

Standing Rock Controversy



Sioux Pride at Wakpala Public School, Standing Rock Reservation, South Dakota, 2015 by Sue Reynolds

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. How do you exhibit pride in your school?
2. How do you exhibit pride in your family's nationality?
3. How do you exhibit pride in your country?

The photographs below were taken on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

Despite many hardships, tribal identity and pride remain strong. When the Wakpala public school burned down, the Lakota community raised money to build a modern, K-12 grade school. Pride in who they are is important to the Lakota people, especially when negative stereotypes are developed about Native Americans and reservations by non-Native neighbors.



Left: "No DAPL" Protest Truck, Wakpala, Standing Rock Reservation, South Dakota, 2016 by Sue Reynolds



Right: "No DAPL" Sign at Lake Oahe: What's Our Future? Standing Rock Reservation, South Dakota, 2016 by Sue Reynolds

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The painted and hand built signs in the photographs above protest construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) near the water supply of the Standing Rock Reservation. The backstories of these two photographs help set the scene for current protest and conflict between the Lakota Sioux, who live on the Standing Rock Reservation, and the U. S. Government over the pipeline project.

Most recently, world-wide attention was drawn to a standoff between the Lakota tribe of the Standing Rock Reservation located in North and South Dakota and the U. S. Government over protection of the reservation's drinking water, which comes from the Missouri River. Originally, the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) was scheduled to be constructed near Bismarck, which is North Dakota's capitol, but Bismarck's citizens didn't want the pipeline close to their city because oil pipelines have broken and they feared a break would pollute their drinking water.

To accommodate Bismarck's concerns, the pipeline's planned path was moved away from the city. When the new path for the pipeline revealed that it would run under the Missouri River, near the North Dakota portion of the Standing Rock Reservation, which is where the reservation gets its drinking water, the Lakota people living in the area became alarmed. The tribe began to protest this several years ago, drafting an online petition to block construction of the pipeline in their area. The Lakota were attempting to protect the source of their drinking water and the preservation of their sacred sites and burial areas against oil pollution that would severely damage the area if the pipeline broke.

As the world watched the Standing Rock controversy, the Lakota were joined by other tribes and indigenous peoples worldwide, as well as other U. S. and international peoples at several encampments, some sitting directly in the pipeline's path.

Note and Discuss:

The protest sign painters -- Native people prefer the term water protectors -- of the truck above chose the colors red and white, and photographer Sue Reynolds photographed this scene set against a blue sky. What do these three colors symbolize to you? What statement do you think the colors and subject of this photograph make to the U. S. Government?

In the photograph on the right, Fawn and Devin stand near a "NO DAPL" sign made of rocks on the shore of Lake Oahe on the Standing Rock Reservation. Lake Oahe was created from 1948 to 1959 when the U. S. Government dammed the Missouri River near Standing Rock. Prior to this the Lakota and other tribes lived along the Missouri's fertile river bottoms, which were abundant with wildlife to feed the people and lush grasses for their horses and cattle. Lakota elders tell stories of Wakpala, which means "Creek" in Lakota. It was an entire prosperous town, which was flooded after the river was dammed and the Lakota people were relocated to higher ground on the plains where the harsher landscape and climate made life more difficult for them.

These photographs symbolize the Lakota people's uncertain future, the ongoing breaking of promises the government made to the Sioux regarding their land and resources, and set the scene for discussion of the Dakota Access Pipeline controversy.

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. Is Standing Rock a name that you have heard in the news?
2. What do you know about the controversy over the proposed location of the Dakota Access Pipeline close to the Standing Rock Reservation's water supply?

Note: To prepare for discussion/writing, older students can research this topic in advance.

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Oceci Sakowin Protest Camp near Cannonball, North Dakota, 2016 by Sue Reynolds

Read through Victor Charlo's poem below.

Elder's Week

We are Indian.
We make our stand.
But this year we ask elders,
moon, stars, old times
to remind us how we once
were. Drum talks to clay cliffs
that watched our blood ride
before time. How was it?

Songs ring memories
like dark water.

Put Sey (Good Enough), by Victor A. Charlo.

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. What "stand" could the poem be referring to?
2. How does this poem relate to Native American History?
3. How does this poem relate to the more contemporary Standing Rock controversy?
4. Why does Victor Charlo feel it is important to ask the elders about the past?
5. Tribal elders are respected and revered for their experience and knowledge. Are elders respected and revered in your family, community or county? Discuss.
6. How does "dark water" relate to Native American history?
7. How does "dark water" relate to the Standing Rock controversy?

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Local law enforcement used rubber bullets and water hoses to try to force people to leave the encampments but failed. Social media and news outlets took up the tribe's cause and thousands of people from across the United States traveled to Standing Rock to show their support, bring supplies, or join the encampments. Support groups included U. S. veterans, representatives from Black Lives Matter and many religious organizations, celebrities, every-day Americans and internationals. After the onslaught of support for the Lakota protest, President Obama agreed to pause construction and look for an alternative route for the Pipeline that would not endanger the reservation's water supply.

The Lakota and the world remain wary and on alert, as the Standing Rock victory was short-lived. Newly elected U. S. President Trump rescinded the decision to halt construction of the pipeline and find an alternative route, which means resistance and struggle will follow.

Note: This current events topic can be researched and followed.

Over much of its history, the U. S. government has lied to, relocated, punished, disrespected, and killed Native Americans and done everything in its power to abolish their religion and culture. Although their history has included many discouraging, horrific and sad events, Native American pride endures.

What is promising is the world-wide support the Lakota people received during the 2016 Standing Rock controversy. More Americans, in particular, are standing with Standing Rock and will continue to do so as the pipeline construction plan continues. Progress is never a straight line, but support for Standing Rock and resources such as this can bridge the gap of understanding between Native Americans and non-Natives.

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. What is your response to the decision to move the pipeline from the Bismarck area to a location near the reservation?
2. What arguments have been used to defend the decision to build a pipeline near the Standing Rock Reservation, where the drinking water for the Lakota people might be contaminated?
3. In small groups discuss: Are there similarities between the Battle of Little Big Horn and the Standing Rock controversy? Discuss.
4. How does the U. S. Government's treatment of Native Americans in this controversy make you feel?
5. What do you think would improve trust and relations between Native Americans and the U. S. Government?

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