

FELLOWSHIP BRIEF

Ceramics is to Clay: What Pueblo Pottery Traditions Teach Us About Indigenous Environmental Relations

Carine Rofshus - Master of Environmental Science '26

The Need.

Environmental law in the United States affords Tribal Nations limited protections of traditional resources, such as ancestral sites, animals, minerals, and plants important for cultural continuity. Further, the legal protection of sacred sites depends on subjecting their integrity to a facilitation, implementation, management, and legal process that threatens their sanctity. The Indigenous Environmental Justice movement emphasizes that natural resource extraction of fossil fuels and minerals remains an ongoing threat to these fragile places. The continuance of Pueblo pottery traditions in the U.S. Southwest for the last 900 years offers critical insights into the resilience and survivance of cultural traditions despite environmental challenges. The research questions addressed here include:

- How are Indigenous connections to the environment expressed through the ceramics-making process?
- What do potters identify as environmental impacts on the process of making traditional Pueblo pottery?
- What practices in the process of making pottery contribute to the tradition's resilience?

Okhúwa Munu: A Dialogue between Cultures and Nature by Stina Folkebrant (Swedish) and David Naranjo (Santa Clara Pueblo) Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, NM



The Project.

This project draws on site visits and interviews conducted from May 2025 – April 2026 in Santa Fe, New Mexico and the surrounding region. Santa Fe offers unique proximity to Pueblo communities, federal lands, museums, galleries, archaeological and historical sites, national labs and scientists. This research was a multidisciplinary collaboration between Pueblo potters, who served as traditional knowledge holders and western scientists from the fields of archaeology, geology, materials sciences, and nuclear engineering.

Hopi, Jemez, Ohkay Owingeh, San Ildefonso, Santa Clara Pueblo, and Tesuque Tribal Nations were represented. Drawing from storytelling practices expressed in ethnographic interviews, the literature, and the arts, a total of 25 individuals were interviewed, which consisted of 13 Pueblo potters and 12 western scientists. Themes were also repeated by several individuals in participant observations, which included approximately 50+ conversations with potters.

The Findings.

Pueblo potters emphasized the spiritual importance of pottery is inseparable from their ancient and intergenerational connection to clay. The quotes below demonstrate this.

“The role of pottery in our life is to bring the human into oneness with the earth through clay.” -Tessie Naranjo (Santa Clara Pueblo)

“It’s [pottery’s] primary function is to link generations. Mothers, daughters, fathers, sons with each other, with their pasts, with their future.” -Dimitri Brown (Santa Clara Pueblo)

Potters identified the following environmental impacts to the process of making clay:

- Pueblo potters defined contamination as anything that disrupts the spiritual relationship.
- Potters noted that issues of resources acquisition or scarcity for making pottery--clay, mineral slips, and vegetative pigment--are currently tied to private property laws, historical land dispossession, and climate change.
- Chemical contamination from heavy metals and radioactive waste was also identified as health concern by potters and environmental experts
- Interviews on environmental remediation experts noted context determines contamination pathways. This means practices for gathering clay serve as safeguards that protect people from potential impacts

Potters emphasized their traditions are resilient for their creation and recreation of community. The significance of these traditions is underscored in statements that pottery is integral to one’s identity.

The Impact.

Qualitative interviews from Pueblo potters interfaced with geologists and materials scientists indicated a need for a quantitative analysis of heavy metals present in clay sources for concerned communities. We recommend future work is led and co-designed by participating Tribes in accordance with their cultural and data sovereignty protocols to ensure proper legal protections.



The Student.

Carine Rofshus – Western Resource Fellow | Carine is a Master’s in Environmental Science Candidate at the Yale School of Environment. Her research focuses on the integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and cultural resources stewardship through working with Indigenous communities in the U.S. Southwest. She is particularly interested in the relationship between traditional ceramics processes and the environment as place-making practices. Carine currently serves as a NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Reparation Act) Assistant for the Yale Peabody Museum. [See what Carine has been up to.](#) [Blog](#)