

Focus . . . Partnerships That Work— Desert Refuges and Tribes Build Rapport—and More

By Alyson Mack and Wendy Smith

When Newe and Nuwuvi tribe members visited Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge several years ago, a bighorn ram crested a hilltop to watch them. Similarly, an entire herd greeted them last fall. But when a ram showed up this spring, a time when sheep normally are absent from the refuge, the group fell silent. The ram came, the elders said, because “he heard a familiar language.”

The tribe members are part of the Newe/Nuwuvi Working Group—a partnership among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Newe (Western Shoshone) and Nuwuvi (Southern Paiute) nations, The Mountain Institute and Portland State University. Facilitated by Jeremy Spoon and Richard Arnold, the group collaborates on interpretive planning and resource management projects at Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex in southern Nevada. Spoon is a research associate at the institute and an assistant professor of anthropology at the university; Arnold is chair of the Pahrump Paiute tribe.

Tribal consultation occurs on various refuges in various forms, but this working group process provides federal agencies with a decidedly cooperative approach to tribal involvement. It underscores building rapport that extends beyond mere policy compliance.

“Most agencies typically conduct ‘check the box’ consultation, where they often only consult with the tribes as much as dictated by federal laws,” says Spoon. “Our process of both formal and informal consultation and involvement helps build real relationships and achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes.”

Arnold and Spoon accomplish this through transparency and meaningful discussions. Before tribes share information on any project, there is an informed-consent meeting, which



The Newe/Nuwuvi Working Group regularly consults on projects at Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Nevada. Here, members of the group visit the life-giving Crystal Spring at Ash Meadows Refuge. (Wendy Smith/USFWS)

explains to participants the intended use of the information and states their right to withhold or retract information. “We always make sure to have full review of our materials by both the federal agencies and the participating Native American nations,” Spoon says. “This transparency is a vital component of our work.”

Empowerment is also a key component. Spoon stresses the importance of federal agencies contacting tribes in a government-to-government manner, rather than simply relying on the individuals they know. “It is up to the Native American nation to choose who participates in a project,” he explains. “Empowering Native American representatives to collect information from their own people is a good strategy to build trust and rapport.”

“I Feel Serenity”

The working group is helping to guide interpretation for a new visitor contact

station at Pahrnagat Refuge and is scheduled to conduct a traditional pine nut harvest at Desert Refuge this fall. The group is also working with the Service and the U.S. Forest Service on a consultation handbook and a collaborative resource management plan for future projects, including interpretive exhibits, visitor facilities and restorations. Involvement from initial project planning through to completion is crucial for a sustained partnership, Spoon says. “Collaboration on exhibits at one time can shift to working on educational programming or resource management at another. The rapport built is vital for our partnerships to continue.”

For some working group members, the experience is invigorating. “I am amazed how the group functions and talks genuinely about the importance for us to be back on this land,” one tribal participant recently told Spoon. “This has been a renewal of the past. Seeing how [the refuge] is being protected, I feel serenity.”

For the Service, the process produces results it couldn’t achieve alone. And it enables the Service to tell more complete stories honoring the vitality of Newe and Nuwuvi cultures.

For all involved, the partnership is a learning process. Newe and Nuwuvi look to bighorn as teachers in life, showing the way to knowledge and wisdom. Perhaps that bighorn ram last spring was reminding the working group of an important lesson in partnerships: Never stop listening for the sound of a familiar language. 

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