

Photo: Edgar R. Ayala

# Environmental Racism: The US Nuclear Industry And Native Americans

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**F**or decades, the United States has mined Native American lands for uranium and has tested nuclear weapons on them. Some 75 percent of the country's uranium reserves lie under native lands — lands once considered so worthless that the authorities did not mind designating them as reservations — while all nuclear testing within the United States has been carried out on native lands.

Children now play on radioactive waste from the mines simply left where it was piled up. Some of the waste has been used to build houses or schools. In many areas, the death rate among children is higher than among the miners. In New Mexico, Arizona and South Dakota, radiation from uranium mining tailings has contaminated water resources. The Shoshone have fought for decades to end nuclear testing on their land in the Nevada desert which has exposed them to levels of radiation many times higher than that generated by the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War.

Now the authorities want to dump nuclear waste on native lands as well. Two proposals are currently being mooted: a high-level radioactive dump on Yucca Mountain in the lands of the Shoshone in Nevada; and a low level

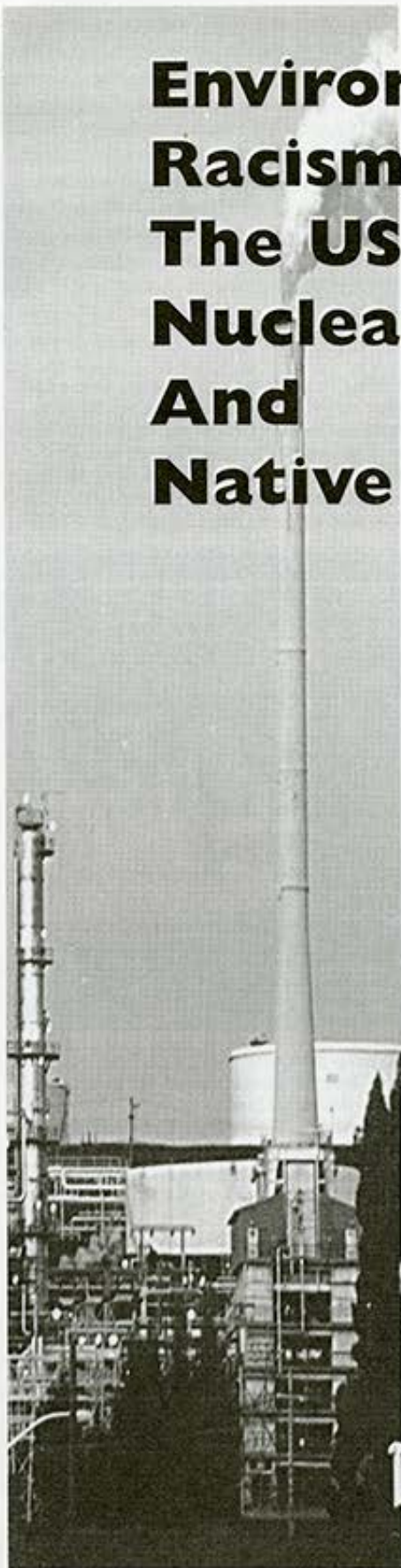
radioactive waste dump in Ward Valley in the California Mojave desert, an area which is sacred for five native peoples, the Fort Mojave, Chemehuevi, Quechan, Cocopah and Colorado River Indians.

An estimated 30,000 tons of nuclear waste are in temporary storage in the US., either in underwater pools or in steel and concrete casks, at 109 nuclear reactors across the country. But these stores are almost full. Some plants may have to shut down within the next few years unless more storage space is found. There is no central facility in the US for handling, processing, storing or disposing of nuclear waste.

The nuclear industry is attempting to force the national government — specifically the Department of Energy — to take responsibility for nuclear waste, but the department maintains it does not have the capacity to do so. It is however, mandated to "provide" a central underground storage site for the country's entire stock of high-level nuclear waste. The only candidate it has come up with is Yucca Mountain.

Millions of dollars have been spent studying the safety of burying nuclear waste at Yucca, the results of which are anything but promising. Located in a volcanic area and potential earthquake zone, the proposed site is also near ground water. Even though the site has not been approved as an underground nuclear waste dump, further studies have been commissioned and its opening has been postponed until 2010 at the earliest, several proposals currently going through the US Senate and Congress aim to send radioactive waste to Yucca Mountain from 1998 onwards. If approved, this waste would simply sit in the nuclear equivalent of a parking lot without adequate controls or equipment.

Beside the permanent site of Yucca Mountain, the Department of Energy has also suggested 21 temporary dump sites in the US for high-level waste, 18 of which are on native lands. Large sums of money have been offered to "persuade" the various tribes to accept these proposals; so far all but two nations, the Goshute and the Paiute-Shoshone, have refused. In neither of these two cases did the Tribal Council put the decision to the



tribe as a whole. Probably for good reason: previously the Goshute rejected a proposed toxic waste incinerator on their lands and decided to start a recycling business instead, while, in a survey of the Paiute-Shoshone, tribal members opposed the nuclear dump by 4 to 1.

The government and nuclear industry are also forging ahead with plans for the low-level radioactive waste dump in Ward Valley in the California Mojave desert. Despite misleading terminology, low-level radioactive waste contains the same ingredients as high-level waste; the half-life of some low level waste is tens of thousands of years. The waste would be placed in steel drums inside sealed plastic or steel containers and then buried in shallow, unlined trenches.

The proposed dump is right above a major aquifer and about 30 Kilometers from the Colorado River which flows through the valley on its way to Mexico. Scientists of the US Geological Survey warn that leaking radioactivity may end up in the river. Even the National Academy of Science's Board on Radioactive Management has recommended further safety studies. The river and its canals bring drinking water to over 20 million people in Los Angeles to

the west and Phoenix and Tucson to the south, as well as providing water for agriculture and cattle.

In Beatty, Nevada, an existing dump, similar in design to the proposed Ward Valley site and also in a desert, has started to leak and contaminate ground water, even though it is only 20 years old.

Ward Valley is in the midst of eight designated wilderness areas and is a protected area because it encompasses the few remaining habitats for the endangered desert tortoise. The valley is also sacred to five native peoples of the area. Their ancestors have walked there, their ancestors are buried there and their spirits still roam there. It is their church and graveyard. The Mojave believe they are guardians of the land, caretakers of the water and neighbors of the desert animals. If the Colorado River dies, the Mojave believe they will disappear as well. Together with the other native peoples of the area, the Mojave have organized protests and ceremonies in the area. They have set up a permanent camp on the proposed dump site where some of the elders stay. Corbin Harney, a Shoshone Elder and healer, said:

"This nuclear power is always taken to native Lands. First it's mined

from there and now the native lands are turned into dump sites. They take our water, then the poison is hurting all living things there. I don't really appreciate what the government is doing. They know it is dangerous but still they move nuclear waste through roads to seas. We the people should be out there at the front. That's why we have asked the non-Indian people to stop the government. Not only here but everywhere: in England, Puerto Rico, Russia—we should really unite! We in Nevada have too much mining and chemicals that go to the water table...In my part of the country, we saw that nuclear radiation was making our lives shorter. I've seen children born without legs: I've seen cats born with just two legs. I've seen a lot of humans die of diseases caused by radiation... Everybody has been polluting [this land] and everybody has to pitch in and make things better. If we continue to destroy things, than nobody will be able to survive at all. If we don't start working together to clean up the planet soon, there won't be anyone left to clean up our messes tomorrow. We have to unite to understand what nuclear energy does." 🐦

