

The Western Apache Home: Landscape Management and Failing Ecosystems

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Abstract—*The traditional Western Apache home lies largely within the Madrean Archipelago. The natural resources of the region make up the basis of the Apache home and culture. Profound landscape changes in the region have occurred over the past 150 years. A survey of traditional Western Apache place names documents many of these changes. An analysis of the history and Apache places in the Wheatfields area in southeastern Arizona illustrates the loss of Apache natural resources. Traditional Apache elders attribute the loss of these resources to disrespectful land management practices, resulting in direct harm to Apache communities.*

Introduction

For the past thirteen years the authors have worked extensively with Apache elders from the San Carlos Apache Tribe, the White Mountain Apache Tribe, the Tonto Apache Tribe, and the Yavapai-Apache Nation. Much of this work has centered on gathering traditional Apache information about the natural world, including field work documenting traditional place names and plant uses. The Apache information included in this paper comes from Apache elders interviewed during the course of this work.

The traditional Western Apache home encompasses a large area of central and eastern Arizona (see figure 1). Trade, warfare, and ceremonial practices required occasional trips to the Rio Grande and east, Mexico, the Gulf of California, the coast of southern California, and the Grand Canyon northward. Apaches have lived in this region for centuries, and traditional knowledge of this region is profound in its depth and specificity. Many Apache songs and stories describe specific natural elements and processes in this region from the time before humans existed. Prior to the establishment of the reservations, Apaches depended totally on the natural resources of this region for their livelihood.

Native Americans have lived in this region for thousands of years, exploiting resources to survive. Apaches did not live in a pristine landscape, unaltered by human hands. However, Apaches consciously limited their impact on the land in pre-reservation times, attempting to live within traditional parameters governing their own population size, harvesting of wild resources, and agricultural techniques. Apaches traditionally understood the negative consequences of living beyond these traditional parameters, and misusing natural resources.

The ecosystems of the Western Apache homeland have suffered profound changes since Inah (Europeans or Euro-Americans) arrived in the 1820s to trap beaver (Dobyns 1981),

and especially after 1870 as Inah agricultural and mining practices altered the natural world in a very short period of time. Numerous authors have described the environmental impacts of this period including Dobyns (1981), Bahre (1991, 1995, among others), and Pyne (1982). Apache elders describe this change as a series of speedy and violent transformations: commons changing into restricted lands, wetlands changing to drylands, water sources diminishing or disappearing altogether, the loss of topsoil in general, transformation of grasslands into woodlands or shrublands, transformation of open forests to choked forests, non-native plants and humans displacing natives, and natural places transformed into industrial or urban sites. Elders see this change in terms of lost access to cultural resources, as the pre-Inah ecosystems have all but collapsed.

The ongoing Western Apache Place Names Project has to date identified over one thousand Apache place names within central and eastern Arizona (see figure 1). These names reflect a wealth of knowledge of the region, including descriptions of the land prior to Inah activities and settlement. Over 50 places have been documented so far whose traditional names no longer aptly describe the land due to significant alteration or destruction by Inah activities. For example, *Ch'ich'iił B'idaagoteeł* ("Emory Oak Flat"), an important traditional acorn-gathering area, is now the site of the intersection of Highways 87 and 260, shopping centers, and fast-food in Payson, Arizona. *Teeł H'ach'77* ("Row of Red Cattails") was a wetlands with a dense of growth of traditional plants on the eastern boundary of the San Carlos Reservation, and has now been pumped dry by off-Reservation farmers and urban users. *T'ich'og7* ("Yellow Water Spring") is a spring that feeds Pinto Creek north of Superior, Arizona, next to a traditional Danceground, and will soon be in the middle of the Carlota Copper Company's planned open-pit mine.

The land-altering activities of the last 130 years, and their effects on Apache resources, are easily visible in the region of Wheatfields, along Pinal Creek just west of Globe, Arizona

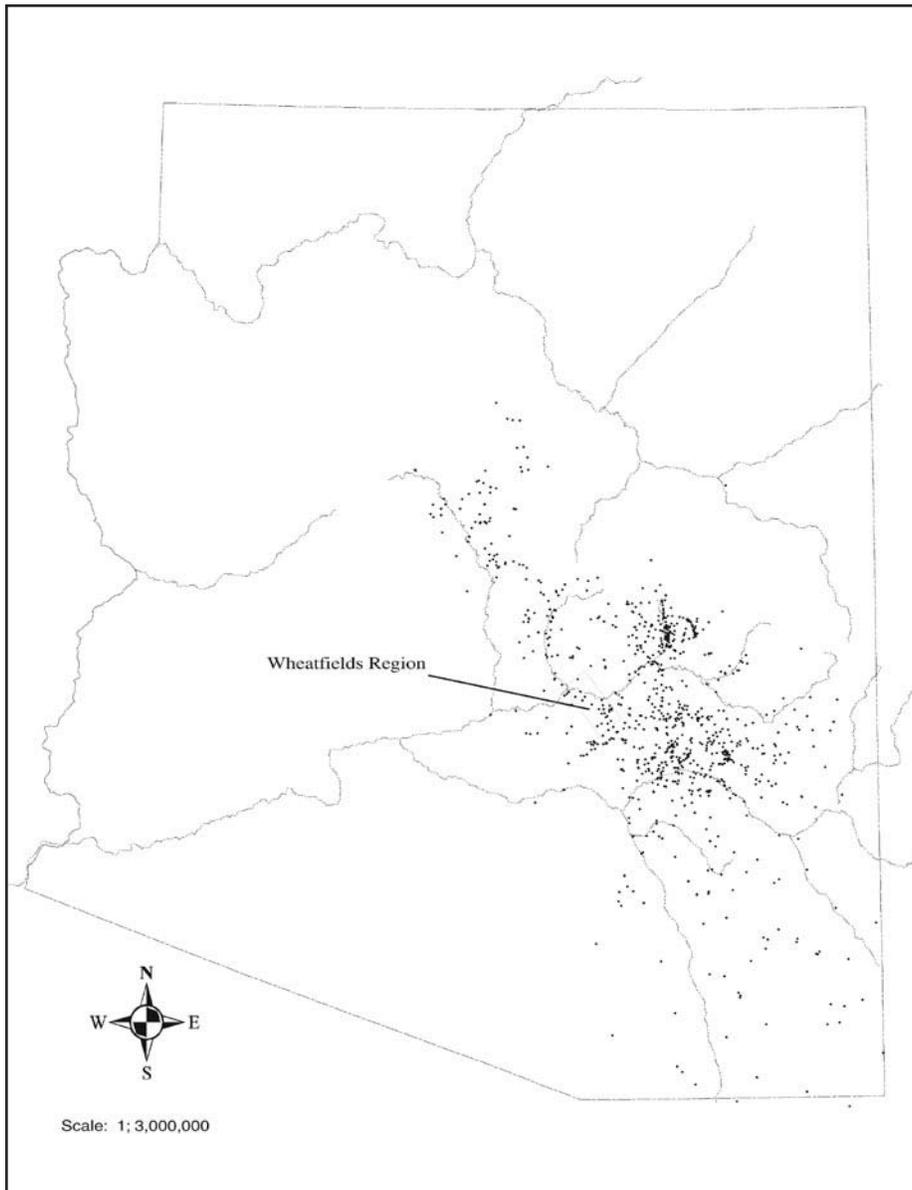


Figure 1—Western Apache Place Names in Arizona.

(see figure 2). This region, known as *T'is Tseba* (“Gray Cottonwood Growths”), is a traditional homeland, permanent camp, and farming area for the *K'is Chint'adn* (“Alders Jutting out People”), *Ts8 Ts4h4skidn* (“Trees on a Hilltop People”), *Dzif Likeslan* (“Mountains in a Row People”), *Tsebnast'it* (“Rock Encircled People”), and the *Hak2iy4* (“Inah Upwards”) clans in *T'is Tseban* (the Pinal Band) country. Apaches lived in *T'is Tseba* in significant numbers well into the 1930s, even though most Apaches had been moved onto the Reservation by then.

Situated at about 3,100 feet, the riparian area still consists of some cottonwood, willow, elderberry. The immediate surrounding flats are thick with mesquite and catclaw, or cleared farmland, home sites, or industrial sites. The uplands, reaching 5,000 feet in elevation, range from upper Sonoran scrub, to desert grasslands, and juniper, pinyon, oak woodlands, and chaparral.

According to Apache elders from the 1930s, the *T'is Tseba* of centuries ago was “...vacant and never before occupied by

Apache. Place so beautiful that [the *Hak2iy4* clan moved there in entirety... (Goodwin, 1942)”. Within the last ten years, elders in their eighties and nineties have remembered the *T'is Tseba* of their youth and of their elder’s memories, describing the pre-settlement landscape in some detail. Pinal Creek flowed year round, with a relatively narrow and deep channel. The banks were covered with grass, and the crowns of tall cottonwoods and willows on both sides of the creek connected to form a closed canopy.

The flats on either side of the creek were generally open and grassy with some mesquites, cottonwoods, burro brush, graythorn, and other shrubs. The lower slopes on either side of Pinto Creek were composed of Sonoran scrub species, but quite open with almost all of the surface covered with grass. The woodlands were open and covered with grass, with occasional pinyon, junipers, and oaks.

Most prominent in elder’s memories is the former abundance of water. Not only was Pinal Creek perennial, but so were numerous springs in the region. Most of these springs

ran strong, and supported luxuriant growth at their sources, and along the creeks that ran from them.

The Tíis Tseba region was rich and varied in Apache resources, due to its abundance of water and varied ecosystems. The flats along Pinal Creek supported farms where Apaches grew traditional crops of corn and squash. The surrounding country supported numerous wild plants that provided traditional food, and all the elements of material culture. The many water sources supported plentiful wild game. One elder estimated that the Tíis Tseba region traditionally supported an Apache community of a few hundred (Elder X, 2004). This same elder referred to the region of that time as “an Apache paradise.” Although popular Inah writing has made much of Apaches as warriors and raiders, most of their traditional subsistence was owed to agriculture and wild food harvesting. Buskirk (1986) estimated that the traditional diet of many Western Apache groups was comprised of up to 90-100 % wild and agricultural foods, with only the smallest portion made up of products obtained in raids.

In the mid-1860s wars with Inah began in earnest, and by the early 1870s most of the Western Apaches had been subdued by the U.S. Army and concentrated on reservations. The San Carlos Reservation was established in 1872, and Tíis Tseba was originally included in the Reservation. As Inah found copper, gold, and silver ores, and good grazing lands, on and off the Reservation, large tracts of the Reservation, including Tíis Tseba were placed back into the public domain. A detailed history of the Apache wars, the establishment of the reservations, and the removal of lands from the Reservation, as they pertain to Tíis Tseba can be found in Newton (1999).

Extensive ranching and mining operations in the Tíis Tseba and Globe/Miami regions began in the early 1870s. As an Apache elder from Tíis Tseba told us, “Those ranchers, they already had it figured out with the Army. The Army would come in, and the ranchers would start up right away” (Elder X, 2004). To support the fast-growing population of the area, non-Apache farms were established in the flats throughout Tíis Tseba. The combination of ranching, mining, and agriculture very quickly impacted Apache resources and access in the region, and in twenty years greatly altered the landscape.

Elders have told us that by the beginning of the Twentieth century Pinal Creek started to flood more frequently and erode more rapidly, greatly widening the creek’s course. By the 1910s or 1920s, Pinal Creek flowed only with the rains. By this time cattle had cleared much of top layer of vegetation and topsoil over most of the hills, and there was less grass to be found. Most importantly in the memories of elders was the loss of many of the springs by the 1910s. As they recall, the copper mines established a water delivery system for the mines that effectively dried up the major springs in the area, and further diminished the flow in Pinal Creek. Other springs had been dynamited in an attempt to increase flow, but had resulted in killing the springs.

An examination of Apache places in the Tíis Tseba region (see figure 2) clearly illustrates the change of the landscape as well as the loss of Apache resources. Na.ʔe [iD ana ka.ɣ4 (“Ducks Waddle Around”) was, in the early part of the last century, a wetland next to Pinal Creek with standing water

year-round. A favorite spot to cool off and swim, it was known as a watering hole for animals and a source for important traditional plants. It was pumped dry by the mines in the teens, and the wetlands disappeared. Today a sewage treatment facility stands on this site. Similarly Ts4 L1tah Tɿ (“Water on Top of the Rock”) was a spring that had a strong flow of cool water year-round, was a source of water for wildlife, plants, and Apaches and their farms. The area around this spring was traditionally one of the most heavily inhabited with a great number of farms. The spring site is now situated in a rock quarry and, even though the spring is gone, the place remains well known among elders throughout Western Apache country.

Tɿ Y adn.ɿn (“Water Flowing Down”) is a wash that used to run year-round before the mines came, but now runs only occasionally with heavy rains. Elders told us that the springs near the head of this wash used to support an Inah rancher’s fruit orchard, but the springs’ flow is now greatly reduced and often dry. The cottonwoods, willows, and walnuts that used to be abundant along the wash are now only sporadic. Large desert-willows (*Chilopsis linearis*), hackberries, mesquites, turbinella oak, and a few walnuts are now the dominant trees. Nagone.ɿh (“Yerba Mansa”) is the name of a spring and wash that was a traditional campsite for groups from Tíis Tseba going out to gather acorns at the nearby Chich.ɿl da [k.ɿzh (“Spotted with Emory Oaks”). This spring has since been developed, with a windmill feeding several pipelines. Today the spring supports cottonwoods, willows, and reed, but there are encroaching non-natives such as Ailanthus trees, spearmint, red brome, and horehound; and none of the *yerba mansa* plants for which the spring was named. Once plentiful and highly valued in healthy wetlands, *yerba mansa* is increasingly hard to find in Apache country.

Today Pinal Creek and its immediately adjacent lands, Na.ʔe [iD ana ka.ɣ4 Ts4 L1tah Tɿ, and the spring at Nagone.ɿh are all private holdings, surrounded by U.S. Forest Service lands. Often signs are posted on private property boundaries warning trespassers to keep out. Apaches are used to being legally separated from their traditional, off-Reservation places and the traditional resources that are found there. Often Apaches must sneak under fences to harvest traditional plants, and the authors have seen elders hide behind bushes or in ditches so that no one will see them gathering important resources, even when perfectly legal, accustomed as they are to harassment by law enforcement personnel or local citizens.

Several years ago the authors spoke to an accomplished ɿee D.ɿh.ɿn (a traditional herbalist), who was then in his mid-nineties, about the state of the natural world. He told us that “..the world is drying up. The water and the springs are going down, and the medicine plants are pulling back away from us..... We are disrespecting the land and the plants, that’s why....” (personal communication, Richard Galson 1992). Traditional Apaches recognize that every element of the natural world has power, and that maintaining a good relationship with each of these elements is crucial to one’s ability to use these powers for sustenance and health. Hurting any of these relationships by disrespect or ignorance can harm oneself, one’s loved ones, or the community. To traditional Apaches, the home consists of all those with whom one strives to maintain good

relationships—the relatives, friends, places, species, and natural elements that one depends on to be healthy and happy.

Elders consider activities that harm the natural world, such as large-scale mining and irresponsible ranching, inherently disrespectful and dangerous. Apache elders acknowledge the necessity of exploiting natural resources to survive, but are critical of destructive exploitation. Harming the natural world not only destroys habitats for natural resources, thereby removing access to resources, but it breaks the foundation of one's home, exposing people and communities to the harmful side-effects of broken relationships. Because traditional people still have and maintain these relationships, the destruction of habitats hurts them deeply and profoundly, as if a family member has been harmed or killed. The authors were present when a medicine man from Cibecue tearfully told Forest Service and mining representatives that their proposed copper mine would "...tear open the veins of Mother Earth." (Elder Y, 1997) This reflects a conservative and traditional Apache view of copper ore. The authors have often witnessed elders in tears when they have seen a denigrated part of their home.

Apache elders believe that forced separation from traditional places, the destruction of traditional places, and the destruction of natural resources profoundly harms all of us, and that this harm manifests itself in a variety of individual and social ills, which encourage disrespectful behavior. Elders point out that Agency and private land management practices, and the individuals responsible for carrying out these activities,

have directly harmed Apaches and their resources. Apache elders want land managers to understand that what they do on the land directly affects the health and well-being of the entire Apache community. Apache elders want all of us to manage the land to resemble as close as possible pre-Inah settlement conditions.

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