

HOME Native Voices on the Colorado River

"...Grand Canyon is my home, the home of my mother and father, my grandparents. My people lived in contentment in this beautiful place of awe... This is my home. We share this powerful place, this river and canyon, with all the world, but we understand how it was, before the scientists. It was our home before it was a national park." -Dianna Sue, Havasupai

As with many river guides who have worked on any river for an extended amount of time, Grand Canyon river guides come to feel, think and call the river and surrounding lands, *home*. So those of us who have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically season after season on the Colorado river, we feel kinship to Dianna Sue's words. When you hear the words coming out of her mouth, with her eyes closed and her whole being in a sort of meditative state, you can only witness and perhaps feel a little, just a small bit, of the deep, innate and spiritual connection she and her people have to the Grand Canyon. Although a few of us have had the privilege of being on the river with Dianna Sue, most of us have not, and may not ever get to spend 8-16 days on the river with her, or with anyone who has her caliber of tribal wisdom. Because of this, her words, along with those of other tribal people, will be the direct link to help us, Grand Canyon river guides and outfitters, understand in a deeper sense the cultural and spiritual connections that we can share appropriately with our passengers and fellow river guides, and even with our family and friends.

Through the *Native Voices Program*, we want to share words and wisdom from tribal members of the 11 affiliated tribes of the Grand Canyon. Since technology is a huge presence in a majority of everyone's lives these days, we figured that sharing through videos and transcription of their words would work best. This is where the April 2011 Native Voices on the River trip comes in. It was a journey that was both adventurous and spiritual in every sense of the word, made by twenty people representing six of the 11 tribes: Hopi, Diné (Navajo), Hualapai, Havasupai, Yavapai, and Paiute. It was a journey that was completely unique and extraordinary, attended by tribal members who live ordinary lives above the Rim, but who served on this trip as spiritual and cultural leaders representing their respective communities.

The journey began as all Grand Canyon river trips do, packing and traveling to Marble Canyon and Lee's Ferry. The trip gathered for introductions and a hot meal at Marble Canyon after arriving by bus provided by Canyon Explorations. The owners, managers, staff and guides of the newly minted outfitter, *Grand Canyon Whitewater*, greeted the tribal members and *Native Voices* staff. As bedtime approached, last minutes questions arose among a lot of teasing, laughter and excitement about the trip. From the beginning to the end, every person on the trip, including the guides, film crew, photographers and a writer, approached this journey with respect, positivity and great honor not only for the Canyon and river, but for each other: each tribe, each people, and each person's individual approach.

So, early the next morning, everyone arose to a beautiful sunrise and blue skies reaching the depths and beauty over Marble Canyon and onto the Vermillion Cliffs, rested and ready for the journey downriver. Before getting on the vans to the ferry, Alfred (*Diné*) talked about migration routes the Navajo took when crossing the river or traveling to and from the river. His willingness to share his knowledge set the precedent for other tribal members to feel comfortable in sharing certain histories and stories, and to not feel pressured to share everything -- especially sacred knowledge that's not meant for everyone, including other tribal people. But there was one

moment that was all-inclusive and meant for everyone, including the non-Native folks. Before the official launch downriver, tribal members carefully took out their sacred pouches of corn pollen, white corn meal and hematite. Individual and group prayers and offerings were made by tribal members for a safe and successful journey downriver, and so as not to offend the Holy People who reside in and around the river and canyon. The two motorboats were blessed as well, and the folks from Grand Canyon Whitewater were encouraged to take a pinch of cornmeal or pollen to partake in the offering. They were each guided by a tribal member who explained the significance of the ritual that only Native people partake in unless they invite non-Natives into the process. *[Note: The formality of Native people making offerings with corn pollen and cornmeal is sacred and must not be duplicated by non-Natives unless guided and/or invited by a tribal member.]*

After prayers and blessings, and receiving gifts of lip balm, sunblock and salve donated by DeeAnn Tracy Brown of *Peak Scents*, we did the important stuff; last visit to the porcelain throne; fill up water bottles; orientation by the trip leader; fitted with life jackets; pre-trip group photos; board the boats; and the first head count of the day. Thus launched the first (and hopefully not last) *Native Voices* river trip, which was generously supported by all of the Grand Canyon river outfitters and affiliated Grand Canyon tribes. Let's begin the story of that journey and all the knowledge and wisdom that came forth from it.

All tribes agreed that the Grand Canyon is not only a place of spirituality, but also a sacred place where they all felt like it was *home*. This was a major overriding theme of conversations and interviews on this journey. For tribes like the Paiute, Havasupai, and Hualapai, the Grand Canyon has been home for as long as the people have stories. For the Hopi and Zuni, Grand Canyon was the place of their origination; they lived there for many years before migrating out into what is part of their current homelands. Beep of the Hopi Tribe says, *"This whole area was occupied, lots of people lived here... lots of people lived along the river, experiencing the fluctuations in flows, before the dam."* And the Grand Canyon is a place where the Hopi and the Paiute send their beloved who are deceased to find their peace and their way to the Creator. For all, including the Yavapai and Navajo, Grand Canyon figures prominently not only in their stories and their prayers, but was very important to their actual physical survival. Grand Canyon was and is a gathering and planting place for foods, medicines and materials for life; it's a source of water, salt and other minerals; and it was a major trade route in the area, with common gathering places and seasonal homes along the way. John Wesley Powell talks of finding melons and corn, to which he and his men helped themselves before they could be caught by the Paiutes who, of course, saw this as stealing. Native people have lived all over in this canyon. This was *home*: where they were born and lived, where they farmed, hunted, prayed and buried their dead. They were only pushed out by the creation of the National Park Service and their individual reservations. The last Havasupai living at Indian Gardens was forced to leave in the 1910's.

Another common theme among the tribes is that the canyon is a spiritual place that must be treated respectfully and delicately, and therefore IS their equivalent of church. The canyon is central in their stories of self, their prayers, deities, beliefs, and histories. Water is life, giving not only moisture for people to survive, but giving life to the many plants and animals that live here and have provided food, medicine, shelter and tools so that people could sustain their families. This water, this bit of green in a dry desert environment, is home. *"[Water] is in our prayers, for the rains to come, for the snows to happen. We need the snows already to start getting our lands wet for the...upcoming planting seasons. We pray for the rains in the summer time to water our crops and to nourish them. Without the moisture in the ground, our seeds can't grow. Without our crops, we can't survive. For the Hopi people, water is so precious that we don't*

take it for granted. Every day, it's in our hearts and in our mind." said Howard (Hopi). For all the tribes, their prayers are based on the place, (and) they believe their deities are within, and that all living things have a voice and soul, even the plants, water and rocks. This canyon and this river are life-giving, nourishing, and rejuvenating. The people have been given the special knowledge they need to live in this harsh and sometimes dangerous place, with joy and thankfulness.

"When the Paiutes was born, all was water. In the beginning of time, there was just a grain of sand. But these legends are told only in winter. Don't tell them in summer, or you'll have a rattlesnake at your doorstep when you return home. That's what everything is-belief, either you believe it or you don't...Hopi gods and our gods are the same beings, but different names. When the animals were created, they all spoke the same language. The rocks, the animals, everything spoke the same language. Until coyote came along, crazy one who disrupted it. That's why the world is the way it is today: people doing good things and people doing bad things." -Beans, Paiute

As river guides, we call ourselves and we are known as the stewards of the river and canyon. Those of us who go down each season whether it is once, twice, or fifteen times, we are called upon by our outfitter and by the Grand Canyon National Park Service, to *take care* of each area we visit, hike and camp at. Of course, we often find tissue poking out of the sand or behind the bushes, forgotten items of clothing, jewelry, or pieces of food scraps on the beach from a previous groups' scrumptious lunch, or cans of floating cocktails, items flung into the river by a rapid or the wind. It is a guide's knee-jerk reaction (hopefully) to pick up the "forgotten" item and dispose of it properly, assuming the previous owner "forgot" it or else the wind/ravens caused them to "forget" it. Each area we visit on the river is sacred to us in our own way because it is *home* for the night, and where we replenish our strength for the next days to come. We use the river water to wash ourselves, to hydrate, to cool down and to cook with, but most fun of all, we use the water to go boating!

The point of all this is that we, river guides and passengers, depend on the river and canyon for our livelihood, to replenish our adventurous spirit and learn and see new things. But as tribal members, we depend on the river and canyon for the maintenance and survival of our culture, histories, traditions, prayers, ceremonies, songs, and spiritual guidance. *Dianna Sue says, "All of us are here for a purpose. Everybody was chosen for a purpose..."* And *Howard (Hopi) asks, "...Coming down into the Grand Canyon now, we're using it, many people are going to be using it for recreational purposes. We can't stop it, it's gonna happen, but I do ask in the future that when you do come down here, you respect it."*