

SLIM BUTTES COMMUNITY REFORESTATION AND AGRICULTURE PROJECT (PINE RIDGE)

The Slim Buttes Tiospaye is one of several traditional Oglala Lakota Tiospayes (extended families) actively attempting to revitalize themselves as viable communities on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

As reported in the previous PLENTY Bulletin, Pine Ridge is the second largest and the poorest Native American reservation. Fifty by one hundred miles, with a population of 18,000, the Reservation is beset by 85% unemployment and a land base which has been decimated by the incursion of out-of-state white ranchers. These ranchers are currently leasing more than half of the total acreage for cattle grazing and paying prices amounting to a few dollars per acre.

Over the last three years, Dutch Elm disease has become a major factor contributing to a rapidly accelerating process of deforestation at Pine Ridge. American and Chinkota Elm stands, the major tree species in the primary drainage areas of the Reservation, are all dead or dying. These trees were especially thick along the White River, which cuts a 200-mile course through the Reservation, including the Slim Buttes community. The death of this foliage is having a severe impact on the Pine Ridge environment in terms of soil and water conservation, wildlife, native food, and woodland resources.

It is a bleak picture, and one which reveals, upon closer examination, an epidemic of homicide, suicide, alcoholism and other by-products of despair and isolation. The reservations are America's versions of South Africa's 'homelands'

There is another side to this depressing view of reservation life. The Oglala Lakotas have a proud and vital social and spiritual heritage. Known for their self-reliance and indomitable spirit, the Oglalas are showing signs of taking hold of their destiny anew and making things better for themselves. This positive movement is occurring from a regeneration of the Oglala sense of community, which is being manifested through the lately reactivated Tiospayes.

The Tiospaye that is behind the project at Slim Buttes is largely made up of descendants from the legendary American Horse

and Afraid of Bear Oglala clans. Today, the community at Slim Buttes consists of about 80 people, living in 20 households, spread out over a few thousand acres in the southwest corner of the Reservation.

What they have done is take 320 acres, much of it good bottom land, back out of lease for their own use. Plans call for 135 acres to be planted with 8,000 new trees and five acres will be returned to agricultural production this year. One acre will be planted in potatoes, one acre in sweet corn, one in assorted vegetables, one in root crops, and one in soybeans. The harvest from these crops will not be sold for profit but will be consumed by the community or given away to people in need. Many of the crops will be stored in root cellars or canned after harvest for use in the winter months. The soybeans will supply a program to introduce the home preparation of soyfoods to residents of the Reservation.

This project, though small in scale, is exactly the kind of effort that the Reservation needs. Pine Ridge, while incredibly poor, is rich in its resources of people and land. As renowned Native American writer and commentator, John Mohawk, has observed, the people are a generation removed from the skills necessary to mobilize their resources for their own economic benefit. All they need is a little practice and a little help getting started.

At this point, the Slim Buttes project has been awarded a \$5,000 grant by our friends at the Seva Foundation. Another \$2,000 has been promised by the Forestry Division of the B.I.A. (Bureau of Indian Affairs) for the purchase of seedlings. PLENTY USA is attempting to raise an additional \$9,000 before spring planting. Next year, the project's greatly reduced costs will be largely covered through the sale of firewood cut on the land.



Tom Cook and Loretta Afraid of Bear have spearheaded the Slim Buttes Project. Tom is the Project Director, and Loretta is on the Project Management Board.