajo people was a denouncement of the imprisonment of sacred animals in the zoo. Some tribal leaders called for an immediate release of all of zoo animals back into the wild. Zoo supporters countered that to do so would mean certain death for the animals. In the end, Navajo Nation President Kelsey Begaye, in part due to the large number of letters sent to him by Navajo children, elected to keep the facility open.⁶²

It is not one of my goals in this paper to debate the merits or cultural appropriateness of zoos. However, it is quite clear that the future of the Mexican wolf lies in the hands of captive breeding populations like those held at the Navajo Nation facility. For this reason I will close this paper with personal hope that the Navajo people support the efforts now underway to restore the Mexican wolf to its historic Southwest habitat. As demonstrated in this paper, Wolf has long been an integral and positive part of Navajo life. The

Navajo people are poorer without him. While the day will never come when wolves again roam freely through the Navajo mountains, it is important that their physical and spiritual presence remain for the Navajo people to draw upon.

Will Tsosie best summarized the importance of the wolf to the Navajo, and indeed to us all, when he stated:

Wolves are the most misunderstood creature in the Navajo world. People fear what they do not know. It is sad to think that we have the capability to destroy an entire species of fellow beings—the “ones who trot people.” We, as humans, are perhaps not that far behind. Maybe this is a prelude of what is to come. Maybe we are orchestrating our own demise.⁶³

The foundation of Navajo culture has been the maintenance of harmony with all life. But their harmony with the wolf has been destroyed. Support of the Mexican wolf program provides the Navajo people with an opportunity to correct the defamations of the past and, in doing so, restore the harmony that once existed. Only when this is done will Big Trotter reclaim his rightful place in the minds and hearts of the Navajo people.

NOTES

This paper was originally presented at the Eleventh Navajo Studies Conference held 23 October 1998, at Window Rock, Arizona. I wish to extend a note of appreciation to a number of people who helped give me the information and insight to make this paper possible: author Dave Brown; Kathleen McCoy and Rick Winslow of the Navajo Nation Department of Game and Fish who were kind enough to discuss with me their ideas on the historical occurrence of the Mexican Wolf in Navajo Country; Bobbie Holaday of Preserve Arizona Wolves; Peter Siminski of the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum; and Lolene Hathaway of the Navajo Nation Zoological Park, who provided information on the history and status of the Mexican wolves that are being kept at that tribal facility. Finally, I wish to thank my friend and colleague Will Tsosie, who again helped me find my way through the complexities of Navajo traditional thought and lifeway. As always, I alone assume responsibility for the content and analysis offered in this paper.

1. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 130.

2. Originally, there were twenty-four recognized subspecies of the gray wolf, *Canis lupis*, inhabiting North America. The subspecies that once inhabited what is today the Navajo Reservation, *C. l. youngi* is now extinct. Considering the historic range of the early Navajo people, tribal members undoubtedly encountered at least two other subspecies, *C. l. mogollonensis*—also extinct—and *C. l. baileyi*, the Mexican wolf.

3. David E. Brown, *The Wolf in the Southwest: The Making of an Endangered Species* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983), 24. See also Vernon Bailey, *Mammals of New Mexico* (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Biological Survey, 1931), 310.

4. Three Apache tribes, the White Mountain, San Carlos, and Mescalero, also officially opposed introduction of the Mexican Wolf. While it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss in depth the reintroduction program, it should be noted that the first year of the project experienced major problems and setbacks. Of the eleven wolves initially released, only two remain free. At least five were shot and killed, some deliberately by individuals out to sabotage the reintroduction effort. Several wolves exhibited undesirable traits, mostly the tendency to roam too far afield or too close to human habitation, and were consequently recaptured. However, the program continues with additional animals being released and several litters of young being born in the wild. As of this writing, there are almost thirty Mexican wolves living wild in the White Mountains recovery area. For additional information on the Mexican Wolf Reintroduction Program and Apache attitudes toward wolves and the reintroduction program, see Steve Pavlik, "San Carlos and White Mountain Apache Attitudes Toward the Reintroduction Wolf to Its Historic Range in the American Southwest," *Wicazo sa Review* 14 (1999): 129-145.

5. John A. Murray, ed., *Out Among the Wolves: Contemporary Writings on the Wolf* (Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books, 1993), 11.

6. Barry H. Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978); and Robert H. Busch, *The Wolf Almanac* (New York: The Lyons Press, 1995).

7. Brown, *The Wolf in the Southwest*.

8. James C. Burbank, *Vanishing Lobo: The Mexican Wolf and the Southwest* (Boulder: Johnson Publishing Company, 1990).

9. Rick Bass, *The New Wolves: The Return of the Mexican Wolf to the American Southwest* (New York: The Lyons Press, 1998).

10. W. W. Hill, *The Agricultural and Hunting Methods of the Navaho Indians* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Publications in Anthropology no. 18, 1938); Karl W. Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975).

11. Gladys A. Reichard, *Navajo Medicine Man Sandpaintings* (1939; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 16.

12. Father Berard Haile, *The Upward Moving and Emergence Way* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 11-12.

13. *Ibid.*, 39-43; 93-94. It should be noted that in other versions of this story, it is First Man, not wolf, who is wronged by his wife and leads the male beings in separating from the female.

14. *Ibid.*, 111, 116-117. See also Franciscan Fathers, *An Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (St. Michael's, Ariz.: St. Michael's Press, 1910), 351.

15. Haile, *The Upward Moving and Emergence Way*, 128.

16. *Ibid.*, 144.

17. Washington Matthews, *Navajo Legends* (1897; reprint, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1944), 87-88.

18. Reichard, *Navajo Medicine Man Sandpaintings*, 32.

19. Haile, *The Upward Moving and Emergence Way*, 90.

20. Reichard, *Navajo Medicine Man Sandpaintings*, 34-35, Plate VII.

21. Father Berard Haile, *Origin Legend of the Navaho Flintway* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943) 53-54.

22. Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition*, 169.

23. *Ibid.*, 11-13.

24. Ibid., 18.
25. Ibid., 172–175.
26. Hill, *Agricultural and Hunting Methods*, 97.
27. Karl W. Luckert, *A Navajo Bringing Home Ceremony: The Claus Chee Sonny Version of the Deerway Ajílee* (Flagstaff: Museum of Northern Arizona Press, 1978), 30.
28. See Francis H. Elmore, "The Deer and His Importance to the Navajo," *El Palacio* 60 (1953): 371–384.
29. Hill, *Agricultural and Hunting Methods*, 97, 101.
30. Ibid., 98.
31. Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition*, 51.
32. Hill, *Agricultural and Hunting Methods*, 109.
33. Morris E. Opler, *An Apache Life-Way: The Economic, Social, and Religious Institutions of the Chiricahua Indians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), 320.
34. W. W. Hill, *Navaho Warfare* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Publications in Anthropology no. 5, 1936), 36; Opler, *An Apache Life-Way*, 347.
35. Hill, *Agricultural and Hunting Methods*, 136.
36. Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition*, 142–146.
37. Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944), 25–28.
38. Ibid., 26.
39. Will Tsosie, interview by Steve Pavlik, Tsaile, Arizona, 26 September 1999.
40. Tony Hillerman, *Skinwalkers* (New York: Harpers and Row Publishers, 1986).
41. Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men*, 123.
42. Busch, *The Wolf Almanac*, 99. The language used by Lopez and Busch is strikingly similar in content and wording. It is interesting, however, that in Lopez's book *mai-coh* is a synonym for wolf, whereas in Busch's publication *mai-coh* is said to mean wolf, especially since it appears from his bibliography that Busch's source for his Navajo werewolf comment must be Lopez. In turn, Lopez cites two sources for his Navajo werewolf information: William Morgan, *Human Wolves Among the Navajo* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Publication in Anthropology no. 11, 1936)—the single most important but largely anecdotal work on the topic—and a special edition of *El Palacio* (1974) dealing with Southwest witchcraft and includes an uncredited article on Navajo witchcraft. However, neither of these sources use the term *mai-coh* for wolf. This word seems to be first used by Kluckhohn (1944) in *Navaho Witchcraft* (see note 37). I can only assume that Lopez also used this work but did not include it in his bibliography.
43. David L. Mech, *The Wolf: The Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970).
44. Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition*, 7.
45. Aileen O'Bryan, *The Dine: Origin Myths of the Navaho Indians* (Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 63, 1956), 33–34.
46. Fathers, *Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language*, 140–141, 175.
47. Gladys A. Reichard, *Navajo Religion: A Study in Symbolism* (1950; reprint, New York: Pantheon Press, 1950), 268. Author's emphasis.
48. Kluckhohn, *Navajo Witchcraft*, 25.
49. O'Bryan, *Origin Myths of the Navaho Indians*, 3.
50. Keith Basso, *Western Apache Witchcraft* (Tucson: University of Arizona Anthropological Paper 1, 1969), 34.
51. Karl W. Luckert, *Coyoteway: A Navajo Healing Ceremonial* (Tucson: University of

Arizona Press, 1979), 10.

52. Hamilton Tyler, *Pueblo Animals and Myths* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 154–175; Elsie Clews Parson, *Pueblo Indian Religion, Vol. I* (1939; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1939), 187.

53. Elise Clew Parsons, "Witchcraft Among the Pueblos: Indian or Spanish," *Man* 27 (1927): 1226–1227.

54. Parsons, *Pueblo Religion Vol. I*, 106, 136.

55. Parsons, *Witchcraft Among the Pueblos*, 128.

56. Polly Schaafsma, *Rock Art in New Mexico* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1992), 149.

57. Will Tsoie, interview.

58. Steve Pavlik, "Navajo Christianity: Historical Origins and Modern Trends," *Wicazo sa Review* 12 (1996): 43–58; Steve Pavlik, "The Role of Christianity and Church in Contemporary Navajo Society," in *A Good Cherokee, A Good Anthropologist: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Thomas*, ed. Steve Pavlik (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1997), 189–200.

59. Bailey, *Mammals of New Mexico*, 310.

60. Luckert, *Coyoteway: A Navajo Healing Ceremonial*, 8–9.

61. Peter Steinhart, *The Company of Wolves* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 202–206, 209–210.

62. Bill Donovan, "Navajos May Close Zoo," *Arizona Republic*, 8 January 8, 1999, 21; Bill Donovan, "Navajos Weigh Options to Keep Tribal Zoo Open," *Arizona Republic*, 1 February 1, 1999, 1; Catherine C. Robbins, "Tradition Clashes With Some Needs to Endanger Zoo," *Gallup Independent*, 30 March 30, 1999, 2.

63. Will Tsoie, interview by Steve Pavlik, Tsaile, Arizona, 30 July 1999.