The impact of culture and organizing
Addressing the Crisis of Sacred Sites

Hundreds of Indigenous sacred sites across the country have been threatened and desecrated by development projects like pipelines, mining activities, and resource extraction that were approved without the consent of Native Nations or communities. They face complete destruction if no immediate action is taken.

Native Organizers Alliance and its partners—House of Tears Carvers, IllumiNative, Se’Si’Le, and The Natural History Museum—have been demanding federal action to protect Indigenous sacred sites from infrastructure projects and resource extraction. In April 2021, we set on a journey across Indian Country to visit the sites at urgent risk. As a result of the outreach of NOA and partners, thousands of tribal members, supporters, and Native organizations have called on the Biden administration to address the crisis by requiring all federal departments to require the consent of tribes before projects are approved.

Native Activism Leads Biden to Take Immediate Action

Following the Red Road journey, and actions taken across the U.S. to call on President Biden to protect sacred sites, the Administration announced in November a memorandum of understanding from 18 federal agencies to protect tribal treaty rights. The departments of Agriculture, Defense, Commerce, Education, Energy, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Labor, Transportation, Veterans Affairs, State, and the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Personnel Management, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the Council on Environmental Quality are ordered to issue reports on their efforts to strengthen treaty protections within the next 180 days. It is the result of Native organizing of grassroots Indigenous activists and Native leaders who came together on the Red Road to DC.

Bringing National Attention to the Crisis

In April 2021, the House of Tears Carvers began a 20,000-mile journey with a 4,000-pound totem pole, visiting Indigenous sacred lands and urging President Biden to take action toward their protection.

On July 14, Indigenous grassroots leaders and allies joined the journey for stops at the most prominent at-risk Indigenous sacred places in the country— Snake River, Bears Ears, Chaco Canyon, Black Hills, Missouri River, Standing Rock, Line 3 in Minnesota, and Line 5 in Michigan. Tribes and Indigenous organizations hosted events to bless the totem pole and share stories about their sacred places.

The journey concluded with an event on the National Mall in Washington D.C. where the totem pole was welcomed by Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo). Paawee Rivera, Senior Advisor for Intergovernmental Affairs and Director of Tribal Affairs at The White House, and Brenda Mallory, Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, also joined tribal leaders, and Indigenous grassroots leaders to speak about the importance of tribal sovereignty and the protection of sacred lands.
Lobbying for Change

Following the event on the National Mall, the Department of Interior hosted a meeting in DC. Two dozen tribal leaders and Indigenous activists met with Secretary Haaland to express their hope for a change in the way federal agencies approve projects. They urged the administration to require all departments to hold meaningful and ongoing engagement with affected Native Nations and tribal communities, and to gain their consent before any project is approved. The failure of the federal government to require this consent has put hundreds of sacred sites at risk of total loss.

Red Road to DC’s Impact

The Red Road to DC brought hundreds of tribes, Native organizations, and Indigenous activists together to call on the Biden administration to take immediate action. The long journey across Indian Country brought national and international attention to the urgency of sacred site protection, and began critical conversations about the need for the federal government to change its business-as-usual approach to tribal engagement.

“The fact that we are all here is not insignificant. When our nation’s capital was established, its policies were intended to exclude us, to assimilate us. Laws and policies were written without considering Indigenous communities’ challenges or their strengths, and we are working hard to undo so many consequences of these actions.”

Madam Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), Department of the Interior
Media

The number of print, tv, and radio outlets nationwide that published pieces as a result of Red Road to DC's media outreach

800+

The potential audience reach from Red Road to DC media coverage

1,240,284,563

“Sacred places and public lands are under sustained duress from climate chaos and fossil fuel reliance, and we feel that under this administration we can change the role that the federal government plays in this equation. This is the political moment.”

Judith LeBlanc,
Director of the Native Organizers Alliance

Quote from USA Today article
Social Media

549,086
Total reach from Red Road to DC social media posts

1 Million+
Livestream views of DC event from Native Organizers Alliance, IllumiNative, Ocean Preservation Society, and Mark Ruffalo

1,559
New Instagram followers during Red Road to DC

7
Virtual events to highlight additional Indigenous sacred sites
OUTREACH AND ORGANIZING

80,000+ Petition signatures

20+ Number of speakers at National Mall event
Native Americans are transporting a 5,000-pound totem pole to D.C. from the Pacific Northwest

The pole was made from a 400-year-old Western red cedar tree that was cut, carved and painted with images of importance to Native Americans.

By Dana Hedgpeth | June 19, 2021

A 5,000-pound totem pole that was hand-carved by Native Americans is coming from Washington state to be on display in the nation’s capital this summer after a journey that organizers hope will raise awareness about protecting land that is sacred to tribes.

The totem pole’s journey on a tractor-trailer, which organizers are calling the “Red Road to D.C.,” involves a two-week trek led by about a dozen people, many of whom are Native Americans and members of the Lummi Nation, a tribe of about 5,000 members west of Bellingham, Wash. About $500,000 has been raised from dozens of nonprofits, sponsors, and tribal groups for the cross-country trip.

In preparation for the journey, the group took the pole on a tour this spring along the West Coast and parts of the South. Group members will hit the road again in mid-July, arriving in the nation’s capital by July 29. The pole will be on display for two days on the Mall and outside the entrance of the National Museum of the American Indian.

Native American organizers said they plan to “deliver the pole to the Biden administration in hopes that it gives a strong and important message.” Arrangements are being made to find a permanent home for it in D.C., organizers said.

On their road trip to D.C., the caravan plans to stop at several spots of importance to Native Americans, including Chaco Canyon, a national park in New Mexico; the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota; and Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. Each faces threats of development tied to natural resources or pipelines.

For Jewell “Praying Wolf” James, a Lummi Nation citizen and the master carver of the pole, it is “a reminder of the promises that were made to the first peoples of this land and waters.” He said he hopes that people will “share in their responsibility to safeguard the sacred sources of life — Earth, water and sky.”

The idea came from Phreddie Lane, a Lummi Nation citizen. He said he is “proud of how...
strongly Native Americans had come out to vote in swing states in the last U.S. presidential election” and he wants the new administration to “hear our message” of concern about issues important to Native Americans and, in particular, worries about sacred sites being harmed.

“It’s a very historic moment to bring it to D.C.,” Lane said. “And to have it sit among these sacred national monuments, representing Native American peoples, is special.”

White House officials said they are aware of the totem pole’s journey to Washington.

Libby Washburn, special assistant to the president for Native affairs and a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, said Biden is “committed to ensuring tribal voices have a seat at the table.” She noted he appointed Deb Haaland, who is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna, to lead the Interior Department — the first Native American Cabinet secretary — and has worked closely with “the Native community on our covid-19 response and plans to rebuild our economy.”

Totem pole carving is a tradition for some tribes, mainly in British Columbia and the U.S. Pacific Northwest. The totem poles often are said to be a “spiritual being” and are considered sacred symbols of a tribe, clan or a family tradition, experts said.

For the Lummi Nation, totem poles historically are carved with symbols that represent a certain clan of a tribe or show a family or tribe’s lineage. They can have scenes that depict an important tribal leader or might have a panel that shows a tribal battle or a story told for generations, James said.

“They represent visions, dreams and stories that are handed down and shaped through each generation,” he said.

Standing 25 feet tall and measuring about 43 inches wide, the totem pole that’s coming to D.C. was made from a 400-year-old red cedar tree. The tree was cut, carved and painted with images and symbols that include a moon, salmon and a man praying. One drawing shows an eagle “headed downward in a dive to the Earth,” representing a Lummi belief that the eagle is “bringing the spiritual power to impregnate the Mother Earth.”

It contains an image of a woman with a girl kneeling near her, a scene meant to depict grandmothers across the country who are raising and teaching their granddaughters traditional Native American ways, James said.

Seven tears are near the image, which James said represents seven generations of Native people throughout the world who have been “traumatized by the treatment they received from non-Indians.”

Another area contains a red hand to bring attention to the hundreds of indigenous women who are murdered or go missing each year.

James’s group, called the “House of Tears Carvers,” spent three months this year working on the pole.
Two carvers work on a 25-foot totem pole that will come from the Lummi Nation in Washington state to D.C. in late July. (Jason Jones/The Natural History Museum)

The group has created 110 totem poles over three decades that range from 3 feet to 28 feet, he said. Most are given to schools, homes for veterans or other places in Washington state. Others recognize tragedies like the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. A 13-foot totem pole was placed at Congressional Cemetery in D.C. to honor victims who were at the Pentagon that day.

This summer will be the first time the group has made and moved such a large totem pole. In the past two months, it has been on a West Coast tour, on display for tribes and stopping at community events.

Beka Economopoulos, director of the Natural History Museum in Washington state, which has been involved with the totem pole project, said the West Coast travels have brought crowds of people to events who lay their hands on it and pray.

“It’s going to carry the spirit of the land it visits and the power and prayers of the people along the way to the symbolic heart of the nation,” she said. Economopoulos said keeping the pole in D.C. would make it a “monument to the protection of sacred places and a way of relating to the land.”

Elena Guarinello, an exhibition developer and manager at the National Museum of the American Indian, said graphics and panels inside the museum will explain the totem pole’s significance and its journey.

Judith LeBlanc, director of the Native Organizers Alliance, said bringing the pole to the nation’s capital will encourage national leaders to “recognize what their ancestral responsibilities are.”

“We sat nation-to-nation and signed agreements,” LeBlanc said. “We gave up land that mattered in order to receive health care, education and housing. Those treaty rights have been denied all through history.”

LeBlanc said she hopes the White House will “create a whole new reset with tribal nations by bringing us to the table to not just consult, but to come up with solutions” to protect land and water resources on sites sacred to Native Americans.
Indigenous people are trekking across the US with a 25-foot totem pole. Here’s why

By Harmeet Kaur | July 11, 2021

For the House of Tears Carvers, totem poles are more than masterful works of art -- they’re a medium for storytelling, for raising consciousness, for healing.

The group of artisans from the Lummi Nation, one of the original inhabitants of the Pacific Northwest, has for decades hauled its masterful works of art around the country to unite communities around issues of local and national concern.

This year, they’re taking a 25-foot, 5,000-pound totem pole all the way to the nation’s capital.

Organizers are calling the journey the “Red Road to DC,” a two-week national tour that will begin July 14 in Washington state and culminate in Washington, DC. Along the way, the House of Tears Carvers plan to stop with the totem pole at a number of sites sacred to Indigenous peoples.

Their goal: To protect those sacred sites from the existential threats of the climate crisis and extractive industries -- and to ensure tribal nations have a seat at the table when decisions affecting them are made.

“By going out and uniting and informing the public, we create a greater voice,” said Jewell “Praying Wolf” James, House of Tears lead carver and a citizen of the Lummi Nation. “We have an opinion, and we want to be heard.”

Upon its arrival in Washington, DC, the totem pole will be presented to President Joe Biden’s administration: partially in recognition of the climate actions it has taken so far and also as a reminder of the promises the federal government made to the first inhabitants of this land.

A fight to protect sacred sites

The totem pole will travel to key cultural sites where battles over land and water rights are playing out, including Bears Ears in Utah, the Black Hills in South Dakota and the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota.

By connecting these places through one journey, organizers hope to bring attention to the challenges each individual community faces and ultimately, build momentum for the last stop in Washington, DC.
A visitor touches a totem pole made by the House of Tears Carvers during a stop in Miami. The pole will be making stops across the US to raise awareness about the efforts to protect sacred waters and lands.

“The Lummi Carvers are offering their totem pole as a way to gather the prayers and hopes of many different tribal nations, to bring people together and help each area and tribal nation understand they are not alone,” said Judith LeBlanc, director of the Native Organizers Alliance, one of the journey’s sponsors.

“That collectively, by building and utilizing the power of our prayers and our beliefs and our hopes and our organizing, we are able to make transformational change happen.”

Mackinaw City, Michigan, is one of the stops on the tour. There, the Bay Mills Indian Community has been fighting the existing Line 5 pipeline, as well as a plan to build a new pipeline tunnel under the Straits of Mackinac.

The Straits of Mackinac connect Lakes Michigan and Huron, and are sacred waters for the Bay Mills Indian Community and other tribal nations in the area.

Under a treaty made in 1836, the tribe ceded land to the US for the creation of Michigan. In turn, tribal citizens were granted the right to fish, hunt and gather in that territory, which includes the waters of the Great Lakes and the Straits of Mackinac, said Whitney Gravelle, chairwoman of the Bay Mills Indian Community.

“We have this connection with land and water and the Straits of Mackinac that is deeply tied to our cultural, our traditional and our spiritual identity,” Gravelle said, noting that both Line 5 and any additional construction “can actually cause damage to numerous archaeological resources, artifacts and other paleo landscapes that all describe and are a part of our history here in the state of Michigan, as well as in the Great Lakes.”

When the totem pole stops in Mackinaw City on July 27, the community plans to hold a water ceremony on the Straits of Mackinac, as well as songs and other activities. It will be a day of celebration, Gravelle said, honoring not just the sacredness of the waters but the tribe’s relationship to them.

That the totem pole will pass through so many other sacred places before reaching her own community is not lost on Gravelle.

“[The totem pole] is going to collect all of that good spiritual energy as it travels and touches the sacred places -- all of that good medicine," she added. “When it arrives in Washington DC and is presented at the White House, I can only hope and pray that that good energy and that good medicine stays there.”

The meaning behind the totem pole

The House of Tears Carvers’ first totem pole journey took place after the 9/11 attacks.

James thought about all the people whose lives had been forever altered by the tragedy and decided to carve a totem pole. With a group of other Lummi Nation citizens, he took the pole across the country, collecting good thoughts and prayers for the children who lost parents that day, before bringing it to its final destination at a park in Monroe, New York.
In the years since, James has made several similar journeys in an effort to alleviate pain tied to trauma, achieve social and environmental justice and fight for tribal sovereignty.

The group geared up for the national journey earlier this year by taking the new 25-foot totem pole on a regional tour along the West Coast and areas of the South. The pole, which has drawn well-wishers and crowds throughout its travels, was crafted from a 400-year-old Western Red Cedar tree and took about two months to complete.

Some of the images depicted on the pole reference Native heritage, stories and mythologies.

The full moon at the top is a nod to Grandmother Moon, who watches over the waters of the Earth. The eagle is a symbol of power and strength, while the Chinook salmon is there for its importance to tribal nations in the Pacific Northwest and the area’s ecosystem. Seven tears represent seven generations of trauma that resulted from colonization, James said.

Other images on the pole demonstrate the group’s commitment to certain social justice issues. An image of a child in jail symbolizes the humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border, while the red handprints represent the decades-long crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

“There’s a story to be told, and like all stories, there are many plots tied to it,” James said. “If you can understand all the plots, then you understand the message of the totem pole.”

A ceremony and exhibit in DC

After the totem pole passes through the sacred sites on the tour, Indigenous leaders and organizers will present it to the Biden administration on July 29 in Washington, DC.

A ceremony will be held on the National Mall outside the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, where an exhibition about the House of Tears Carvers’ totem pole journeys is on view.

The totem pole will be on display at the museum for two days before it is transferred to a more permanent home, which has not yet been announced.

While in the nation’s capital, organizers and demonstrators plan to lobby on Capitol Hill for the right to be included and consulted on any decisions about projects of legislation that could affect tribal communities.

“I think the Biden administration has acknowledged the need to engage with tribal nations, but I think they need to be reminded that the time is now, and also that we need to be a part of the decision making,” LeBlanc said.
For Native American activists crossing the nation with a totem pole, sacred lands are their Notre Dame

By Marco della Cava  |  July 16, 2021

Two dozen Native American activists in 10 cars towing one totem pole across the country.

While this protest caravan may seem small, its message to Congress is outsized: Give Indigenous peoples a say before granting access to land that tribes consider sacred. The opposing argument: public lands are for everyone and the nation’s energy needs can’t be ignored.

Nowhere is that debate more heated than at Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah, a striking archaeological and natural wonder that activists will reach Saturday.

Former President Barack Obama set aside 1.35 million acres for the monument in late 2016. Conservatives criticized the move as government overreach, and then-President Donald Trump reduced the size of Bears Ears by 85% in 2017. Its fate is still in play.

“Sacred places and public lands are under sustained duress from climate chaos and fossil fuel reliance, and we feel that under this administration we can change the role that the federal government plays in this equation,” said Judith LeBlanc, director of the Native Organizers Alliance, who spoke to USA TODAY as the caravan motored through Utah. “This is the political moment.”

Native organizers have been buoyed by the appointment of former U.S. Rep. Deb Haaland, of New Mexico’s Laguna Pueblo, to run the Interior Department as well as President Joe Biden’s relaunching of the White House Council on Native American Affairs.

An aerial view of Arch Canyon within Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah, which President Barack Obama sought to protect in 2016. President Donald Trump then greatly cut back on the size of the planned monument. Its fate is still undecided, but activists want an even larger swatch set aside. Francisco Kjolseth, AP

Activists say the role Indigenous peoples played in the recent election should give them greater say in policies that can help support tribes with employment, education and healthcare.

“Native Americans must be at the decision-making table,” said LeBlanc, who belongs to the southeastern states’ Caddo Nation.

For most of the nation’s nearly 600 federally recognized tribes, land use and ownership is a
top priority. While some tribes have had success on that front – last year the Supreme Court ruled half of Oklahoma is on Native lands, with resulting implications for court cases – most have spent the past years protesting against access to federal lands, many in Indian country, that the Trump administration granted to energy and mining companies.

The result, activists say, is deep concern over the despoiling of lands due to fracking and oil pipelines that often have deep historical and religious significance to Native peoples.

“Much like cathedral of Notre Dame is a structure of symbolism for Catholicism, these landscapes are our cathedral,” said Pat Gonzales-Rogers, executive director of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Council, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “We ask people to be in the same deferential mindset and show respect to this landscape as our people and tribal leaders do.”

Gonzales-Rogers added that while no sacred site is more important than another, Bears Ears, named for two towering ear-like buttes, is likely to test the power of the presidency when it comes to oversight of the Antiquities Act of 1906, which grants the president powers to “declare by public proclamation historic landmarks.”

Bears Ears supporters say that is what Obama was doing when he made it a monument in one of his last gestures in office. Critics say the act is not designed to set aside such vast amounts of land, thereby potentially limiting access to a range of users.

“This act should be used to prevent acts of looting for the smallest area compatible,” said Jeffrey McCoy, a lawyer for the Pacific Legal Foundation, a libertarian public interest law firm that represented ranchers who said Obama’s declaration deprived them of access to land they had long used. That case has been stayed as Biden reviews the action of his predecessor.

McCoy said it is not for presidents of either party to decide the fate of massive federal land holdings, but rather "that's the job of Congress and the declaration of National Parks."

Bears Ears leader Gonzales-Rogers said activists are pushing lawmakers to increase the size of the national monument to beyond what Obama granted, at nearly 2 million acres.

Recognizing that the fate of Indian country has long been tied to federal policy, a variety of Indigenous groups came up with the idea of driving from Washington state to Washington, D.C., with stops at some of the most contentious Native sacred sites.

Dubbed the Red Road to D.C.: A Totem Pole Journey for the Protection of Sacred Places – a name that references a journey from addiction to sobriety – the trip started last week at the coastal Lummi nation north of Seattle and will conclude with events at the nation’s capital on July 29.
The stops along the snaking way include Chaco Canyon in New Mexico (July 18), where fracking is underway in an area where thousands lived between 850 and 1200 A.D.; Standing Rock, North Dakota (July 24), home to years of protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline; and Mackinaw City, Michigan, where tribes are fighting to shut down a pipeline for fear that a spill would contaminate lake water.

The idea of making the journey along with a massive carved totem pole was in the best of protest traditions: having something that makes those who see it ask questions, said LeBlanc. “It’s about raising the awareness of all people of what’s happening to our nation’s land,” she said.

Totem poles are a traditional feature of Native American tribes from the Pacific Northwest and are considered sacred symbols. This particular totem was created over three months by Lummi craftsmen called the House of Tears Carvers. It stands 25 feet tall, is 43 inches wide and was hewn from a 400-year-old red cedar tree.

Among the dominant imagery of the colorful totem is an eagle diving down to earth, a man praying and a salmon. There is also a woman with a girl nearby, a tribute to the way grandmothers often are teaching the younger generation of the Native ways and language. There are also seven tears carved into the totem, which represent seven generations of Native Americans who have suffered at the hands of non-Natives, according to Red Road to D.C. organizers.

As the caravan continues, activists hope to draw attention with both the totem and their gatherings to the universal need to protect nature at a time when climate crises – from fires out West to storms in the East – seem to pose a growing threat.

Native Americans, they argue, are uniquely poised to be stewards of land that once belonged solely to them.

“Sacred places are where our peoples have gone since the beginning of time to gather medicines, to be in communication with our ancestors, and to pray and lift their spirits,” said LeBlanc. “We have an understanding of how best to preserve and protect to ensure these places will continue to be for our people, and all people.”
Red Road to DC brings awareness to sacred sites and tribal rights

By Acee Agoyo | June 29, 2021

WASHINGTON, D.C. — After 20,000 miles and 115 stops across the country, a group of Native carvers and elders have finally arrived in the nation’s capital, bringing much-needed attention to sacred sites and tribal rights along the way.

The House of Tears Carvers began their journey on the Lummi Nation in Washington state two weeks ago. The 25-foot, 5,000-pound totem pole they created has traveled to some major battlegrounds in the fight to protect tribal ways of life, including the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, where opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline has survived three U.S. presidential administrations.

“This is not a Lummi fight or Standing Rock fight,” Fredrick “Phreddie” Lane, whose traditional name is Sul Ka Dub, said of the journey across the United States. “This is our fight!”

The Red Road to DC, as the journey is known, is now set to deliver one final message to the Joe Biden administration. As they present the totem pole to Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the only Native person in the Democratic president’s cabinet, they are calling on the federal government to live up to its trust and treaty responsibilities by ensuring Indian nations are at the table when decisions are made affecting their lands, their waters and their most important places.

“Native peoples are organizing to influence policy change,” said Judith LeBlanc, a citizen of the Caddo Nation who serves as director of the Native Organizers Alliance, one of the groups behind the drive to D.C.

“Sacred places have been threatened for generations by development, extraction, and infrastructure projects,” added LeBlanc. “The federal government is failing in its responsibility to tribes to gain consent before projects are approved.”

An eagle on the 25-foot, 5,000-pound totem pole created by the House of Tears Carvers. Photo by Indianz.Com
The Red Road delegation arrived in D.C. on Wednesday afternoon and made two stops. They first brought the totem pole to the National Museum of the American Indian, where an exhibit entitled *Kwel’ Hoy: We Draw the Line* is on display, highlighting the Lummi Nation’s long-running efforts to raise awareness about threats to the environment and public health.

From there, the group brought the totem pole to a park in the southeast side of the city for a welcoming reception hosted by members of the local Native community. Rudy Soto, a citizen of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes who has worked for national tribal advocacy organizations as well as a key member of Congress, highlighted the location of the intimate, early evening gathering.

“It’s the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac rivers and the Washington Channel,” Soto of the Western Leaders Network said following a series of prayers, songs and blessings for the pole at Diamond Teague Park. “So there’s symbolic significance of this place.”

On Thursday afternoon, the Red Road to DC makes one final stop as part of its two-week campaign for sacred sites and tribal rights. With the help of President Fawn Sharp of the National Congress of American Indians, the group will bring the totem pole to the National Mall.

With the U.S. Capitol as the backdrop, the Native delegation will continue to press the need for free, prior and informed consent of tribal nations when it comes to U.S. law and policy.

“As monuments to colonialism are dismantled across the nation, the totem pole creates a new kind of monument, one that serves to build alliances around our collective obligation to care for our lands and waters for the generations to come,” said Rosalyn LaPier, a citizen of the Blackfeet Nation and board member at The Natural History Museum, a collective that helped organize the nationwide tour.

“It also challenges us to address environmental racism and the growing climate crisis,” LaPier said.

The totem pole presentation to Secretary Haaland is scheduled to begin around 2pm Eastern. A livestream is expected to be available through redroadtodc.org and facebook.com/totempolejourney.

Following the event on the National Mall, the totem pole will remain on display outside of the National Museum of the American Indian through Saturday. The *Kwel’ Hoy: We Draw the Line* exhibit runs through September 9.

The Red Road to DC departed the Lummi Nation on July 14. One of the first major stops took place the following day along the Snake River in Idaho, where the Nez Perce Tribe is calling for the removal of four dams in order to restore runs of salmon and protect treaty rights.

“Time is running out to protect our sacred salmon,” said Vice Chairman Shannon Wheeler. “This is a crisis that threatens our way of life, and it is a violation of our treaty rights. The federal government is failing to uphold the promises made to our ancestors when we ceded our lands.”
On July 17, the delegation visited the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, which has been the subject of high-profile political and legal disputes. Back in 2017, Republican former president Donald Trump dramatically reduced the boundaries of the site during his first year in office, over the objections of tribes whose ancestral homes, sacred sites and burial grounds are located there.

“Bears Ears is a place of healing,” said Woody Lee, the executive director of Utah Diné Bikéyah, which has supported protections for the site. “The canyons hold our songs, memories, and history. This place should be permanently protected and under the stewardship of the tribes who know the land better than anyone.”

The totem pole journeyed to Bears Ears in Utah on July 17, 2021. Photo courtesy Red Road to DC

On July 18, the totem pole arrived at Chaco Canyon in neighboring New Mexico. Secretary Haaland, who is a citizen of the Pueblo of Laguna, has referred to the area as her ancestral territory. As a member of Congress, she fought against energy development in the region.

“The fight to protect Greater Chaco encompasses the fight against the climate crisis, the fight for inherent tribal sovereignty, the fight against resource extraction and exploitation, and the fight to address the adverse health impacts on the communities who live in the region,” said Julia Bernal, director of the Pueblo Action Alliance. Haaland’s daughter is part of the organization.

On July 21, a private ceremony took place in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The territory was promised to the Sioux Nation by treaty, one which the U.S. government violated by opening the area to natural resource exploitation.

The stop at Standing Rock took place on July 24. The tribe has continued to press the Biden administration to shut down the Dakota Access Pipeline, which crosses lands protected by the Sioux Nation treaty.

The Red Road delegation then made its way to the Midwest, where pipeline battles have drawn significant attention as well. The White Earth Nation hosted the totem pole in Minnesota on July 24, followed by the Bay Mills Indian Community in Michigan on July 25.

In Minnesota, tribes and their allies are fighting the replacement of the Line 3 pipeline, citing threats to their wild rice, water and treaty rights. In Michigan, Line 5 has been operating in violation of law. Both pipelines are owned by Enbridge, whose headquarters are in Canada.
"The Red Road to DC" Totem Pole Contains Strong Messages of Survival

By Levi Rickert | August 01, 2021

Last Tuesday, dozens of American Indians from Michigan tribes gathered on the shores of the Straits of Mackinac to see the "Red Road to DC" totem pole. It was the last official stop on its cross-country journey from the Lummi Nation, based in Bellingham, Wash. to Washington, D.C.

The totem pole was delayed Tuesday morning as it made its way across Michigan's Upper Peninsula en route to Mackinaw City, Mich. from Minnesota. Seeing the crowd and no totem pole in sight, people arriving wanted to know if they were at the right location and joined the growing crowd. As time went by, anticipation grew and suddenly, the totem pole appeared lying on a flatbed trailer behind a truck.

For those gathered, the wait was worth it. The 24-foot, 8-inch hand carved totem pole with brilliant colors demonstrated the craftsmanship of the Lummi Nation, whose tradition of carving and painting date back centuries.

Inspired by the Biden victory in last year’s presidential election and the nomination of Deb Haaland as the first Native American to serve in a presidential cabinet member, Jewell Praying Wolf James, the only surviving member of House of Tears Carvers, decided to carve a totem pole to present to the Biden administration.

He solicited the assistance of other Lummi Nation carvers, whose ages ranged from four to 70.

The crowd soon discovered that just as a book contains chapters telling unique stories, each totem section carved and painted into the 400-year-old red cedar told a story, too.

Because of ill health, Jewel James was not able to complete the journey. His brother Douglas James (Sit ki kadem), who helped carve the totem pole, described the various sections carved and painted to highlight issues important to Indian Country, such as missing and murdered Indigenous women, environmental issues and endangered Chinook salmon, bears, and wolves. In its entirety, the totem pole addresses the issues that confront Indian Country today.

Its top section displayed a full moon with a red hand painted on it, bringing awareness to the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women.
“We bring recognition to them. We cannot forget our sisters…our relatives,” Douglas James said. As he continued, he spoke of an Indian man sitting on the moon praying to the Creator to save Mother Earth for all children.

Just below the top of the totem is an eagle bearing a salmon design on its wings.

“The eagle carries our prayers to the heavens and the eagle is a strong symbol of our spirituality. The salmon represents how the salmon need to be able to climb up the dams to get back into the cold water to lay their eggs instead of the warm water at the bottom of the dam,” Douglas James explained.

“If we save the salmon, then we can save the orcas,” James said. He then brought in the symbolism the orca depicts. “The orca was taken from her home, just like the Native kids were taken from their families and placed in boarding schools,” bringing awareness to a topic widely discussed in Indian Country because of the recent discoveries of graves at Canadian residential schools.

Farther down the totem pole is a section containing an image of a child in a cage. The child references the Trump administration’s hand in the separation of children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border and their placement in cages. The parallels between the federal government’s handling of these children and those at boarding schools are equally grotesque, according to James.

Also on the totem pole are seven tears that symbolize seven generations of trauma from colonialist rule over the Indigenous people of this country.

After numerous stops in Indian Country to bring attention to Indigenous sacred sites, thousands of miles traveled, and its departure from Michigan, the totem pole made its last leg of the cross-country journey to the nation's capital.

On Thursday, Interior Sec. Haaland spoke at the National Mall in the nation's capital as she received the totem pole on behalf of the Biden administration.

“The fact that we are all here is not insignificant. When our nation’s capital was established, its policies were intended to exclude us, to assimilate us. Laws and policies were written without considering Indigenous communities’ challenges or their strengths, and we are working hard to undo so many consequences of these actions.”

The “Red Road to DC” totem pole’s symbolism sends a strong message to Washington to slow down and be witnesses to the storytelling traditions of Native people and their ancestors – stories of abuse, trauma, neglect, genocide and above all, survival. The totem pole asks Washington to come to terms with this country’s true history and, in doing so, lift those whom they oppressed over centuries, or at the very least, as the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Gingsburg brilliantly said, “take their feet off our necks.”
Indigenous groups urge Biden to protect sacred sites

Organizers of the cross-country Red Road to DC project are calling for Native Americans to get more say in how to manage their land

By Carey L. Biron  |  July 29, 2021

WASHINGTON, July 29 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - The fight over South Dakota's Black Hills was handed down to Nick Tilsen from his parents, part of what he says is the longest-running legal battle over indigenous lands in U.S. history, ongoing since the 1800s.

At issue is control of more than 1 million acres (404,700 hectares) of rolling hills - a place of origins for Tilsen's Lakota tribe, dotted with sacred sites the community returns to regularly.

“Our people have been traveling in and around the Black Hills as part of our spiritual cycle for millennia,” Tilsen told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

Yet it is the federal government that ultimately makes decisions concerning most of the Black Hills, despite 19th-century treaties that included these lands - provisions that were broken once gold was found in the area, Tilsen said - and subsequent court rulings in the tribe's favor.

Hoping that President Joe Biden's administration will open the door to stronger indigenous land rights, Tilsen and others are focusing on a message being delivered to Washington, D.C. this week - in the form of a 25-foot-tall (7-m-tall) totem pole.

Over the past two weeks, the intricately carved and painted artwork, made from a 400-year-old cedar tree, has been traveling cross-country in the Red Road to DC caravan, stopping at 10 sacred sites, like the Black Hills, on its way to Washington.

Accompanied by a group of its creators, the Lummi Nation's House of Tears Carvers, the totem pole is due to arrive in Washington for a rally Thursday.

After that, backers plan to meet with government officials to present policy demands on how to protect sacred sites across the country.

About 56 million acres across the United States are considered tribal lands, though these are all held in trust by the federal government.

Tilsen, who heads an advocacy and philanthropic group called NDN Collective, is optimistic,
pointing to growing tribal action on indigenous land sovereignty and rising public recognition of the issue over recent years.

Indigenous advocates also see promise in the new Biden administration, which they say has hired more Native Americans than any other.

That includes Deb Haaland, who became the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary when she was named head of the Interior Department, which manages tribal lands. Haaland will address the rally Thursday, organizers say.

Natural resource extraction, climate change and “unbridled development” are the main threats to indigenous land, said Judith LeBlanc, director of the Native Organizers Alliance (NOA) and an organizer of the Red Road to DC project.

“Although people have taken note of these struggles, the remedies are all very different - the common denominator is the role of the federal government and its policies,” she said by phone.

A spokesperson for the Interior Department declined to comment.

**Plummeting Salmon Population**

At the heart of the Red Road campaign is the totem pole, featuring more than a dozen elements of iconography - such as a moon, a bear and a salmon - drawn from tribes across the continent.

“This ‘journey’ is about sacred sites. Thus, we decided to let the spirit guide the choice of figures as we carved the totem from top down,” Jewell James, the head carver, wrote in a statement provided by organizers.

The pole will be offered as a gift to Biden to “urge his immediate protection of sacred sites”, according to a press release from the campaign, before it is displayed temporarily at the National Museum of the American Indian until a permanent placement is decided upon.

Julian Matthews is a member of the Nez Perce tribe in Idaho, where he and others have watched the Snake River’s salmon population plummet by up to 90% over the past quarter century, he said.

The tribe, which hosted the Red Road caravan on July 15, blames the federal government’s construction in the 1960s and 1970s of four dams that have impeded the water’s flow and raised its temperature, he said.

“This is an important food source, but it’s also part of our culture,” said Matthews, who leads the nonprofit Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment, noting that the community uses salmon in ceremonies such as funerals.

In March, a U.S. representative proposed removing the dams to restore the salmon population, a bill that received tribal support this month.

**Political Control**

A common goal for tribal communities is to have the power to make decisions about major land management issues, said LeBlanc at the NOA.
Federally recognized tribes are sovereign and many have treaty agreements with the government, yet Washington only goes as far as offering “consultation” on key proposals, she noted.

“The only path to saving sacred places as well as public lands from destruction is if the federal government moves toward a relationship of informed consent, bringing native leaders and communities to the decision-making table to solve problems together,” LeBlanc said.

She sees rising energy toward those aims, including a U.S. House proposal in May that would mandate a stronger role for tribes in deciding on federal action that would significantly affect indigenous land.

“Tribal consultation ... must become law as soon as possible,” Representative Raul M. Grijalva, who introduced the bill, said in a statement.

In the Black Hills, Tilsen said the national public discussion about race and equity has boosted the new “Land Back” movement seeking the return of sacred and public lands to indigenous control.

“Indigenous people want political control of the land again – let's be clear, that's what we’re fighting for,” he said.

He points to an area on the edge of the Black Hills as an example, where 100 acres of federally owned land was ceded to three tribes in 2017 and where NDN Collective is now helping develop housing for the homeless.

“This is about way more than physical land,” Tilsen said.

“Societal, political and economic systems were destroyed in the process of taking the land. Now so much of this is about rebuilding a new system.”
Haaland, Native American leaders press for Indigenous land protections

By Jackson Walker  | July 29, 2021

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland joined other Native American leaders and activists at the National Mall on Thursday to accept the delivery of a totem pole transported across the country as part of a push to protect sites that are sacred to Native Americans.

The event was the final stop in the “Red Road to DC,” a two-week tour from Washington state to Washington, D.C., with visits to sacred locations throughout the U.S. Speaking at the event Thursday, Haaland called for greater inclusion of Native American voices in lawmaking in order to protect the sites.

“The fact that we are all here is not insignificant. When our nation’s capital was established, its policies were intended to exclude us, to assimilate us. Laws and policies were written without considering Indigenous communities’ challenges or their strengths, and we are working hard to undo so many consequences of these actions,” said Haaland, who is the nation’s first Native American Cabinet secretary.

Advocates warn that a number of sacred locations across the U.S. are threatened by government actions, which they say violate prior peace treaties. Among these locations is the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. Former President Trump slashed the size of Bears Ears, which the Biden administration has pushed to reverse.

The Snake River in Idaho, another site on the tour, has seen a decline in its salmon population due to dams in the river that native people have long claimed violate their fishing rights.

Timothy Davis, chairman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, told The Hill that the protection of this and other sacred lands was an immediate concern of many Indigenous people.

“Without having protection, [the sacred sites are] desecrated, destroyed, consumed and gone. Our children won’t have that place to pray, they won’t have that place to picnic, to camp, to gather roots, berries and hunt. That’s why we have to protect the sacredness of that place because that’s what God blessed us with.”

Director of the Native Organizers Alliance Judith LeBlanc said the event and cross-country tour underscores the “political grassroots power” pressing for greater Indigenous protections. She also argued that listening to Native Americans is an important first step in making reparations to sacred land across the country.

“The one common denominator is that the federal government has the power to sit down with us at a table and talk out what the solution is,” she said. “That’s the common denominator, the federal government recognizing tribal nations as equal inhibitors and co-managers of the land.”
A 25-foot Native American totem pole arrives in D.C. after a journey to sacred lands across U.S.

Many who touched the pole during its journey ‘burst into tears because they could feel the energy’

By Dana Hedgpeth | October 7, 2021

Douglas James stood Thursday on the Mall in front of the 25-foot totem pole he and a team had spent three months hand-carving and painting from a 400-year-old red cedar tree.

James, a member of the Lummi Nation in Washington state, and a group of supporters and volunteers from his tribe hauled the pole on a flatbed truck more than 20,000 miles, including trips along the West Coast, a jaunt to Florida, then back to Washington state before heading across the Midwest and arriving in the other Washington, where the pole will stay as part of a campaign to protect sacred tribal lands.

“The pole speaks for itself,” James said to the crowd. “It’s been reaching out and touching many hearts.”

The roughly 5,000-pound pole and its crew arrived a day earlier at the National Museum of the American Indian, where a small crowd welcomed the addition. It will be outside the museum until Saturday, then be moved to Rawlins Park near 20th and E streets in Northwest, where it will stay, horizontal on the ground, before a permanent home is found in the D.C. region, organizers said.

On Thursday, tribal leaders, the pole’s carvers and Interior Secretary Deb Haaland — the nation’s first Native American Cabinet secretary — blessed the pole at a ceremony on the Mall, saying many of the nation’s policies originally were “intended to exclude” Native Americans.

“‘We’re working hard to undo so many consequences of those actions,’” Haaland said, adding that the country is in a “new era” of “truth, healing and growth.”

Lynda Terrill, of Arlington, stood in the crowd to see the pole after its long journey. A White retired English teacher, she said she wanted to support the Native American cause to save land sacred to them. Having worked more than five decades ago at a school in Page, Ariz., attended by Apaches.
and Navajos, Terrill said she had “seen how other people disrespected the Native peoples.”

“I always remembered that and wanted to come do my part to honor and respect them,” she said.

People gather near a totem pole after its arrival Wednesday outside the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

The totem pole’s journey, which organizers dubbed the “Red Road to DC,” was led by about a dozen people, many of whom are Native Americans and members of the Lummi Nation, a tribe of about 5,000 members west of Bellingham, Wash. They raised about $500,000 from dozens of nonprofits, sponsors and tribal groups for the cross-country trip.

The group said they met thousands of people along their journey — many of whom became emotional as they touched the pole.

“They’d burst into tears because they could feel the energy,” James said outside the museum just after the arrival of the pole, which was made from a tree that was cut, carved and painted with images of importance to Native Americans.

En route to D.C., the caravan stopped at several spots of importance to Native Americans including Chaco Canyon, a national park in New Mexico; the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota; and Bears Ears National Monument in Utah. Each faces threats of development tied to natural resources or pipelines.

Phreddie Lane, a Lummi member who came up with the idea to bring the totem pole to D.C., said it was a “very historic moment” to bring it to the nation’s capital. “And to have it sit among these sacred national monuments, representing Native American peoples, is special.”

Organizers are working to find the pole a permanent home in or near the Washington area. Officials said the pole was moved in August to the National Conservation Training Center, a secure government training facility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

But finding a spot for the enormous totem pole in a city filled with red tape has been tough. It wouldn’t fit inside the National Museum of the American Indian because engineers there said it was too big and too heavy for its floors. Its arrival coincides with an exhibit at the museum that will showcase the Lummi Nation’s history of pole carving.

Another 13-foot totem pole made by the same group — the House of Tears Carvers — was placed at Congressional Cemetery in D.C. to honor
victims who were at the Pentagon during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The group has carved and painted more than 110 totem poles in the past three decades for homes for veterans, schools and other groups.

James said they wanted to give the totem pole to the Biden administration and send a message to Washington about the sacred tribal lands: “We want to come together with one heart and one mind to save these sites.”

For many of those on the caravan, presenting the pole in D.C. to Haaland, who is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna, is a meaningful part of the journey.

Crystal Echo Hawk, who is Pawnee and executive director of the nonprofit IllumiNative advocacy group, said showcasing the totem pole in D.C. is meant for “Americans to see that Native peoples are leading the way around issues of protecting lands, waters.”

Too often, she said, Native Americans haven’t been fully included in major decisions on development in and around their sacred lands.

“They represent visions, dreams and stories that are handed down and shaped through each generation,” said James’s brother — Jewell “Praying Wolf” James, who is the master carver of the pole brought to D.C.

Measuring about 43 inches wide, the totem pole was made in roughly three months. The tree was cut, carved and painted with images and symbols that include an eagle, moon, salmon and a man praying.
People place their hands on the totem pole Wednesday after its arrival in D.C. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

It contains an image of a woman with a girl kneeling near her, a scene meant to depict grandmothers across the country who are raising and teaching their granddaughters traditional Native American ways, according to Jewell James.

He said seven tears near the image represent seven generations of Native people throughout the world who have been “traumatized by the treatment they received from non-Indians.”

A red hand on the pole represents the hundreds of Indigenous women who are murdered or go missing each year.

The project marks the first time House of Tears Carvers has made and moved such a large totem pole.

Stops on its trip from the West have drawn thousands of Native Americans and non-Natives, organizers said, who came to offer support and prayers and lay their hands on the pole.

At Snake River — a tributary of the Columbia River that runs through part of Idaho and other states where Native American tribes are worried about the declining population of spawning salmon because of dams — many who came said they felt special to see the pole.

“Carrying a totem pole from Indian Country with a message is an ancient practice and considered a way to raise awareness of what’s important to us,” said Shannon Wheeler, vice chairman of the Nez Percé tribe in Idaho. He said he hopes the message the pole brings to Washington is that Native Americans are “not history.”

“We’re not pre-1900s and we’re not just old black-and-white photos you find on the Internet,” Wheeler said. “We’re still living, breathing and exercising our way of life that we’ve practiced for hundreds of years … We’re still here, and we don’t intend to go anywhere.”
Achieving success on the Red Road

The Red Road to DC shows what is possible when a movement based on political strategy is woven together with our traditional, cultural practices like art, ceremony, song, and prayer. Successful advocacy in Indian Country comes when we combine our Indigenous ways and knowledge, to work within today’s political framework.

The hundreds of Native peoples drawn to events across the country, and the more than 75,000 signers of a petition calling on Biden to protect sacred sites, resulted from our deep and ancient ties to these places and to each other. Recent years have shown a deepening solidarity among all Native Peoples to take a stand on behalf of the earth. For Native peoples, advocacy on behalf of the lands, waters, animals, and fish is a way of life that has existed since time began.