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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 1999 HONOREE

Pte Hca Ka, Inc. Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe

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Indians living on the Cheyenne River Reservation in north central South Dakota are among the poorest in the United States. In the early 1990s, 70 percent of reservation's Indian households had incomes near the poverty level, and the unemployment rate exceeded 50 percent. While these economic conditions are the result of many different factors, one of the earliest and most devastating was the systematic destruction of the high plains buffalo herds in the late 1800s. It was an attack on both the Lakota economy and the Lakota way of life. Today, leaders of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe (CRST) are committed to improving reservation economic conditions and to doing so within important boundaries: they hope to achieve economic success without causing further cultural disintegration.

Pte Hca Ka, Inc. aptly achieves these goals. The tribally owned and chartered corporation was founded in 1991 to manage and develop the tribal buffalo herd. As in any successful wildlife-based business, Pte Hca Ka's managers aim to develop a biologically sound herd and a financially sound enterprise. The key difference is that Pte Hca Ka's managers pursue these goals within a culturally compatible system for raising and harvesting buffalo. Their commitment has paid off. Today, Pte Hca Ka is a thriving "socio-economic enterprise." It sustains important tribal traditions, helps tribal members reconnect with Lakota culture, and contributes both directly and indirectly to the alleviation of reservation economic problems.

In its early years, for example, Pte Hca Ka's main focus was on building and strengthening the Tribe's buffalo herd, which began with fewer than 100 animals. But increasing herd size was not allowed to take precedence over the importance of making animals available to tribal members for ceremonial uses and traditional feasts. In 1991, the CRST's district governments received a total a six buffalo for these purposes. By 1996, Pte Hca Ka provided them with a total of 20 buffalo—and the herd had grown to more than 1,000 animals.

With the growth in herd size, Pte Hca Ka's managers considered expansion into off-reservation commercial sales and concluded that in this pursuit, too, culturally appropriate methods were important. Because many Lakota view the typical feedlot and slaughtering process as disrespectful and wasteful, enterprise managers hoped to find a way to harvest and fully process buffalo on the open range. A break-through came when Pte Hca Ka's director heard of a mobile unit used by Lapplanders to harvest reindeer. With the help of Swedish engineers who had worked with the Lapplanders, he was able design a similar unit for buffalo. Now, Pte Hca Ka employees can harvest buffalo with respect, and in a manner that meets modern health standards. According to Lakota custom, none of the buffalo

products are wasted. Most commercial quality meat is sold off-reservation to specialty meat distributors. The remainder is contributed to the Tribe's schools and elderly program, sold at reduced prices in the local grocery store, and donated to local and national Indian events. Hide and bone parts are collected and cleaned for ceremonial, craft, and even everyday purposes. Thus, in addition to employing 15 people and earning revenue for the Tribe, Pte Hca Ka's "commercial" operations are restoring the centrality of the buffalo to Lakota life.

Pte Hca Ka's various outreach efforts reinforce this process. Pte Hca Ka has encouraged Cheyenne River Community College to develop an entire course of study in bison management, both to train future workers and to share the enterprise's learning more widely. School children are invited to make field trips to visit the herd and view program operations, and elders are urged to work with Pte Hca Ka to share their knowledge of the buffalo culture. Soon, Pte Hca Ka will extend these outreach efforts to an even broader public. In 1999, the corporation issued bonds to finance the purchase of an additional 21,000 acres. Pte Hca Ka will develop this area, as well as the existing buffalo range, into the first-ever tribal national park. Once open, the park will allow members and non-members alike to be witness to the restoration of a modern buffalo culture among the Cheyenne River Sioux.

Certainly, Pte Hca Ka's success can be attributed to its innovative business strategy, but it has also depended on an arms-length relationship with the CRST's political leaders and a strong connection with the reservation community. For example, the enterprise's charter and by-laws prohibit elected officials from involvement in day-to-day program management. Because the Tribal Council and President uphold this agreement, Pte Hca Ka's managers are able to focus on long-run enterprise success rather than short-term political goals. Similarly, Pte Hca Ka was founded on the will of the people, and as the business has grown, Pte Hca Ka's director has continued to elicit community opinions and cultivate support for the enterprise. This way, members understand that it is not just a few people, but the Tribe as a whole that benefits from the buffalo business.

The Lakota expression "Mitakuye Oyasin" means "all my relatives." It expresses the interdependence the Lakota have with all other living creatures, particularly the buffalo. Thus, it is not surprising that many Lakota believe the fate of their nation is tied to the fate of the buffalo. By helping to ensure the survival of the buffalo, Pte Hca Ka, Inc. renews the Lakota—as well as their land and the natural ecosystems of the plains—and proves that it is possible to combine modern technology, indigenous traditions, and economic success.

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