

## **Ongtupqa - Salt Canyon**

Wendy Himelick  
Boatman's Quarterly Review  
Vol 21 #3

If one word could sum up every answer I heard to the question “What would you like the tourists to learn or take away from their visit to Grand Canyon?” it would be this: RESPECT. It didn't matter whether I was asking a traditional, progressive, or conservative Hopi; they all said Respect Ongtupqa. Young or old, with children or without: Respect the Canyon. Respect was the word at the beginning of the trip, and at the end of the trip respect was still the word, by that point usually uttered with reverent laughter-spiked tears.

“After doing these trips for sixteen years,” says Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, director of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office “I know that Grand Canyon guides are dedicated. The canyon is special to them and they have reverence for the environment.” It is exactly this care and respect that Hopis wish to see communicated to tourists who visit Ongtupqa.

Hand in hand with this idea of respect, which seems to develop naturally in most folks who find themselves at the bottom of Grand Canyon, is being aware of the sacredness of the area to the Hopi people. Realizing that the Hopis of today have strong spiritual and ceremonial ties to Grand Canyon, not to mention a lot of pride in how and where their ancestors lived, adds to this appreciation.

Of course education, information, and understanding are at the root of respect – but this is a fine line to walk with the Hopis. On the one hand, they pray for life, health, and happiness for everybody – including non-Hopis. But on the other hand, there are certain restrictions upon which they all agree: no visiting Sipapu or the Hopi Salt Mines. It's good for the tourists, or any bahana, to learn about the importance and sacredness of these areas, but not good for them to go see it themselves? Why?

It was explained to me to be a matter of preparation and of danger. Ongtupqa, no question about it, is considered to be a very dangerous place to Hopis. Not just anybody is allowed to visit, and those who are must undergo special processes of purification and preparation before entering and after leaving. It is understood by all that there could be very serious consequences to you and your family if these conditions are not met. What's more, it doesn't seem to matter if you believe or not – you'll become a believer when the ill effects of disrespect hit you. It is a form of protection to keep the general public away from such sensitive areas.

Too often in the past, non-Hopis have pushed the limits set by Hopis. They have not been respected. One night after dinner, the three elders on the trip discussed this and explained that they don't mean any discrimination by asking for limits and restrictions. They're asking for respect. If somebody says “don't go there,” then don't. Merv, the cultural leader on the trip, likened it to warnings about radiation. Some folks won't listen; they'll go there anyway, even if told not to. But consequences will follow: it will affect your health and could make you sick or even die. It doesn't matter if you believe in radiation or not, if you get too close you will be affected.

Most Hopis on this trip agreed that, with very few exceptions, the other folks in the Canyon were behaving just fine. As Jonah said with a laugh, “seems like mostly old folks hanging out in the shade.” There was some discussion about the practice of piling stones and everyone agreed that they don't care to see it. The ideas behind this practice were explained to

me by a long-time Grand Canyon guide and it seemed pretty cool to me: that of listening to the stones and balancing them as they asked to be placed. It seemed to be an artsy form of meditation, but the reactions of the Hopis I talked about it with ranged from laughter and rolled eyes to exasperation. Seems that Hopis don't talk to rocks in the same sort of "new-age" way! All agreed that the piled stones should be returned to their original places when finished.

But this idea of leave no trace is universal: leave the potsherds, pots and bones where you see them, do not step on the vegetation, build no cairns, simply do not alter the landscape in any way. Of course there are environmental reasons for this, but it mostly goes back to the idea of respect. Ongtupqa is the most sacred place in the Hopi worldview; it is a temple and a shrine. One of the younger men on the trip likened it to going into somebody else's church and messing it up. You just don't do that.

Feelings about Navajos in the Canyon ran very strong. The two tribal cultures are very different – the Navajos being newly arrived adaptive nomads and the Hopis being a very structured culture with age-old roots in Grand Canyon. The elders felt very strongly that they want the public to know that Hopis originated in Grand Canyon, not Navajos, and the Hopis feel very strongly that the canyon belongs to them. At a certain point the Hopis left and later the Navajos moved in. Grand Canyon was of course very important in the history of the Navajo tribe, but "we were here first" seems to be an important concept to convey.

The Hopi tribe is entitled to one trip per year, but the level of importance attached to this trip seems to far exceed this meager ration. Every single person on this trip told me that the privilege of visiting Ongtupqa was one of the greatest gifts they'd received in their entire life. Returning to the boat after hiking up the Little Colorado, Woody said "This is the one thing I've always wanted to do before I die. I can't believe I'm here seeing this. Now that I've been here I want my sons to see it too. My face hurts from smiling so much!"

Having Hopis from different clans and villages come together on this incredibly life changing trip had many effects. From what I understand, members of the different clans do not usually exchange their stories with each other and members of the different villages not only have different stories but varying dialects as well. But this trip was all about learning for everybody. Stories were shared, names and locations of sacred shrines and springs were revealed, and knowledge was passed along. One man explained that he learned much from the elders about the sacred realm of the Hopi belief system and that this knowledge made his own beliefs far more powerful as a result. This sharing of knowledge is a form of giving respect to each other and enriches everyone.

For some of the younger men the importance of learning their native Hopi language was underscored as all prayers (and much discussion) were conducted in Hopi. Merv explained to me that the kachinas to whom the Hopis pray are spirits; they represent a different sort of being, a Hopi sort of being that doesn't understand English. Hopis pray in their own words, from the heart, and all prayers are accepted. But prayers from those who are initiated and who speak in Hopi are stronger and more concentrated. Hearing so much of the Hopi language really helped some of them feel more comfortable speaking and thinking in Hopi and went a long way towards improving their language skills.

One last thought, which Leigh shared with me: "Go down with positiveness, go down with offerings, go down with respect, and the spirits will be waiting for you." Happy boating!