

A Review of *The Navajo and the Animal People: Native American Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Ethnozoology*

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The Navajo and the Animal People: Native American Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Ethnozoology by Pavlik, Steve. 2014. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing. 264 pp.
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I have lived and worked among the Diné (the autonym for the Navajo) for four years. Early on I remember remarking to a colleague that all the Diné seem to have dogs outside their homes. He replied that some of the dogs were for herding sheep, others for guarding, but mostly the dogs protect the homes from any external negativity. The Diné people believe dogs can absorb that kind of energy without any harm to themselves and they protect the family in that way.

Somewhat like my experience with the Diné and their dogs, *The Navajo and the Animal People* is a book about the Diné and their relationship to animals, predatory carnivores in particular. The author weaves together his own experiences, traditional stories, and natural history to create an intricate Navajo rug pattern that illustrates the system of knowledge that the Diné have about animals. Steve Pavlik was most recently an instructor at Northwest Indian College in Bellingham, Washington, where he taught Native American Studies and Native Environmental Science. He lived and worked with the Diné for many years, forming lasting relationships that find their way into the pages of this book. Sadly, he died the same year that his book was published.

Each chapter was originally a conference presentation, most of them at the American Indian Studies section of the Western Social Science Association's annual conference. This gathering was frequented by Vine Deloria, Jr., Daniel Wildcat, and others associated. A few of these presentations have been previously published and the work includes copious references to animal stories and correlative ceremonies published in the anthropological record.

Pavlik describes in his book that central to Dine knowledge concerning animals is the concept of *hozho*, which can be translated as balance, harmony, or beauty. Sickness is seen as a loss of balance and disrespect to an animal can be the cause of this imbalance. A ceremony to the animal can restore this balance and health. Many Diné behaviors toward animals are meant to show respect, or conversely, out of fear of losing balance. Each of Pavlik's chapters on specific animals addresses this dynamic between the Diné and animals.

Animals are not classified as good or evil in themselves, but all animals are capable of moral decisions that can be interpreted as bad or good just like humans. Animals are capable of both harm and healing. In order not to offend an animal, each one is referred to by a euphemism and the real name being used only for ceremonial purposes. Bears, for instance, are referred to as the “mountain people.” Sickness related to bears is cured by the Mountainway Ceremony, which lasts for nine days. It can only be held in the period after the first frost of autumn and before the first thunder in spring. The bear is seen as very powerful, both physically and spiritually, and bear meat is almost never eaten. There are still bears on the Navajo Nation land, especially in the Chuska and Lukachukai mountains.

By contrast, the last wolves on the Navajo Nation were killed off by 1950 because they were seen to be a threat to livestock. The wolf is referred to as “large coyote” in common speech and as “big trotter” ceremonially. The Diné language also uses the same word “hunter” for both the wolf and the act of hunting itself. The wolf howl was also used by human hunters to communicate with each other, and the Beadway and Coyoteway ceremonies are associated with wolves.

The coyote is the trickster figure in the Diné tradition. He is the most enigmatic and paradoxical of the animals and is very powerful spiritually. The coyote is a major figure in the creation stories and plays the role of scattering the stars and bringing fire to the people. A host of stories revolving around the coyote are used to show proper behavior by telling warning individuals about what happens when a person behaves improperly. These stories are only allowed to be told in winter. In the oral tradition it is said that the Diné performed a coyote ceremony at Bosque Rodondo where they had been forced to live after the Long Walk. This area is chosen due to the belief that the negotiators would have spiritual power, and these negotiations ultimately ended with the Diné being returned to their homeland rather than settled in Indian Territory.

The mountain lion (sometimes called the cougar) is called euphemistically “the one who walks silently.” In the Chuska and Lukachukai mountains of the Diné homeland there still live a few mountain lions. It was a common petroglyph of the Anasazi, the ancestors of many of the Southwestern tribes. The mountain lion is portrayed as a protector in many traditional stories and sometimes appears with his friend the wolf. Diné hunters emulated the mountain lion while hunting deer, sang mountain lion songs, and the most prized quiver was made of mountain lion skin.

Jaguars, on the other hand, are extinct in Diné lands. They are known as “spotted lions” and are mentioned briefly in a few traditional stories, seen in a few Anasazi petroglyphs, and make an appearance in a few sand paintings. One hears rumors of jaguars in the Southwest, but the Diné feel that they are best left alone and not harassed by scientists. It is in this context that Pavlik gives us the heart of the matter:

Native people accept the unknown and unexplained with reverence. They know that some things cannot, and should not, be explained. In the tribal world, some things are better left a mystery. It is those mysteries that keep Native people—including the Navajos—humble and respectful toward powers greater than themselves. This is the foundation of Native traditional ecological knowledge (197-198).

Both bald and golden eagles are found on the Navajo Nation, though bald eagles are much more common in the winter with the golden eagle being the more revered. A story is told of a pair of monster birds who lived on Shiprock (a rock formation near Shiprock, New Mexico). Eagles and owls are said to be their children, and hunting eagles was previously highly ritualized, but it is not done anymore. Eagle feathers

hold great power, especially if they came from a living bird, i.e. naturally molted. The feathers are used by medicine men for a number of ceremonies as are the claws. A whistle made from the hollow wing bone of an eagle is especially prized.

Pavlik also writes about the other birds of prey, bobcats and lynx, foxes, otters, badgers, and raccoons – none of which play a prominent role in traditional stories. He devotes a whole chapter to snakes, Big Snake being a recurring character in some of the creation stories. Today the Diné people are especially afraid of snakes. Some will flee when they see one and others will kill them on sight. Pavlik attributes this reaction to the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

In his Preface (15-17), Pavlik gives a succinct synopsis of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, of which his work in ethnozoology is a subfield. The Diné people, like most other indigenous peoples, aspire to have a relationship with their environment that is based on respect, cooperation, and mutual exchange. “How we choose to treat the natural world is how we choose to treat ourselves” (24).

The traditional knowledge that the Diné derive from their relationships to animals yields a corpus that is unique to this book. Pavlik has been studying this topic for many years, as the dates of his conference presentations show. His reliance on Diné traditionalists as a counterbalance to the published record demonstrates the kind of critical thinking that makes this book a solid work of scholarship. While an index would have added greatly to the usefulness of this book, it is both an excellent reference and a good read. Not only is this a book about the Diné relationships with animals, but it also provides a good example for how work with other tribes might proceed.

An older Diné man of my acquaintance told me that the reason dogs were first kept for spiritual protection is that they eat everything, including fecal matter, without any noticeable detrimental effect. The association between physical matter and things of the spirit is so strong in the Diné culture that the ability to absorb foul physical things is immediately inferred to also be the ability to absorb all other negativity. Now I look at the dogs outside Diné homes in a whole new light.