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## A Zoo in Peril Stirs a Debate About Navajo Traditions

By CATHERINE C. ROBBINS  
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A spring sandstorm whipping into the Navajo Nation's zoo does not ruffle Yogi, a 475-pound bear sedated and sprawled on the ground for his annual checkup. Scott Bender, a veterinarian, stoops to listen to the animal's heart, using a stethoscope with tubes wrapped in delicate Navajo beadwork. A dozen zoo workers and visiting children, most of them Navajos, watch intently from outside the bear's enclosure, and Dr. Bender improvises a bear anatomy lesson.

The fate of Yogi and 77 other animals in the seven-acre zoo here in northeast Arizona has brought an unusual controversy to the Navajo people and to Kelsey Begaye, the tribe's new president. Although the issue seems simple -- even humorous, to outsiders -- it signals the stresses among the reservation's 175,000 Navajos.

Faced with economic depression, political instability and technological advances, many Navajos are turning for guidance to their traditions and culture. But in this case, the assertion of tradition and the cultural reverence for animals have combined to put the future of the 36-year-old zoo in doubt.

"It's a culture shock that we're experiencing," said Harry Walters, a Navajo who is an anthropologist and the chairman of the Center for Dineh Studies at Dineh Community College, about 50 miles north of Window Rock. "Dineh" is Navajo for "the people," what members of the tribe call themselves.

The controversy began on Jan. 11, the last day in office of the tribe's outgoing president, Milton Bluehouse. He ordered the zoo closed and its animals set free, saying that he gave the order because two Navajo women reported to him that Holy People -- a reference to Navajo deities -- had appeared to them and issued a warning.

The deities, the women told him, had said that the Navajo people were not living according to tradition and that they were upsetting the natural order by keeping animals caged in the zoo. Located in Window Rock, the capital of the Navajo Nation, the zoo is behind the Navajo Museum, amid imposing red sandstone cliffs and monoliths.

The sightings of the Holy People are similar to appearances of Mary in Western Europe, but with a critical difference, Mr. Walters said. "Rather than focus on the sightings to determine if who saw it was nuts or not -- that's what a Westerner would do -- we look at it as a message: 'Are we going the way we should?'" he said.

The protest over the zoo's closing surprised Navajo officials. During Mr. Begaye's first month in office, he received more letters on the zoo than on any other issue, said Tina James, his press officer. Most were from Navajo children wanting the zoo to remain open.

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Mr. Begaye quickly but temporarily reversed Mr. Bluehouse's order, and no animals were released. But the controversy flared on Navajo and English-language talk radio and in regional newspapers.

Larry Foster, Mr. Begaye's chief of staff, met with the Navajo Nation's Hataalii Advisory Council, a group of medicine men, which declared that it would be disrespectful to discuss the animals' fate while they were sleeping or hibernating. The group imposed a period of silence until the first thunderstorms, which generally come in April, Ms. James said.

Mr. Foster said that the president would consult with the tribal council's natural resources committee before making a final decision.

Tribal officials are considering options other than closing the zoo, including letting the current population die and not accepting other animals. Another option is to rename the zoo, because "zoo" is considered disrespectful to the animals, and call it a natural resources center. Shuttling between meetings with his new staff recently, a harried Mr. Begaye said, "By not closing it, we're saying leave it open."

The controversy comes at a difficult time for the Navajo Nation. Last year, the tribe had four presidents, including two who resigned because of financial questions. While other tribes have looked to gambling to boost their economies, Navajos have twice voted against casino development. Mr. Begaye has characterized economic conditions on the 27,000-square-mile reservation, the biggest in the United States, as worse now than during the Great Depression. Unemployment stands at 46 percent, per capita income is \$5,600, and the reservation's poverty rate is 56 percent. Revenue from natural resource development last year dropped by 25 percent.

That the zoo's animals have become caught up in the tribe's stresses is not surprising. Animals are central to Navajo culture and religious beliefs, an integral part of the natural order, the cycles of life that maintain balance. Tradition strictly governs the treatment of animals, including, for instance, how to use or dispose of every part of a deer. Grave consequences can be expected from sport hunting, because it violates the natural order that insures rain, bountiful crops and effective ceremonial life, Mr. Walters said.

"When we use these living things," he said, "we do it within this order, so we don't upset the balance."

Navajos speak fondly of animals, and the term "respect" creeps into conversations about animals.

"I used to play with bear cubs, when I was 4 or 5," said Mr. Foster.

But by tradition Navajos do not keep animals enclosed, not even inside their homes as pets, although cats, dogs and horses may live outside, around a house. The Navajo language does not have a word for "pet" and uses instead a variant of the word for "horse," an animal that was introduced by Europeans, Mr. Walters said.

This is how he described the philosophical underpinning of Navajo attitudes toward animals: "The environment is part of you. The space you occupy is a part of you. May there be beauty all around me. This is where we are."

At the zoo, Dr. Bender and Loline Hathaway, the curator, tuck in Yogi and then check the cougars and wolves. There are no exotic animals at the zoo, which houses only species that are known to Navajos.



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Dr. Bender and Ms. Hathaway, who are both white, said that many of the animals would perish if they were released. Some, like the eagle with an amputated wing, were brought to the park because of injuries that still cause problems. Others like Gummer, the toothless resident coyote, are geriatric. The reaction of animals like the cougars, which have lived at the zoo since they were cubs, is hard to predict. If they were to fend for themselves for the first time, attacks on people might occur.

Because of Federal wildlife regulations, species like the eagle and wolf are protected and cannot be released.

Ms. Hathaway, who has directed the zoo for 16 years, said visitors signing the guest register overwhelmingly support keeping it open. Two visitors who wanted it closed were animal rights advocates from Boston who took pictures to include in a mural they were making there.

The zoo was founded in 1963, when New Mexico game and fish officials gave a bear to the tribe. As stray and injured animals were brought to the zoo, it grew, with tribal financing. Over the decades, Navajo school children have visited, and medicine men have gathered eagle and hawk feathers to use in ceremonies.

"We were more relaxed then," said Martin Link, an anthropologist who was the first director of the Navajo Museum and became a de facto zoo director when he took in that first bear. In February, the Navajo Department of Natural Resources gave Mr. Link, who is white, an award for his service at both the museum and the zoo.

Mr. Link said he was not surprised at the controversy over the zoo. "As basic culture changes and parts of it start to disintegrate, the things that hold on are the negative aspects: 'Don't do that,'" he said.

Not all traditionalists favor closing the zoo. Anderson Hoskie, a medicine man who uses traditional healing practices in his work with Navajo substance abusers, said some medicine men have looked to the spirits of the zoo animals to guide and protect them, and he has used the eagle to perform the rare Eagle Chant ceremony for general health protection.

As Mr. Hoskie talked about the ancient healing ceremony, a hundred yards away in a meeting room, tribal managers were attending a seminar on the year 2000 computer problem given by Johns Hopkins University. The juxtaposition may jar outsiders, but Mr. Walters points out that over the centuries, Navajos have successfully absorbed new ways of doing things, from raising sheep to computer technology. The problem now, he said, is that "we're changing so suddenly that we have these clashes."

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