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Imagining Indians and Revisiting Reclamation Debates

By the 1950s the United States Bureau of Reclamation, the governmental agency in charge of water storage projects, had proposed the construction of nine large dams along the powerful Colorado River in the states of Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. This article examines the Colorado River Storage Project Act of 1956 (CRSP) as well as subsequent efforts by the Bureau of Reclamation to build dams on the Colorado River from the vantage point of some of the original inhabitants of the region—representatives of the Navajo Nation. Much has been written about the environmental controversies surrounding the CRSP, especially the proposal to construct the Echo Park Dam in Dinosaur National Monument (DNM), and the ways that non-governmental organizations, including the National Parks Association, Izaak Walton League, Wilderness Society, and the Sierra Club, launched a successful campaign to kill the proposed dam and save DNM. However, few have asked how the residents along the Utah-Arizona border responded to the promise (or threat) of these dams, namely, Echo Park Dam, Glen Canyon Dam, Navajo Dam, and Flaming Gorge Dam. Throughout the 1950s, western politicians, the Bureau of Reclamation, state water and power boards, the Mormon Church, and local residents formed a powerful pro-dam constituency. Like the environmentalists, they organized a “grassroots” campaign that fought for the construction of large-scale water storage projects. Yet despite the fact that much has been written about the CRSP and the controversies it generated, little has been written about the roles that Navajos played in debates over the dams, both as historical actors and as symbols of either environmentalism or American national character.

From 1950 to the early 1970s, both pro- and anti-dam activists used powerful visual images in the fight surrounding reclamation. Environmental organizations, such as the Sierra Club, both drew on and helped set the stage for the emerging visual trope of the “ecological Indian” through their use of eco-images, a specific genre of visual representation that placed Native Americans squarely within contemporary environmental debates. Environmentalists, for example, utilized images that cast Native Americans as symbols of the careful stewardship of nature. Such imagery took iconic form in a 1970s public service announcement for the Keep America Beautiful campaign that featured the actor Iron Eyes Cody as the “crying Indian” in a television ad and used

Figure 1:
Keep America
Beautiful,
advertising
campaign,
1971 (Image
courtesy of
Keep American
Beautiful, Inc.).



the famous tag line, “Some people have a deep abiding respect for the natural beauty that was once this country and some people don’t. People start pollution, people can stop it.”¹

Figure 2:
Mass. Bay Colony
Seal in use from
1629–1886
(Source: Com-
monwealth of
Massachusetts).



Pro-dam organizations, however, drew on another set of eco-images that cast Native Americans as emblems of the unique American landscape, but also as a people in need of assistance to thrive on the land. This particular trope or use of eco-images has a long history. American colonists, for instance, cast Native Americans as traditional people who needed help from non-Indians in order to fully utilize the land they inhabited. Note the way in which the Indian in this early illustration from the Massachusetts Bay Charter is cast as a product of nature (fig. 2). The Indian wears a loincloth made of foliage and is flanked by two underdeveloped trees. The imagined plea is simple: “Come over and help us.”² During the CRSP debate, pro-dam constituents refashioned such symbols, casting Navajos as a traditional people who would benefit from American ingenuity

- 1 Keep American Beautiful, “People start pollution. People can stop it,” Advertising Campaign, Keep America Beautiful (1971).
- 2 Massachusetts Bay Colony Seal, Courtesy of Massachusetts Archives, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Archives Division.

and the technological know-how that enabled engineers to harness the power of the Colorado and San Juan Rivers for their economic and social benefit. Visual depictions of Navajos and the land they inhabited circulated in such debates. This article traces the ways different participants in the debates over the damming of the Colorado River deployed images of Navajos, and it briefly connects that story to a discussion of actual—as opposed to imagined—Navajos’ responses to the hydroelectric projects designed to transform their homeland.³

Constructing the Ecological Indian

The history of the long political, economic, and environmental debates surrounding the Colorado River Storage Project have been chronicled in many different academic and popular texts. As scholar Mark Harvey notes, the most contentious part of the original reclamation plan was to build a dam at Echo Park in Dinosaur National Monument. Opposition came from a variety of organizations and groups, and the mobilization against that dam is largely seen as one of the more important manifestations of the modern environmental movement. The successful anti-Echo Park campaign led the Sierra Club to launch a series of books that demonstrated how and why large-scale reclamation projects were ill-conceived.⁴ As Scholar Finis Dunaway notes, the first photo essay book, *This is Dinosaur*,⁵ provided Sierra Club leaders “with a new tool of propaganda, a concept they would refine in the years to come.”⁶ One of those experiments involved Indians. By the late 1960s, the Sierra Club had co-opted the Navajo into their anti-dam campaign in spite of the fact that leaders of the Navajo Nation had, only a few years earlier, actively supported the construction of Glen Canyon Dam.

The incorporation of Indians into the anti-dam movement marked a shift for environmentalists. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, environmentalists had either ignored or excluded Native Americans from their causes. Not only did John

3 Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999). On Indians as representatives of a unique American character, see Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 37.

4 For a detailed analysis of the Sierra Club’s photo book series, see Robin Kelsey, “Sierra Club Photography and the Exclusive Property of Vision,” in this volume.

5 Wallace Stegner, ed., *This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

6 Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 123.

Muir, for instance, view Native Americans with disdain, but even the National Park Service had worked to limit their access to hunting and fishing grounds in the newly formed National Parks of Yosemite, Glacier, and Yellowstone. American Indians might be acceptable entertainment for tourists in such spaces, but the National Park Service prohibited them from utilizing the land they had relied on for food for generations.⁷ Little changed until the 1960s, when American Indians began to fight for sovereignty, treaty rights, and access to the natural resources guaranteed in those treaties. At that time, environmentalists slowly came to view them as potential allies. As Sherry Smith notes, environmentalists like Stewart Brand began to convey a new message about Native Americans. He traveled throughout the United States telling people, “Indians are still here . . . and have important lessons to teach, particularly regarding how to use the land, honor it, and maintain a continuity with it for decades.”⁸ Eventually, the Sierra Club would come to embrace a similar position in its fight against dams on the Colorado River.

In particular, the anti-dam contingent used images of Navajos, the Navajo Reservation, and text from Navajo ceremonies and creation myths to make their case that dams wrecked the environment and violated the wishes of area Navajos. In short, they utilized the language of Navajo primitivism to cast Navajo Indians as protectors of the environment.⁹ Under Sierra Club President David Brower’s direction, images of ecological Indians, who tread so lightly on the Earth’s surface that they leave no trace, abounded. Regretting the construction of Glen Canyon Dam, and coordinating a larger campaign to promote wilderness and the passage of a legislative act to protect wilderness, Brower sought out photographers such as Ansel Adams, Eliot Porter, and Philip Hyde to assemble beautifully illustrated coffee-table books to draw attention to the organization’s mission: saving rivers from being dammed and trees from being logged, while establishing wilderness areas and building the organization’s coffers to enable additional fighting.¹⁰ No place figured as prominently in the photo campaign as Glen

7 Mark David Spence, “Crown of the Continent, Backbone of the World: The American Wilderness Ideal and Blackfeet Exclusion from Glacier National Park,” *Environmental History* 1 (1996): 29; Donald Worster, “John Muir and the Modern Passion for Nature,” *Environmental History* 10 (2005): 13.

8 Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1161–62. Kindle Edition.

9 On language of Navajo primitivism, see Erika Bsumek, *Indian-Made: Navajo Culture in the Marketplace, 1866–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), chap. 1.

10 Dunaway, *Natural Visions*; Michaelann Nelson, “Voices of Glen Canyon: The Influence of Place on Imagination and Activism,” PhD Diss. (University of New Mexico, 2009).

Canyon—the area Brower felt he had sacrificed when he agreed to the Echo Park Compromise.¹¹ Regretting this compromise, Brower pushed the Sierra Club to produce the award-winning *Navajo Wildlands: “As Long as the Rivers Shall Run”* and the stunning *The Place that No One Knew* to combat the Bureau of Reclamation’s plans to build additional dams along the Colorado River.¹² Brower hoped that the books, full of vivid photographs of the monumental Grand Canyon area as well as the recently dammed Glen Canyon and surrounding areas, would evoke a deep sense of loss in readers. The large format books were intended to galvanize the public to fight further reclamation of water.¹³ To strengthen the sense that man and nature were one and that no one knew this better than American Indians, each large, full-color photograph was accompanied by text drawn either from a Navajo ceremonial chant, from the Navajo Creation Story, or from some of the region’s most famous residents or advocates, including Willa Cather, Frank Waters, Wallace Stegner, Clarence E. Dutton, and Owen Wister.¹⁴

The introduction of *Navajo Wildlands* claimed that the construction of dams represented the loss of more than land: it represented the continued war on Indian tribes. “‘As long as the rivers shall run and the grass shall grow,’ was used in many Indian treaties to say ‘forever’ in a way that both the conquered tribes and the United States government could understand. But that forever was only a few short years . . . Many Indian nations were to find the rivers of the tribal domains fettered like themselves.”¹⁵ While many areas were at risk, the book’s primary author—anthropologist Stephen Jett—rightly noted that Navajo Country was especially vulnerable to conquest via dam building. Jett further claimed, once ignorant of the importance of their “wild Glen Canyon country,” by 1967 Navajos had recently “awakened to the danger their wild rivers face, and are becoming increasingly aware of the value of their natural resources.” The accompanying photograph showed a free-flowing section of the Colorado River with a caption from a version of the Navajo *Myth of the Mountain Top Way* ceremony that was meant to convey the importance of moving water to Navajo thinking: “That flowing water! That flowing wa-

11 Not wanting a dam to be built in a national monument, Brower agreed not to fight the construction of Glen Canyon if Echo Park Dam was killed.

12 Stephen Jett and Philip Hyde, *Navajo Wildlands: “As Long as the Rivers Shall Run”* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1967); Eliot Porter and David Brower, *The Place that No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado River* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1968).

13 For a good discussion of the Sierra Club Grand Canyon campaign see Jared Farmer, *Glen Canyon Dammed: Inventing Lake Powell and the Canyon Country* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004), 152.

14 Jett and Hyde, *Navajo Wildlands*; Porter and Brower, *The Place No One Knew*.

15 Jett and Hyde, *Navajo Wildlands*, 16.

ter! My Mind wanders across it.”¹⁶ Flowing water was a core feature of their traditional culture—and necessary to its survival. Navajos needed free waters to be a free people.

While photographs throughout the book featured important Navajo landmarks and representations of the locations often referred to in Navajo myths and creation stories, it should be noted there were no photographs or images of the Navajos as a contemporary people. Thus, the eco-images employed by the Sierra Club subtly pulled Native Americans into an environmental debate by depicting, for example, their ancient dwellings and rock art. The impression the editors meant to convey was that Navajos were an ancient population so intimately connected with the land only nature itself could fully represent them. In one photograph titled, “Juniper, west side of Redbud Pass,” a lone juniper stands adjacent to a red-rock canyon wall. The editors used Willa Cather’s words to explain its relevancy: “Each tree grows alone, murmurs alone, thinks alone. They do not intrude upon each other. The Navajos are not much in the habit of giving or of asking help. Their language is not a communicative one, and they never attempt an interchange of personality in speech. Over their forests is the same inexorable reserve.”¹⁷ In the last section of the book, Brower and Jett used the words of Oliver La Farge, the Pulitzer Prize winning author and director of the American Association of Indian Affairs, to speak for Navajos. Alongside a photograph labeled “Canyon of Aztec Creek above junction with Bridge Canyon” was this quote from La Farge:

It is characteristic of Indians when not under overwhelming pressure that they never lose sight of the great, fundamental question: What makes life worth living? This is one of the factors which makes white men find them exasperating to deal with, for our theory of profit is extremely simple and so deeply rooted that we cannot understand a man who decides that under the circumstances the money offered is not worth the sacrifices demanded for it.¹⁸

Below that, readers encountered a “traditional” Navajo voice in the form of a quote from the Navajo “Song of the Earth Spirit,” that read, in part, “I, I am the spirit within the earth . . . the feet of the earth are my feet . . . the legs are of the earth are my legs . . . the voice of the earth is my voice.” Between La Farge’s description of non-capitalist, anti-market Indians and the words of the ancient Navajo song, Navajos were rendered

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

as the ancient protectors of the earth who alone had a unique responsibility to speak for the land itself. The Navajos who lived in these “wildlands” were not farmers or livestock managers, not drivers of Ford trucks or modern consumers of Buster Brown shoes, nor were they looking for what Paul Jones, Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, had only a few years earlier called “a new dawn” in the age of prosperity. Father Latour, Willa Cather’s fictional protagonist in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, was referenced at the end of the book to show that Navajos actually shunned modern values because they realized how damaging they could be. The authors seemed to be implying that Navajos realized that America’s commitment to irrigation, farming, and progress had, literally, taken nature’s breath away: “Latour had noticed that this peculiar quality in the air of new countries vanished after they were tamed by man to bear harvests . . . the moisture of plowed land, the heaviness of labor and growth of grain-bearing, utterly destroyed it; one could breathe that only on the bright edges of the world, on the grass plains or the sage-brush desert.”¹⁹ This quote was placed next to a photograph of the free-flowing “San Juan River below Navajo Dam.” As the Sierra Club fought dams, they drafted Navajos onto their front lines; they created a series of American Indian eco-images that referenced people, but did not represent them directly.

Why did it matter that such eco-images were created by non-Indians? Although many Navajos would join the fight to save some of their sacred natural sites, such sentiments did not reflect an earlier generation of Navajos, who had actively supported the construction of Glen Canyon Dam. In the 1960s, the Sierra Club helped craft a vision of the “ecological Indian” that would become a mainstream image by the early 1970s, but they did so with almost complete disregard for the opinion voiced by leaders of the Navajo Nation only a few years earlier.

Why did Brower and the Sierra Club go to such lengths to place Navajos in the essentialist position of one-dimensional, ecologically minded “primitive” Indians? Brower may have done so to win a political fight over the contested diversion dam designed to protect Rainbow Bridge National Monument.²⁰ Upon losing the last court challenge

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁰ When Congress passed the CRSP, the Sierra Club and the Navajo Nation had asked for the construction of a diversion dam that would ensure the protection of Rainbow Bridge National Monument. Yet, as the years went on, Congress refused to appropriate the funds to construct the protective dam. Even Stewart Udall, who by the early 1960s had been appointed Secretary of the Interior, did not force the issue. Thus, the Sierra Club attempted to use the courts to press for the construction of the diversion dam—or to lower the overall water level of Glen Canyon Dam reservoir.

to get the diversion dam built, Brower's lawyer wrote to him that their biggest mistake thus far had been their failure to bring Navajos into the court proceedings and that their only hope to save Rainbow Bridge from the spillover from Glen Canyon's Reservoir would be for the Navajos to put forth a freedom of religion argument in order to protect Rainbow Bridge as a sacred site.²¹ Perhaps Brower had been hoping that books like *Navajo Wildlands* could help convince the Navajos that they had a sacred duty to protect the Colorado River—perhaps it worked.

For the Betterment of the Navajos

While Brower and the Sierra Club used photographs of landscapes and text from writers and Navajo ceremonies to make their point about Indians and their relationship to nature, the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) and their supporters took a different tack to convey the importance of the Indians' need for technology to the public. In particular, a group of pro-dam activists, nicknamed Aqualantes or Water Vigilantes, created a well-organized, seemingly grass-roots movement to mobilize the public to support the construction of dams in the area. While it would take the Sierra Club until after the construction of Glen Canyon Dam to integrate Navajos into their campaign, Aqualantes made Navajos—and helping Navajos—part of the discussion from the very beginning of their fight for the CRSP.

The Aqualantes rallied their membership after conservationists, such as the Sierra Club, the National Parks Association, and Isaak Walton League, successfully lobbied congress for the elimination of Echo Park Dam from the CRSP in 1954–55.²² Aqualantes' members strove to combat the “false information (put out by organizations like the Sierra Club and all of its East Coast supporters) by writing letters to friends and associates in other states, giving them the facts and urging them to write their Congressmen.”²³

21 Tom Turner to Rainbow Bridge Cooperators, Memo January 23, 1967, David Brower Papers, Bancroft Library. The Sierra Club ultimately worked with Navajo medicine men and singers and put forth this argument: *Badoni v. Higginson* 638 F.2d 172 C.A.Utah, 1980. Decided 3 November 1980. The Rainbow Bridge case represents the next segment in the story of the Navajo and environmental debates.

22 The success of the conservationist's efforts to save DNM is often seen as a defining moment in the modern environmental movement; Mark Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

23 “What are Aqualantes?” Circa 1955, document M-5, Untermann Collection, University of Utah Special Collections; see also Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness*.



Figure 3:
Illustration,
Dial-a-Fact card
(Source: Unter-
mann Collection,
University of
Utah).

Although much has been written about the Echo Park debate and the birth of modern environmentalism, the Aqualantes organization also warrants attention for the way that it pulled Native Americans into this national—but also intensely regional—debate.

The main arguments behind Aqualantes' support of the CRSP were national defense, industrial development, irrigation, and a plan to uplift Navajos. Aqualantes literature claimed that the CRSP would enable the “people of the Navajo Indian Tribe—the largest tribe in existence [to] help themselves. This,” the group noted, “will reduce the

need for federal aid.”²⁴ This idea meshed with the idea that it was time to “terminate” the federal government’s trust responsibilities. By addressing both the Indian “problem” and governmental concerns, Aqualantes assumed a moral high ground. They sought to build dams so that water and power could propel Navajos into the “modern” world.²⁵

Of all the eco-images produced during the debate over CRSP, perhaps the most unique was an Aqualantes “Dial-a-Fact” card (fig. 3). The thousands of people who received the cards were told to “take a whirl ... see what [the CRSP] means to you and America.” Individual tabs depicted different populations or industries that would benefit from dam construction. The card played upon the visual language of older eco-images such as the Massachusetts Bay Colony Seal that cast Indians as a traditional people who would benefit from the civilizing efforts of whites. Notice, for instance, that all of the tabs, except the ones depicting fossil beds and Navajos, had modern or contemporary imagery associated with them. For instance, on the tab marked “recreation,” a bikini-clad young woman gets ready to throw a beach ball. Or, on the National Park tab, a modern car moves along a well-defined road. The Navajo tab, however, depicts a traditional Indian dancer. In the accompanying text of a “speaker’s kit,” Aqualantes told readers just how the CRSP dam would help Navajos; it claimed that “125,000 acres of Navajo land will receive water to better the Indians’ standard of living.”²⁶ Glen Canyon Dam would facilitate the economic and social uplift of a romanticized “primitive” people.²⁷ The Dial-a-Fact card was just one part of a massive public relations campaign. Dam supporters and the BOR also used other tactics to advocate for, and later celebrate, the construction of the dam. Dam supporters would not be the only ones to use eco-images of the Navajo in such debates.

24 The idea that the dams would save the government money by helping the Navajo population was an interesting argument, because the cost of the dams that were built would eventually run into the billions. Estimates at the time figured that Glen Canyon alone would cost \$421 million to build, and this turned out to be an underestimate. Nor should we overlook the fact that the cost of the project would far exceed any payments to the Navajo; quote from Aqualantes Speaker’s Kit, “A 3 minute Talk on the Colorado River Storage Project,” undated Document 1, p. 2. Unterman Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

25 Despite such imagery, Navajos had been deeply engaged with the modern world prior to the 1950s; Erika Bsumek, *Indian-Made*.

26 Aqualantes Speaker’s Kit, “A 3 minute Talk.”

27 Aqualantes, “Dial-a-Fact” Card, Untermann Collection, University of Utah.



Figure 4:
 Norman Rockwell,
 Glen Canyon
 Dam (Source:
 US Bureau of
 Reclamation).

During construction of the dam at Glen Canyon, the BOR issued multiple press releases and encouraged magazines such as *Life* and *Sunset*, as well as local and national newspapers, to profile the dam and the region it was designed to help. After it was completed, they hired 40 famous American artists, from Norman Rockwell to Fritz Scholder, to commemorate the Bureau’s “most inspiring” efforts.²⁸ In 1969 the BOR commissioned Norman Rockwell to paint a picture of the newly completed Glen Canyon Dam (fig. 4).

The story commonly told about this painting goes something like this: Rockwell agreed to paint a picture of the dam and then donate the painting to the BOR. Once on site, Rockwell had a difficult time and felt his initial drawings looked too mechanical. Either Rockwell or BOR officials decided that including Navajos in the picture would solve the problem. W. L. (“Bud”) Rusho, a young bureau employee, was assigned the task of finding Navajos willing to pose for Rockwell.²⁹ The end result was the large canvas

²⁸ Leslie Stinger and Bobbie Ferguson, “Portraits of Reclamation,” *CRM* 4 (1999), 48–50.

²⁹ Although the story is commonly told in this way by various scholars, it does not completely reflect what occurred. Correspondence between Norman Rockwell and John DeWitt of the Bureau of Reclamation reveals that Rusho and Rockwell collected numerous photographs of a Navajo, John Lane, and his family. Rockwell used a compilation of the photographs to depict the Navajo family in the photograph. Rockwell Correspondence with DeWitt, Rockwell Archives.

of the dam that currently hangs in the visitor's center; it was (and continues to be) the centerpiece of an art collection commissioned by the Bureau to depict "the imaginative aspects of the Reclamation Projects."³⁰ Rockwell's canvas represented the BOR role in the development of the region. Yet, it was also the first significant visual representation of Glen Canyon Dam—or any CRSP project—that featured contemporary Navajos, as opposed to the "traditional" representations of them seen in the Aqualantes literature. Rockwell depicted the Navajos viewing the "help" that the government had supposedly provided for them.

To date, little has been written about Rockwell's popular and frequently reproduced image of the Navajo family at the Dam. Even less has been written about the Navajos and their participation in the debates surrounding Glen Canyon Dam. Accordingly, Rockwell's insistence on including people in his picture of this new engineering marvel effectively incorporated a crucial part of the history of the Dam—the history of Navajo involvement—which scholars have either ignored or glossed over by relying on preconceived notions of how Indians should have responded to the dam. It is quite possible that some of these preconceptions derived more from the Sierra Club's campaign than from anything having to do with the Navajo themselves. In 2009, for example, Paul Lindholdt described the Navajos in Rockwell's painting as follows:

Members of this ensemble—threatened with extinction, pushed to the continent's edge—peer across a dizzying expanse toward the dam face. Their body language is more akin to resignation or forced cohabitation than to approval. The dog cringes; two hawks soar above the gulf. Life goes on, even in the aftermath of massive technology . . . the Indians in the Rockwell painting seem hindered by the concrete monolith in their way. Nomadic people historically, they see their travel baffled, slowed, constricted.³¹

While this is Lindholdt's reading of Rockwell's painting, his interpretation flies in the face of historical reality. Paul Jones, Sam Akeah, and other leaders of the Navajo Nation celebrated the construction of Glen Canyon Dam. Raymond Nakai, Tribal Chairman in 1966, even prepared remarks for the dedication ceremony. From 1954–66, different members of

30 Paul Lindholdt, "From Sublimity to Ecopornography: Assessing the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection," *Journal of Ecocriticism* 1 (2009), 1.

31 *Ibid.*, 12.

the Navajo Tribal Council actively participated in both local and national debates over dam building and resource development, and they generally ignored the debates about the environment—siding with the pro-dam contingent over the Sierra Club. The tribal government of the Navajo Nation strongly supported construction of the dam and even worked with the local Aqualantes organizers to lobby for the dam. Perhaps most telling is the fact that the Navajo Nation provided the Aqualantes with the largest single donation the organization received. Navajos gave \$13,752 to support the pro-dam contingent.³² Leaders of the Navajo Nation believed that the dam had much to offer Navajos.

Still, Rockwell's painting has much to offer viewers. Historians Sherry L. Smith and Brian Frehner read Rockwell's painting from the BOR's point of view, reaching a different conclusion than Lindholdt. They see it as a bureaucratic rendition of public progress: "The message, perhaps not surprising, given the client, was clear: dams nestled nicely into the landscape and attracted rather than repelled wildlife." Yet, Smith and Frehner were reluctant to read much into the position of the Navajos, asking, "As for the Navajos, does their demeanor suggest acceptance? Resignation? What is the implication about the relationship between Indians and energy production?"³³ While the Navajo Indians in Rockwell's painting could not think—they were paint, not people—we do know what Rockwell was thinking when he placed them on canvas. First, he consciously placed the Indians in the "shadow" of the dam. Yet, they aren't necessarily overshadowed by it. The Navajos in Rockwell's painting evoke ambiguity rather than certainty.

Reframing the Navajos

This ambiguity aroused by Rockwell is remarkably different from what we might view as the first and one of the most significant eco-images of Indians ever produced. Edward Curtis's iconic photograph of *The Vanishing Race* was meant to evoke the nobility of American Indians in the face of land loss.

While the Indians in *The Vanishing Race* were moving out of the frame, literally and metaphorically making way for white settlers, the Indians in Rockwell's painting have

32 On Navajo donations to the Aqualantes, see "Upper Colorado Grass Roots, Inc., Statement of Receipts and Expenditures, January 1, 1955," Box 7, Series 200, George Dewey Clyde Papers, Utah Historical Society.

33 Sherry Smith and Brian Freher, *Indians and Energy: Exploitation and Opportunity in the American Southwest* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2010).



Figure 5:
The Vanishing
Race by Edward
Curtis (Source:
Charles Deering
McCormick
Library of Special
Collections, Nor-
thwestern Univer-
sity Library).

made their way to the dam. While it may not be clear whether Rockwell wanted them to stand as symbols of the American character who embraced the “help” the dam seemingly offered or whether they wished to speak for nature and decry the dam’s presence, one thing is certain: they have come to see their future. Unlike those Navajos represented by Curtis, these Navajos are not vanishing, nor are they moving out of the viewers’ field of vision.

Certainly, not all Navajos supported the construction of Glen Canyon. But many did. Many got well-paying jobs building the dam, and many others worked to pass the legislation that would make those jobs possible. What the future held for Navajos in relation to the dam, however, remained a mystery at the time Rockwell picked up his brush. Rockwell’s painting may have been in response to a Bureau of Reclamation commission, but it manages to provide a truer portrayal of the complicated meanings of the dam for Navajos than that provided by the politicians and activists who tried to enlist the Navajo Nation on their side of the dispute—or that provided by most schol-

ars who have written about the dam in succeeding decades. The Navajos in Rockwell's painting are not going anywhere. They retain a commitment to their livestock (the horse) and their traditions (at least in their dress), while simultaneously facing the power of the modern world.