



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2000 HONOREE

#### **Elders Cultural Advisory Council Forest Resources, San Carlos Apache Tribe**

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*Formed by Tribal resolution in 1993, the San Carlos Elders Cultural Advisory Council advises the Tribal Council on matters of culture, conducts consultations with off-reservation entities regarding cultural matters and administers the cultural preservation activities of the Tribe. As a source of traditional wisdom, the Elders Council plays an active role in the Tribe's governance by providing insight on diverse issues, including resource management, leadership responsibilities, environmental issues, cultural practices and repatriation.*

Traditional Apache culture is based on an intimate spiritual connection with and knowledge of the natural world. The elders believe that such connection and knowledge are necessary to respect one's self, other humans and all living things. Having spent most of their lives outdoors and being taught by the wisdom of their elders, they embrace and encourage self-reliance and discourage dependence on others. For today's elders, to be Apache is to be able to think for one's self, to know the rich history of their peoples, to speak the Native tongue, to participate in ceremonies, and to act responsibly and respectfully towards other humans and the natural world.

The fast-paced world of automobiles, fast food, video games and television has taken its toll on traditional Apache culture. Of course, all cultures change over time. But from the viewpoint of the San Carlos Apache elders, the changes in their community have been particularly worrisome. The youth no longer eat the traditional foods that once kept Apache fit and strong, and obesity runs rampant among the more than 10,000 Indians who call the San Carlos Reservation home. Traditional knowledge about plants and animals is being lost as the young spend much of their time indoors watching television or playing video games. Dependence on federal government goods and services has become an acceptable way to live. Interest in the ancient traditions and ceremonies is slowly being replaced by interest in activities and values associated with the dominant non-Indian culture. In short, despite a long and rich history of tribal strength and pride, the elders are upset about what the Apache people are becoming.

Furthermore, the elders at San Carlos are concerned about questions of governance. As the keepers of traditional knowledge and history, the elders remember – or have been told about – a time when leaders emerged because of their abilities, wisdom, achievements and public-minded character. They recall a time when important decisions were made with “one community mind” and in the best long-term interest of the nation – when political corruption simply was not tolerated. Indeed, the well-documented recent political history of the San Carlos Apache is nothing the elders can be proud of. Throughout the 1990s, San Carlos suffered from debilitating political instability, which has manifested in protests, takeovers, and demonstrations. Financial mismanagement has led to large governmental deficits, and the government is recognized more for its turmoil than for its ability to provide essential governmental services. Governmental ineffectiveness has left the reservation with a weak economy and poor social conditions that are akin to those found in many third-world countries.

In the midst of such cultural, political and economic difficulties lies a kernel of hope and inspiration – the San Carlos Elders Cultural Advisory Council (ECAC). Formed in November 1993 by Tribal Council resolution, the all-volunteer ECAC was established to advise the Tribal Council on cultural matters, to carry out consultations with off-reservation entities on culturally related matters, and to execute various projects related to cultural preservation. It is comprised of elders from the reservation's four districts and meets every two to four months.

While much of the Council's initial work was concentrated on ethnobotany (and, particularly, on recording the names, uses and appropriate treatment of culturally important plant life), today it engages in a much broader range of activities. The ECAC regularly gives its traditional views to the Tribal Council and other decision makers on a wide variety of matters. The ECAC has provided guidance on tribal environmental policies, including Mexican spotted owl surveys and reservation-based mining; on cultural policies such as the inappropriate use of depictions of the Gaan (Mountain Spirits); and on guidelines for non-tribal researchers. It carries out cultural consultations with off-reservation entities, especially federal and state agencies that administer lands in traditional Apache areas, and advises the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the location of graves and sacred sites that should not be disturbed by tree harvesting. The ECAC also helps administer and oversee cultural preservation activities. For example, it is involved in activities related to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the Western Apache Place Names Project, and it helps collect traditional information on the natural world to be used in reservation school curriculum.

In engaging in these many comment and consultation processes, the ECAC has achieved important successes. When the elders felt that tribal citizens were being disrespectful and wasteful in how they cut and disposed of shade material used for camps in the Sunrise Dances, they published an instructive article in the Apache Mocassin on the proper collection, use and disposal procedures. The elders have also provided traditional guidance on penal approaches, on the appropriate way for the Tribe to develop a funeral home, and on the appropriateness of a motorcross race sponsored by the Tribe's casino. Much of this advice has been followed. When the Tonto National Forest imposed permit fees for tribal citizens gathering acorns in traditional hunting areas, the ECAC worked with the Tribal Council to get a tribal resolution passed, confronted the U.S. Forest Service and succeeded in changing the policy.

Moreover, the ECAC has been remarkably successful in its NAGPRA and cultural preservation work. The ECAC took the initiative to form a Western Apache coalition, comprised of the five Western Apache tribes, in order to deal with NAGPRA-related issues in a coordinated fashion. Not only has this coalition strengthened the tribes' claims – to date, over 70 objects have been repatriated to San Carlos alone – but it has helped tribes throughout Indian Country by establishing precedents in justifications of claims. The coalition was also instrumental in convincing the U.S. National Forest Service to give the San Francisco Peaks (a mountain held sacred to the Apaches) special protection and helped to place Mt. Graham, another sacred mountain, on the National Register of Historic Places.

In all of its activities, the ECAC consults its membership – who range in age from mid-40s to late-90s – and, as necessary, other elders respected for their wisdom and knowledge of Apache language, culture and outdoor living skills. While the ECAC operates strictly by consensus, the administrative functions are conducted by a coordinator and a facilitator who jointly organize the meetings, visit home-bound elders or medicine people, and transcribe conversations into letters, memoranda and articles. To ensure its long-term sustainability, the ECAC retains younger elders within its membership, who are mentored by older members. Both to smooth this administrative process and to create a record of its decisions, the ECAC oftentimes expresses its views or provides guidance in the form of letters, which are sent to department heads or the elected tribal leadership.

Compelled by their belief that the traditional Apache way of life is the most responsible, beautiful and proper way for Apaches to live, the ECAC has also become an important, and much needed, check on government. The ECAC is deeply committed to making the tribal government more responsible and accountable by giving the traditional perspective an institutionalized and formal voice that the politicians cannot avoid. Although their views are not always welcome, the ECAC members feel strongly that leaders need the guidance of their elders to properly and wisely carry out their tremendous responsibilities to the people and to the land.

Several examples demonstrate the ECAC's interventions in support of improved governance. When the Tribal Council decided to renew a contract with a company that was buying springwater from a sacred spring on the reservation without community consent, the ECAC vigorously reprimanded the Tribal Council. In 1999, when the Tribe's financial mismanagement became especially bad, the ECAC met and wrote a letter to the Tribal Council reminding them of the proper ways leaders ought to behave. At the same time, the elders agreed that ECAC would set an example of self-reliance by foregoing tribal monies in favor of operating as a self-sustaining volunteer entity. Commenting on Apache leadership, the elders believe:

The values of self-reliance, respect and deep connection to nature are central to traditional Apache life, and are underlying themes in all ECAC activities, consultations and messages. These qualities, along with a great traditional knowledge help make a whole, successful person. A person with these qualities will be a good leader. The ECAC tries to bring these qualities and traditional knowledge to their own leaders in order for them to more effectively care for the people and their land.

The ECAC stands out on a number of dimensions. As an all-volunteer group, the program operates with minimal funding, it is replicable any place a dedicated elder could be recruited as coordinator, and it is a significant contribution at a reservation that suffers from dire political problems. Around Indian Country, elders are consulted for NAGPRA repatriations, for guidance in tribal policy, for assistance in cultural revitalization, and for wisdom in family life. In many instances, however, these efforts are ad hoc and yield only a small portion of the benefit that arises from paying consistent attention to elders' vision and values. The ECAC at San Carlos, in contrast, is a refreshing and instructive example of how elders can play a critical role in advancing the social, economic, political and spiritual health of an Indian nation. The knowledge they possess is essential to the long-term health of the Apache people and the environment, and the perspectives they bring to questions of governance are invaluable. The ECAC serves as a conscience for the San Carlos Apache Tribe by tapping, discussing and then articulating its members' understanding of Apache values. The Elders Cultural Advisory Council is a keeper and carrier of traditional Apache wisdom whose actions and advice will benefit the Tribe for generations to come.

#### Lessons:

- As keepers of traditional wisdom, elders can and should play an active role in tribal governmental affairs, including cultural matters, leadership responsibilities and language preservation.
- One way to utilize the knowledge of elders is to formally recognize a council of elders that is empowered to make recommendations, provide guidance and advise tribal decision makers.
- In some cases, elders groups from different reservations or Indian nations should work together in order to maximize effectiveness when dealing with other governments (both tribal and non-tribal).