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Colonizing the Mníšoše (Missouri River): Devastating Effects of the Pick-Sloan Plan

By: Selena Olvera, Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota Oyate

Since time immemorial, American Indian tribes have inhabited the Upper Missouri River Basin. They have utilized the resources provided by the Missouri River, such as using native plants for medicinal and spiritual purposes. These tribal nations have fought for centuries to keep their relationship with the Missouri River. However, this relationship and usage was profoundly disturbed by the construction of dams following the enactment of the Pick-Sloan Flood Control Act of 1944. This act was created by Congress to have jurisdiction over the waters of the Missouri. As written in the act, Congress has jurisdiction over the river through navigation, flood control, and construction of dams (1). Indigenous people who originally resided in the floodplains of the Missouri were flooded as a result of dam construction and were not given any type of compensation. Forty miles from the Gavins Point Dam in South Dakota, the community of Niobrara is affected with flooding when there is a major release. Historically, there are villages who lived on the floodplains of the Mníšoše. Because of the construction, these villages were flooded and are currently underwater (2). Throughout the summer I conducted interviews with members of two affected tribes. Specifically, one interview was conducted with a member of the Northern Ponca Tribe of Nebraska. The goal of my research was to highlight the impacts of dam construction along the Missouri.

Built in 1945, the Garrison Dam in North Dakota caused 185,000 acres of land to be taken away from the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa tribes, now known as the Three Affiliated (3). This was a result of the Pick-Sloan Flood Control Act. Thousands of American Indians along the river were affected by the dams from the Fort Peck Dam in Montana to the Gavins Point Dam near Yankton, South Dakota which flooded out the Isanti (Santee) and Ponca tribes. Flooding areas for construction of the dams forced the tribal nations to leave their homes and be placed in reservation borders. Since reservation land was commonly infertile, growing crops was difficult. At least 95% of the best agricultural land was taken. To find jobs for better lifestyles, many left the reservations to more urban areas. After only being considered American citizens for two decades, racial tension was high which also made finding jobs difficult. The Assiniboine,

Arikara, Mandan, Hidatsa, Húnkpapǎha Lakǎhota (Standing Rock), Mniconjou Lakǎhota (Cheyenne River), Khulwičhaša (Lower Brule), Khaŋǵí Wakpá (Crow Creek), Ihaŋktuŋwaŋ (Yankton), Istáŋti (Santee), Omaha, and Ponca were all affected by the construction of dams.

Although the dams provide profit from hydroelectric power and tourist recreation, the indigenous along the Missouri River are still fighting for the rights taken away from us throughout the centuries. “The river is the source of life that connects us all to the Mother Earth and together as relatives. The people of the Očéthi Šakówiŋ (Seven Council Fires) are the caretakers of the Mníšoše (Missouri River) which in turn takes care of its inhabitants.



The Missouri River. Photo by Selena Olvera.



Above is a picture of a medicine wheel with the four sacred colors commonly used in Native culture. It also represents the four directions.

“Haŋ, mitakuyapi. Selena emáčiyapi nahaŋ Sisíthuŋwaŋ-Waǎpéthuŋwaŋ Dakhóta Oyaté.” Hello, relatives. My name is Selena and I am Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota.” Selena is a junior at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, South Dakota and double majoring in American Indian Studies and History. Previously, Selena has done an internship with the Indian Museum of North America at Crazy Horse and the Sustainable RIVER REU program at USD. Both have been ethnohistorical analyses of American Indian tribes in the Plains. She is currently pursuing a career in museum research to improve more appropriate research methods towards cultural intelligence.

Literature Cited

1. Flood Control Act of 1944, 58 Stat. 887 1940-1945
2. Interview with Ponca Tribal representative, June 2017.
3. Lecture given by Arikara Cultural Center, July 2017