

The end of the sociological studies

Despite the many contributions of the human dependency and socio-economic studies to the work of the SCS with the American Indian populations, the backlash against the presence of anthropologists and sociologists in the Soil Conservation Service began in earnest in May 1937 with the reorganization of TC-BIA under Allan Harper, its new director. The regionalization of TC-BIA's technical personnel was accompanied by a shift in the emphasis of the sociological studies. Despite the caveats that "In the first year's work...it was found that technically correct erosion control and land use program, in order to be effective, had to be adapted to the ability of the Indian land owners to carry them out..."; that, "In all of the affected regions the discovery of methods of making erosion-control and conservative land-use plans effective on a watershed or community basis was found to be the most difficult part of the total task..."⁶⁴ and despite the stated intent to focus the efforts of TC-BIA on the solution of these problems, the new memorandum of understanding undercut the organization and work of the Socio-Economic Survey unit. The memorandum called for technical teams to come under the jurisdiction of the various regions in which they functioned, but the regional conservators, with few exceptions, were less than eager to have the TC-BIA and its sociological teams invade their territory.⁶⁵ After the regionalization, a series of intensive reconnaissance studies would be performed "in conjunction with agricultural economists and rural sociologists,"⁶⁶ rather than anthropologists, to determine what more detailed studies

⁶⁴ "Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Future Organization and Work Program of Unit for Technical Cooperation - Bureau of Indian Affairs," May 10, 1937, pp. 3-4; AO Organization Correspondence; TC-BIA General Files; RG 114; NA.

⁶⁵ Letter, Walter Woehlke to Alida Bowler, October 23, 1936; SE General; TC-BIA General Files; RG 114; NA.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

should be performed. What this meant was an end to the broad cultural studies that had been envisioned and performed before. The new work would be more pragmatic and narrowly focused upon “the task of preparing erosion-control and conservative land-use plans that can be put into effective operation on the Indian reservations....”⁶⁷ The studies envisioned by Shevky and his compatriots, which were ambitious and admittedly beyond the scope of the SCS work, were no longer welcomed by the SCS, which returned to its earlier utilitarian approach to addressing the social aspects of soil conservation. The anthropologists who had dominated the TC-BIA social and economic studies up to that point were entirely turned over to the Indian Service which was then required to furnish the full-time service of one social anthropologist and one junior agricultural economist, along with various other technical personnel to TC-BIA. The proposed payroll for the Human Dependency and Economic Survey staff for 1938 included six soil conservationists; two agricultural economists; two rural sociologists; one agronomist; two engineering draftsmen; six aides, clerks and typists; and no anthropologists, sociologists, or specialists in American Indian culture or ethnology. The Administrative section, however, did retain a social ethnologist as well as Ruth Underhill as an Assistant Soil Conservationist for Education. The Human Survey Unit of TC-BIA appears to have continued to function in its revised form until July 1939, plagued by criticism from Allan Harper who persisted in his failure to see the value of the unit’s work and who found its methods unorthodox.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis in the original.

⁶⁸ Letter, Allan Harper to Eric Johnson (Assistant Dir., TC-BIA), December 30, 1937, enclosure: Memo from Allan Harper to Human Dependency Unit; AO Filing System; TC-BIA General Files; RG 114; NA.

Although the objectives and form of the human dependency studies of TC-BIA had been remade by the reorganization, the studies continued under Hugh Calkins and Shevky in Region 8 for a short period. Then, at some point in mid- to late-1938, the documentary evidence is poor, the Human Survey Section of Region 8 was subsumed under the Division of Conservation Economics, though Shevky retained the position of director and it appears that the same type of work continued at least for a time. This administrative change may have been due to the continued opposition to the work of sociologists in the SCS.

According to a 1939 memorandum which was TC-BIA's epitaph, the Human Dependency Unit had been "mainly concerned with the problem of making erosion control plans effective and operative by its studies of the degree and kind of economic dependency of the Indian populations on available resources..."⁶⁹ However, the work of the Socio-Economic and Human Dependency studies had done far more than that. They had designed and begun to implement a new means for analyzing the relationship between culture, economics, and land use among the American Indians. Though these qualitative studies were, as many argued at the time, integral to the implementation of successful erosion control projects, they were foreign to the engineer- and physical science-dominated field of soil conservation. This factor combined with limited funds and institutional disregard for the situation of American Indians in a time of national crisis to end the ambitious social research projects established in 1935.

⁶⁹ "Report to the Chief of the Soil Conservation Service on the Operation of the Unit, 'Technical Cooperation - Bureau of Indian Affairs', 1935-1939" n.d.; finding aid file "TC-BIA"; RG 114; NA.

PART II: 1953-1994

The land-use problems of the American Indians persisted long after SCS attention to them had ceased. In 1940, a Presidential reorganization plan transferred all conservation programs on lands under the jurisdiction of the U. S. Department of the Interior (USDOI) to that Department and the SCS projects on tribal lands were handed over to the BIA. However, even before the SCS was formally precluded from working on the reservations, the Conservation District system that SCS had established in 1937, which was organized under state law, had effectively prevented new SCS projects on tribal lands. Over the years, the BIA, who replaced SCS on the reservations, was unable to solve the ongoing problems of land use, subsistence, and economic underdevelopment that plagued the American Indians.

While their land was managed by the BIA, the American Indians had little say in its use and development. As the SCS had in the 1930s, the BIA planned conservation and land use by constructing new organizational systems for decisionmaking on the reservations without consulting the tribal members. Kimball and Provinse's warning in the 1940s had proved prophetic: "The continued stubborn attempts to improve a system of political or social organization without due regard to the traditional behavior and basic principles creating cooperative relations can lead only to failure."⁷⁰ Tribal members were alienated from the planning process and from their land; this alienation led to abuse and neglect of the reservations' natural resources. By the time that SCS programs resumed on the Navajo reservation in the 1970s, visiting SCS employees found badly needed and decades-old irrigation and drainage systems and conservation measures in total disrepair.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Kimball and Provinse, "Navajo Social Organization..." 24.

⁷¹ Telephone interview with Doug Sellers, former Indian Liaison (1984-1989), Soil Conservation Service, Friday, August 25, 1995.

Getting back to work on the reservations

After 1940, a number of significant changes occurred in the relationship between the Federal Government and American Indians. Perhaps most important was the beginning of an active role for the American Indian leadership as advocates for their own interests. No longer content to let the Federal Government or private business interests decide how and when the reservations would be developed, American Indians, particularly the Navajo Nation and other groups in Arizona, began a gradual process of defining their own needs and desires and educating those Federal agencies charged with aiding them about those needs. This new-found strength was formally recognized by a series of Federal legislation giving the American Indians increased autonomy and self-Government, while also guaranteeing protection and assistance through Federal programs in order to ameliorate the poor conditions in which many of the American Indians lived.

Almost 20 years after the end of the TC-BIA experiment, the Lower Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) at Parker, Arizona, organized the first Indian conservation district.⁷² The Parker Valley Soil and Water Conservation District was organized as a regular county district (since it was not yet legal to establish it under tribal code), and was recognized by the

⁷² CRIT has an interesting and unusual history. The irrigation project on the reservation dates back to the 1860s. It was considerably expanded in the 1940s when the Federal Government placed a Japanese-American "relocation" (internment) camp on the Colorado River Indian Reservation. The camp required extensive infrastructural improvements to the reservation, including paving roads and extending drainage and irrigation systems. The improvement work and the camp itself were administered by the BIA. After the Japanese-Americans were freed, the BIA used the newly developed land to settle a number of landless Navajo and Hopi Families on the Reservation. This form of "relocation" bears comparison with the Japanese internment, it is ironic that it required a detention camp to get the improvements to the reservation's lands that were so desperately needed. The BIA continued to develop additional land until 1952, eventually improving almost 20,000 acres, half of which was assigned, in 40 acres parcels, to 253 families. The BIA lent farmers equipment to work the land and helped them to form a conservation district association which allowed the BIA to give the farmers the equipment that had been on loan, and also allowed the farmers—as part of a non-profit organization—to purchase military surplus machinery. Initially, the conservation district association supported itself by renting out the earth-moving equipment it had acquired. Interview with Frank Martinez and Jim Crane, Avi, Arizona, CRIT, September 1995. "History and Legal Aspects of the Colorado River Irrigation Project," (n.d.); file: Colorado River Indian Reservation; NAC-SW.

State of Arizona in 1957. However, according to the existing interpretations of its authority, the SCS was unable to perform conservation activities on the tribal lands, despite their inclusion in a conservation district.⁷³ Beginning around 1970, prompted by the Civil Rights Act, Indian leaders throughout the country began pressing for increased USDA and SCS assistance to the reservations.⁷⁴ In 1975, the Indian Self-Determination Act (PL 94-638) was passed, allowing Indian tribes to adopt standard conservation legislation on their reservations under tribal code. This provided a legal basis for the tribes to establish their own conservation districts. The same year, SCS issued a policy stating that programs available to individuals under PL 74-46, passed April 27, 1935, were available to Indian Reservations, tribal Governments, and tribal members. However, the SCS was still, in practice, prohibited from engaging in work on lands under USDOJ jurisdiction. The internal contradictions of SCS policy were obvious.

On July 1, 1977 the USDA Office of General Counsel issued a reinterpretation of the 1940 presidential reorganization⁷⁵ which permitted SCS work on tribal lands situated within the boundaries of a conservation district. On November 28 of the same year, a formal Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Parker District and the USDA. SCS assistance to the Parker Valley SWCD commenced on August 13, 1978 with the establishment of

⁷³ This was the accepted interpretation, but in fact, in 1953, the Comptroller General Lindsay Warren published an opinion which allowed the SCS to provide assistance on lands under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, provided that the lands were within a conservation district and the Department of the Interior had no objections. See [B-115665], "Comptroller General Warren to the Secretary of Agriculture, October 1, 1953," *Decisions of the Comptroller General* 33: 133-6. The opinion however, was primarily directed at small areas of Federal land interspersed with private land whose owners were trying to implement conservation practices, not at the larger Indian Reservations which, at least in theory, had conservation programs administered by the BIA. As a result, this reinterpretation had no effect on the actual extension of SCS programs to Indian land and its implications for such work appear to have been ignored. See "Technical Assistance on Indian Lands," (n.d.) enclosed with letter from Williams to State Conservationists, 3/5/73; Indian Lands (Authority to Work On); NAC-SW.

⁷⁴ "Indian Reservations in Arizona," (1977); NAC-SW.

⁷⁵ Soil Conservation Service, Office of the General Counsel, Inter-agency Memo #28, July 1, 1977.

the SCS Parker field office.⁷⁶ The following year, Jim Crane and Frank Martinez, the staff at Parker, began a massive cooperative study of the area and drew up an ambitious plan of work, much of which has been implemented. With the assistance and support of Bill Martin, the BIA representative at Parker, farmers were soon approaching the SCS for assistance.

Despite the success of the Parker office and the growing eagerness of other reservations for SCS assistance, it was not until 1980 that the Secretary of Agriculture issued a memorandum extending eligibility for all USDA services to the American Indians on tribal lands.⁷⁷ Between 1980 and 1992 six conservation districts were organized under tribal law, all in Arizona.⁷⁸ However, despite the huge increases in the amount of land serviced by the SCS (in Arizona land eligible for SCS services increased from 22.3 million acres to 42.2 million acres⁷⁹ overnight), and SCS resource inventories which estimated that 80% of all

⁷⁶USDA, Economics, Statistics & Cooperative Service, Forest Service, and Soil Conservation Service, "Plan of Work: Colorado River Indian Reservation River Basin Cooperative Study," March 1979; Colorado River Indian Reservation (CRIT) file; NAC-SW. The SCS Parker Field Office deserves special mention because of its unique relationship with the SWCD, the BIA and the Reservation. CRIT and the Parker Valley SWCD have a unique history in terms of their multi-tribal orientation, early establishment, and in the particular relationship between the SWCD and the SCS. Since 1978, when SCS and Parker signed their Memorandum of Understanding and established the first Indian field office, the Parker office has had the same District Conservationist—Jim Crane. Frank Martinez, a member of CRIT and the Parker SWCD Board also came to work for the Parker field office in 1978 and remained there until his recent retirement. Frank's ties to community, the unusual partnership that Frank and Jim developed with the BIA representative in the area, and Jim's long-term presence on the reservation allowed them to build up the personal relationships so essential to effective work on the reservations. They also have an intimate knowledge of the political processes as well as the special needs of the reservation. They have been able to implement comprehensive studies of the reservation and aid in the development of long-term development goals. All of these factors combine to make this a uniquely effective office. To my knowledge, this is the only office servicing American Indians that can claim such continuity; in most offices, rapid turn-over and burn-out is the norm. Their dedication and accomplishments are worthy of special mention.

⁷⁷ U. S., USDA, Secretary's Memo no. 2006, "Conservation Assistance to Indians on Tribal Lands," January 18, 1980. Though I have been able to find no background information on the Secretary's decision, I suspect that it was related to the discussions he had with Navajo leaders in late 1979 regarding the inadequacy of USDA service to the Navajo Nation. This is discussed in more detail below.

⁷⁸ "Resolution: Amendments to the NACD bylaws," August 8, 1992; Navajo folder; files of the Suzanne Schenkle, American Indian Coordinator, NRCS Headquarters, Washington, DC [hereafter NAC-HQ].

⁷⁹ Draft Policy Memorandum on Assistance to Indians and Bureau of Indian Affairs, 5/16/77; NAC-SW.

Indian land needed conservation work, there was no increase in staffing when work began on the Indian lands and the SCS budget was actually decreased in certain years.⁸⁰

Over the decades, the SCS's approach toward conservation in general had changed and despite the limited manpower and funds that SCS could offer, the change meant considerable improvement for the American Indians. When programs were re-instituted on the tribal lands, they were no longer reservation-wide, long-term, general land use and conservation programs designed by the SCS and imposed upon the tribes. Rather, the SCS focused its efforts, with some exceptions, on specific requests by individual farmers for assistance. This change eliminated many of the planning problems that had plagued SCS work in the 1930s. Since the SCS was responding to requests for aid for specific projects, they generally did not need to be concerned with the appropriateness of the project for the Indian land owner or land user, since it was the farmer who initiated the program. This system also bypassed the problem of to whom the SCS staff needed to address their programs, they no longer needed to discover how land-use communities functioned because it was the land use community itself that requested aid. This approach also had the distinct advantage of returning control over the land to the American Indians themselves.

American Indian cooperators were surprised to find that within the SCS's program, they took control of the management of their own lands, defined their own needs and development priorities, and designed the program of assistance that the SCS would provide through its field offices. This system did, however, cause new problems. Because the projects were farmer-initiated, potential cooperators needed to know what types of assistance were avail-

⁸⁰ "Rural Development Report on SCS Activities and Programs Benefiting American Indians as Requested by Senator Barry Goldwater," October 6, 1983; NAC-SW.

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able and how to ask for it. For many of the American Indians, outside of the well-served Navajo Reservation, local SCS offices were inaccessible, both physically and culturally. Besides the unavoidable complications of location and communication, some staff at SCS field offices lacked sensitivity to the needs and interests of the American Indians, maintaining racial stereotypes about the American Indians.⁸¹ At the same time, the extension of SCS services to Indians created competition with white land-users who had been the traditional beneficiaries of SCS assistance and who feared that assistance to Indian land users would reduce their share of the SCS's resources.⁸² This was one reason, aside from their assertion that they were sovereign entities separate from the states, that many tribes insisted on establishing their own conservation districts under tribal code rather than joining existing conservation districts organized under state law.

⁸¹ Doug Sellers interview.

⁸² See Draft Policy Memorandum on Assistance to Indian and Bureau of Indian Affairs, 5/16/77; NAC-SW.

Old and new issues in culture and conservation

The change in SCS's administrative approach to conservation on the reservations did not end the problems of cultural misunderstanding that had complicated its earlier efforts; so in 1988, SCS's National Sociologist organized a workshop in Phoenix, Arizona to address the ongoing cultural problems of SCS projects and administration on American Indian lands in the Southwest.⁸³ The problems and questions that the workshop participants raised were very similar to those addressed in the 1930s. Basic problems continued to include a lack of knowledge among the field personnel of the cultural norms, social behavior, and political organization of the reservations, all of which were necessary to interact with the people living on the reservations, and to design and implement appropriate conservation plans; a failure to understand the self-defined needs of the reservation populations; and a lack of consistently maintained histories of work with the reservation populations, forcing each new employee to begin from scratch, without background information or guidance based on past successes or failures. Forty years after the Human Dependency Surveys, the SCS still did not know what the basic human problems of the reservations were, how to approach conservation among the American Indians, or even how the decisionmaking process on the reservations functioned. One of the ongoing problems cited by several people was a continuing lack of trust and personal relationships between SCS personnel and the reservation population.

⁸³ USDA, SCS, *Working More Effectively with American Indians: Workshop Proceedings, march 7-10, 1988, Phoenix, Arizona* (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1990).

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Successful SCS staff were frequently promoted out of field positions, leaving new and often inexperienced field staff to reestablish the network of personal relations that were so important for effective work on the reservation. The conference seemed to suggest that the cultural gulf that had complicated early conservation work had widened rather than narrowed over time.

These issues were stressed in hearings on the 1990 Farm Bill, where American Indian leaders argued that among the most serious barriers to Indian enrollment in the numerous USDA programs for which they were eligible “were the cultural and physical isolation of the American Indian population centers...and a lack of information on Indian affairs by local USDA employees.”⁸⁴ Clearly, cultural and interpersonal issues still reigned among the obstacles to improving the human and physical environment on reservations.

In response to the unmet needs of the American Indian rural populations, the 1990 Farm Bill (FACT Act) required the SCS to provide assistance to any reservation or tribal group that requested it. The assistance was to be in the form of a consolidated USDA office (with ASCS, FmHA, etc.) open at least one day a week on the reservation in office space provided by the local tribal council. The Act resulted in 77 tribes requesting additional assistance from SCS.⁸⁵ Though making the services of the SCS more physically accessible, the Act was a long way from solving the more complex problems of social and cultural accessibility.

The following year, the SCS published the results of an on-going survey of participation in SCS programs by American Indians, both continental and Alaskan. The survey, initiated in 1988 by the Council for Tribal Employment Rights (CTER) and SCS, indicated that

⁸⁴ “Report Language” [draft for report on USDA compliance with 2501(g)]; Folder 2501(g)-Background; NAC-HQ.

⁸⁵ See “SCS Activities Sec 2501 (g) 1990 Fact Act” (n.d.); Folder 2501(g); NAC-HQ.

despite the best efforts of the Government, only one-third of the respondents were familiar with SCS programs, and nearly all of those familiar with the programs had participated in them. The main reason given for lack of participation was a lack of information, and 86% of the respondents were interested in receiving training in the USDA programs available to them. The survey put forth a number of recommendations for increasing participation by American Indians. Among these were an information strategy designed specifically for the American Indian communities with “information and assistance which is culturally sensitive and utilizes Indian...communications networks,” and an orientation and training module to educate SCS personnel about American Indians and “to break down any real or artificial barriers to their full participation” in SCS programs.⁸⁶ Clearly, the major obstacles to SCS work on the reservation continued to be problems of communication, sensitivity, and prejudice: problems of culture.

Recognizing this, the SCS initiated a series of conferences in 1991 to raise cultural awareness among SCS employees. The “Harmony Workshops” placed a medium sized group of SCS personnel (50-100) in an experiential learning environment where they were instructed by American Indians in the history and culture of the tribes in their region, in cultural and behavioral norms, in American Indian religion and mythology, particularly as it related to the land, and most important, sensitized to the differences in American Indian and “dominant society” concepts that affected planning and working relationships, like time, future and present, and individual behavior and values. Though the workshops received high praise from most participants, those people most closely involved in ongoing work with the American Indians were more equivocal, reflecting that the workshops were more oriented toward fostering an appreciation for American Indian culture (a worthy goal) than teaching the skills and knowledge necessary to work with the American Indian populations on tribal lands.

⁸⁶USDA, SCS National Bulletin No. 300-1-6, su: LTP-Participation of Indians and Alaskan Natives in SCS Programs-Survey Report, March 6, 1991, attachment: report summary, p. 5; Assistance to American Indians; NAC-SW.

*The Navajo Nation: a case study*⁸⁷

In 1979, members of the Navajo Emergency Services Coordinating Committee approached the Secretary of Agriculture, Bob Bergland, with their concerns that the Navajo Nation was not being adequately served by the USDA. The most pressing needs that they identified were for planning funds to develop a comprehensive land use plan, a USDA office to be located on the Reservation in Window Rock specifically to service the Navajo Nation, and for a liaison who spoke Navajo to work under the direction of the tribal council to educate the Nation about the available programs. At the time, USDA administered all of its programs through county and state offices, both of which had a history of excluding the Navajo from their work.⁸⁸ In order to facilitate the extension of SCS programs to the Nation the Soil Conservation Service entered into an InterGovernmental Personnel Agreement (IPA) with the Navajo Nation. Under the agreement, the SCS assigned Frank Parrill to assist in the formation of conservation districts on the Reservation.

Parrill spent several years working with the Department of Natural Resources of the Navajo Nation, speaking at chapter meetings, holding educational workshops, providing tech-

⁸⁷ This should in no way suggest that the Navajo reservation is representative of all of the diverse conditions on the many different American Indian reservations, groups, rancherias, and other communities across the county. One of the main points of this paper is that there is a wide range of conditions that need to be addressed on a reservation-by-reservation basis, rather than through unitary, global policies. The Navajo Nation has been chosen as the focus of this section for a number of reasons: the scope of this paper prevents addressing a more representative sample of tribal groups; the Navajo Nation, the largest American Indian reservation, is the site of the earliest SCS work with American Indians, and is a good example of the earlier approach of the SCS in the 1930s, exemplifying both failures (the livestock reduction plans) and successes (the Kimball-Provinse research); there is more information readily available on the Navajo Nation's conservation work than on other reservations; The Navajo Nation has been the most active in recent years in reestablishing a relationship with the SCS/NRCS; the Arizona State office of SCS has been one of the most active in an ongoing relationship with American Indian cooperators on a large scale.

⁸⁸ Chester Yazzie (Chair of the Emergency Services Coordinating Committee, Navajo Nation) to Bob Bergland (Secretary of Agriculture), August 27, 1979, enclosed with Memo, USDA, Office of the Secretary, su: USDA Program on the Navajo Reservation, October 25, 1979; Navajo; NAC-SW.

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nical advice and planning services, facilitating the passage of legislation and the formation of conservation districts, and building trust in the community between the SCS and the Navajo people. There was considerable enthusiasm for the programs which Parrill brought to the Reservation. In April 1979, he wrote, "I am continually meeting new people...and it continues to amaze and encourage me at [*sic*] their concern over their problems and their desire for help in trying to solve these problems."⁸⁹ At the same time, he encountered many of the same difficulties that his successors would find; as he reported to the State Conservationist, "The motto I have developed after almost one year is: Success comes slowly, and progress takes small steps, but it does happen."⁹⁰ The decision-making process in the Navajo Nation was completely different, and far more time consuming, than that to which SCS personnel were accustomed. Decisions about planning and land use, and almost everything else, had to be initiated on the local level within the Chapters. Chapter members would reach a concensus, often over several months, and then present their decision to a tribal council representative, or grazing district committee member. There were over 100 chapters on the Reservation, most held their meetings on Sunday evenings, and it was at these meetings that most business was conducted and most local decisions were made, so it was at these Chapter meetings that SCS personnel like Parril, if they wished to be heard, had to make their presentations to the Navajo people. Because of the difficulty in communicating across the reservation—distances between people were great, roads were few and generally poor, telephones were almost unheard of—Parrill had to attend the Navajo chapter meetings regularly. However, going out to the chapter meetings also gave Parrill a unique opportunity to learn about the culture and life of the people with whom he worked. In a monthly report with an unusually philosophical tone, Parrill wrote, "Everyday is a new experience. The 'old ones' truly have a deep love for

⁸⁹Parrill to Rockenbaugh, su: Monthly Report - April 1979, 19 April 1979; Navajo—Monthly Narrative Reports April 1979-June 1982; NAC-SW.

⁹⁰Ibid.