

Collaborative Conference Planning and Continuing the Dialogue

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GRIC Governor Stephen Roe Lewis presents calendar stick to WRRRC Director Dr. Sharon B. Megdal and conference co-chairs Dr. Karletta Chief and Dr. Jean McLain.
Source: Melanie Lenart

The University of Arizona Water Resources Research Center conference, *Indigenous Perspectives on Sustainable Water Practices*, was held on June 9-10, 2015. Since our first conference, *Local Approaches to Resolving Water Resource Issues*, in 2003, the WRRC has organized annual conferences on topics of statewide importance, with the goal of engaging speakers and audiences in thought-provoking and informative dialogue. Recent conferences have focused on water issues faced by Arizonans, including potential water shortages in the Colorado River, groundwater security, and growing urbanization. Although sessions at previous conferences included speakers on tribal water issues, we realized that an Arizona-based conference focused solely on indigenous perspectives and practices related to sustainable water management was lacking.

Active planning of the 2015 Conference actually began in March 2014, when the WRRC Conference, *Closing the Gap Between Water Supply and Demand*, included the unique insights of individuals from several Native communities. The message of these individual indigenous voices was that water is life. Not only does it sustain livelihoods, including ranching, farming, fishing, hunting, and gathering of medicinal plants, but it is revered as sacred and used in cultural practices. They taught their listeners that water is the foundation of the identity of many indigenous peoples, as it acknowledges the connection to Mother Earth and Father Sky, and is an integrating component that connects the land, five fingered people, four legged animals, and plants through a continuous cycle. Much of this message was new to the audience, confirming the need for a conference on water in Arizona from indigenous perspectives – a conference covering a wide informational range, from the legal intricacies of water rights to the spiritual and ceremonial views of water.

And so it was that nine months before the 2015 Conference, co-chairs Dr. Karletta Chief and Dr. Jean McLain formed a Tribal Advisory Committee that represented tribal water management, leadership, and grassroots. The Committee worked tirelessly, surveying tribal and non-tribal stakeholders to identify conference

topics and speakers. The conference title was developed using an online questionnaire, and *Indigenous Perspectives on Sustainable Water Practices* resulted from blending several title ideas. The 10th anniversary of the 2004 Arizona Water Settlements Act stimulated a partnership with the Gila River Indian Community, which hosted the conference, providing generous support and assisting in conference planning, logistics, and tours.

It is not an overstatement to report that the 330 conference attendees were fully engaged throughout. Starting with two pre-conference tours on the morning of June 9, and ending with an expert panel late in the afternoon on June 10, two days were filled with education, energy, and exchange of viewpoints. GRIC Governor Stephen Roe Lewis welcomed participants, remembering family lessons on giving back to the community to effect change. In his opening comments on day two, Arizona State Senator Carlyle Begay noted that the event represented "...a very much needed conference, generating a lot of great discussion, a lot of great insight, and most importantly great ideas in moving our community forward in discussions about the future of our water resources." From the opening keynote delivered by John Echohawk, founder of the Native American Rights Fund, an active conversation ensued, promoted by the positioning of open microphones for audience dialogue. Speakers on the podium and at the microphone were often passionate, at times moved to anger and to tears as they discussed the history of indigenous water rights, current efforts to restore cultural heritage, and paths forward to sustainable water management. The spirituality of the gathering was celebrated with multiple prayers and panelist comments.

In addition to incorporating multiple perspectives in the agenda of invited speakers, an equally important goal was to attract a diverse audience. From the early planning, WRRC staff met with representatives of tribal and non-tribal lands throughout Arizona. Press releases sent to news outlets statewide increased interest in rural areas. A conference invitation was sent to top tribal officials and disseminated through various Native American networks. We are pleased to report that the conference attracted registrants from 49 municipalities and 13 tribal nations throughout Arizona.

Elected officials at the federal, state, municipal, and tribal levels also attended. We received generous support from various sponsors whose contribution we greatly appreciate and are acknowledged in this newsletter. For more information and links to speaker presentations, go to: <http://wrrc.arizona.edu/WRRC-conference-2015/home>.

We close with a hope and a request. Our hope is that this newsletter extends the exchange of information and perspectives on sustainable water practices beyond the two-day conference experience. Our request is for feedback on what else we can do together. Should there be an effort to organize a similar conference on a broader regional scale, such as the Four Corners? We would like to hear from you. Please email your thoughts to us at smegdal@email.arizona.edu, kchief@email.arizona.edu, and mclainj@email.arizona.edu. 

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