

Indigenous people blocking oil pipeline doing 'spirit work'

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue



Authorities in Morton County, North Dakota, remove Dale American Horse Jr. (center), of Rosebud, South Dakota, from a construction digger to which he locked himself to stop work on the Dakota Access Pipeline Project. Photo by Tom Stromme, *Bismarck Tribune*.

Hundreds of people from dozens of indigenous nations across North America have flocked to river banks near Cannonball, North Dakota, to block an oil pipeline that they see as threatening a reservation's water supply and sacred land.

[Several groups set up what they call spirit camps](#) near the spot where the Dakota Access Pipeline would cross the Missouri River, a little more than a mile from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation's water intake. Their numbers swelled into the thousands in August and early September. People have locked themselves to machines to stop construction, leading to arrests.

On September 3, the Dakota Access company's security guards sprayed mace in the faces of unarmed people and allowed dogs to bite them, according to organizers of opposition to the pipeline.

“We do everything in prayer,” said Chas Jewett, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe who lives in Rapid City, South Dakota, and has joined the camps’ efforts. “What’s happening up there is spirit work.”

The organizers charge that the pipeline was approved without adequate environmental or archaeological investigation and that it will damage sacred sites, burial grounds, and wildlife habitat.

About 90 tribal councils have formally declared support for Standing Rock, and more than 60 nations have sent people to the site in North Dakota, one local pastor estimated.

National leaders in the [Episcopal Church](#), the [United Church of Christ](#), and [the Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#) have also backed the efforts to honor the treaties and ensure the safety of the water supply.

The \$3.78 billion project of Energy Transfer Partners, based in Texas, plans to move 470,000 barrels per day from the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota through South Dakota and Iowa into Illinois, a total distance of 1,172 miles.

Multiple state offices of the Dakota Access Pipeline project did not return calls requesting comment. The company’s [fact sheet for the pipeline](#) states that pipelines are “the safest, most efficient means of transporting energy resources.”

Ron Ness, president of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, wrote in the *Bismarck Tribune* that the pipeline project has “state-of-the-art infrastructure . . . far above and beyond what’s required by federal regulations” to prevent oil getting into the water. Those blocking the pipeline “have effectively declared that the laws of their states and the United States do not work for them.”

Jewett said that many indigenous peoples globally have seen their land polluted by similar efforts.

“Resource extraction is a horrible deal,” she said. “Across the world, indigenous people are rising, and we’ll help everyone get to the point we need to, where we can live.”

A group from Standing Rock created the first spirit camp on April 1 to protect land just north of their reservation. Others swelled their numbers starting in early August, when the tribe received notice of the day that construction would begin.

Jewett heard stories in the spirit camps about how people from Standing Rock went to the construction site that day. A group of women blocked the machines and were arrested. Leaders of the tribe's government were then arrested. Media coverage inspired others to join them. Jewett met a Navajo man who came because he saw a photo of the women being arrested.

The arrests, especially of tribal chairman Dave Archambault, created unity, with "sometimes longtime allies, sometimes longtime foes" now in alignment, Jewett said. "What's happened here, through prayer really, is we've gotten the chance to show who we are. Who we are is a bunch of people who care about water, who care about each other."

Jewett, who practices the Lakota faith, spoke of people drawing strength from their religious practice, which was banned for decades. Beginning in the late 1970s [indigenous people gained the legal right to openly have religious ceremonies](#) such as sun dances and sweat lodges. For her, the spirit camps represent a resurgence of faith from a time more than 100 years ago.

"The only thing that I have to compare to is a genetic memory," she said. "Nothing like this has ever happened in my lifetime—I'm 44 years old."

The Standing Rock Lakota Sioux and other Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people filed injunctions and lawsuits against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other entities to stop construction. They invoke treaty laws as well as legislation such as the National Historic Preservation Act and have filed documents showing dozens of sacred sites in the pipeline's path, according to organizers.

At the same time, Jewett said, the action is about something more basic than treaties—the human need for clean water. "We signed a treaty so that our people could live. It hasn't been held up one bit since gold was found."

The Great Sioux Nation did not give up the land the pipeline plans to pass through in its 1868 treaty with the United States, noted John Floberg, rector of three Episcopal churches on Standing Rock Indian Reservation. After the discovery of gold sparked a rush to the Black Hills in the 1870s, the Sioux came together to defend themselves from attacks by the U.S. Cavalry, which was protecting the miners, he said.

"It hasn't been since then that this kind of significant unity has been found not only in the Sioux Nation itself but also among native people from all over North America,"

Floberg said.

Members of Floberg's congregations, who live near the site they are trying to protect, have been involved in the pipeline opposition, joining in the gatherings and bringing food to the camps. [The Episcopal diocese](#) made a monetary donation to the tribe for the camp and is a channel for individuals to make donations.

"There's a broad spectrum of people who are in opposition to this particular pipeline," Floberg said. "There are some who don't believe we should be extracting any Bakken crude oil out of the ground."

Others from his church believe that the U.S. government needs to live up to its treaty obligations, and that did not happen after the Corps of Engineers put the pipeline route across the Missouri River on a fast track. He noted that there was a study of the effects of putting the pipeline north of Bismarck. It was determined that there was too much risk to the city's water intake, he said. Meanwhile, the pipeline would run just north of the water source for the Standing Rock Reservation—which sits in the poorest county in North Dakota and one of the poorest counties in the United States—on land that holds multiple levels of value for them.

"This area has been known to be inhabited by native people, not just Sioux, for hundreds of thousands of years," Floberg said. "There are sacred sites there, there are burial sites there, there are historical sites there."

Any place where the Lakota people held a ceremony is sacred, he said.

"A sweat lodge becomes the center of the universe when people enter it to pray," Floberg said, akin to how the altar in the Eucharist becomes the throne of God in heaven.

This particular piece of land, which stretches from the Cannonball River north to the Hart River, was also a sanctuary in another way, he said. The three peoples who inhabited it were historical enemies, but they agreed never to shed each other's blood there.

Among the nations at the site today, there is also a commitment to gather peacefully—weapons are banned among those camping.

Nevertheless, local authorities declared a state of emergency in late August and have sent armed officers to the area. Authorities heard there were pipes being

loaded, which they assumed were pipe bombs. In fact, they were the sacred pipes used in prayer, Floberg said.

At the site being protected from construction, Floberg read a prayer that specifically speaks of reconciliation, of all being brought in Christ's embrace.

"In North Dakota, this has turned into a real hotbed for racism to raise its ugly head," he said. For example, sheriff's patrols are shadowing school buses going past the site. Floberg imagined children being told that they need protection from the indigenous people protesting. "How do you make that statement to an eight-year-old kid without racism being transmitted to another generation?" —the *Christian Century*

A version of this article appears in the September 28 print edition under the title "Indigenous people gather to block oil pipeline."