

Mining Sacred Ground

Environment, Culture, and Economic Development on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation



Revised 10/14/2024

Grade level

7th–8th grade

Time needed

One to four days

Standards corrolation

The activity that follows reflects the Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians and the Montana Social Studies Content Standards as developed by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. The exercise will align with Essential Understandings 1, 2, 3, and 6 and with Social Studies Content Standards 1.3, 2.6, 3.3, 3.7, 5.2, and 5.4.

Approach and purpose

This current events activity is intended to supplement topics addressed in Chapter 22 of the Montana Historical Society’s middle school Montana history textbook, *Montana: Stories of the Land*. It has been designed to be adapted to a variety of lengths and approaches, in order to make it as useful as possible for the classroom teacher.

The activity relies heavily on recent source materials, such as government documents and newspaper accounts, to familiarize students with an important and contentious issue now facing Montana’s native peoples: whether or not to develop their reservation’s coal and coalbed methane resources. This exercise particularly focuses on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The goal of this activity is to challenge youngsters to better appreciate the complexities of promoting resource-based economic development when such action conflicts with traditional cultural values. By the end of

the exercise, students should also understand that tribal members differ in their attitudes toward resource extraction. This dovetails nicely with Essential Understanding 1: there is “great diversity among individual American Indians.”

Seeking to shed a balanced light on the subject by viewing it from very different perspectives, this activity relies heavily on the actual words of tribal members to help students explore the subject, raise related questions, and formulate their own opinions about this complicated and controversial issue. In this activity, students will:

- ▶ demonstrate comprehension of class readings
- ▶ piece together a meaningful narrative from various source materials
- ▶ analyze the quality of information used to support an argument
- ▶ create interpretive presentations
- ▶ apply previous knowledge of persuasive devices to discussion and a presentation
- ▶ articulate persuasive arguments in an in-class debate
- ▶ find, interpret, and manipulate textual evidence to support one side of an argument
- ▶ work effectively with other students
- ▶ demonstrate effective oral presentation skills
- ▶ analyze the quality of information used to support an argument.

Activity description

In this activity, students will learn of Sweet Medicine, a Cheyenne cultural hero who prophesized about the coming of Euro-Americans and

modern life **[Document 1]**. They will also read a contemporary news article **[Document 2]** that summarizes the controversy surrounding coal mining and coalbed methane drilling on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation today. Last, students will read brief summaries of the arguments for coal development **[Document 3]** and against it **[Document 4]** to familiarize themselves with both sides of the coal and coalbed methane development issue. Students will then use this information to form the basis of an in-class debate before a mock tribal council. Questions will help to focus student reading and set the stage for an active learning exercise and meaningful wrap-up discussion, during which recent developments on Montana's Northern Cheyenne Reservation will be discussed **[Document 5]**.

■ Day 1 (Setting the Stage/Background)

Today, as an anticipatory set, the instructor will read Sweet Medicine's prophecy **[Document 1]** and briefly discuss with the class its significance for the Cheyenne people. The prophecy addresses the environmental and cultural impacts of the arrival of Euro-Americans in the Cheyenne world. It will set the stage for a critical examination of the contemporary controversy surrounding the possible development of coal mining on Montana's Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

Following the reading and a brief class discussion, students will consider an informative 2003 article from *High Country News* **[Document 2]** that provides needed background information on the coal and coalbed methane development issue on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Based on the article, students will answer questions **[Worksheet 1]** to ensure their comprehension of the issue. If time remains, the teacher will go over the questions and clarify key issues as necessary. Students needing more time can take the article and questions home and complete the assignment as homework.

■ Day 2 (Taking Sides)

The teacher will discuss with students their opinions regarding what they feel the Northern Cheyenne should do with respect to developing their extensive coal and coalbed methane reserves, as indicated in the last question on the previous day's worksheet. Following the discussion, a poll will be conducted to determine where students stand. Those students inclined to support development rather than preservation will become team one. Those students inclined to support preservation rather than development will become team two. Three to five of those still undecided will be selected to serve as the tribal council. The remaining students will be distributed among team one and team two to even up the team numbers. *[Note: If the sides are not even, the teacher should randomly determine the two equally sized teams and the five-member tribal council.]*

Once the teams are determined, they will be given a document (either **Document 3—Summary of Pro-Coal Development Arguments** or **Document 4—Summary of Anti-Coal Development Arguments**) that supports their chosen position. Group members will read, take notes on, and discuss their document. With the time remaining, students will brainstorm other arguments and strategize on how best to convince the tribal council that their position is right. The best (most eloquent and convincing) speakers should be chosen to introduce and summarize their group's position. During this time, tribal council members will either read both position documents or simply mill about the room eavesdropping on—but not participating in—each group's discussion. If time remains, tribal council members can also begin considering possible compromise solutions.

■ Day 3 (The Debate)

The teacher will ask the five tribal council members to sit in chairs in front of the classroom. They will serve as the judges for today's debate.

The teacher will instruct them to base their decision not on their personal opinion but on the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented by team one and team two. Tribal council members should take notes during the debate, as each member will be asked to explain his or her decision to the class following the debate. *[Note: While it is expected that the Tribal Council members will “vote” in favor of or against coal and coalbed methane development on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, it is possible that they would choose to find a compromise of some sort.]*

Each opening speaker will have up to two minutes to clearly and forcefully present his or her side’s position on coal development. Every other team member will have thirty to sixty seconds to respond to what has been said, reiterate a point, or make a new point in the debate.

A coin will be flipped at the beginning of the debate, and a student will be randomly selected to call for his or her team. If the student calls correctly, he or she will choose whether the team wants the first word or the last word. If the student calls incorrectly, the other team will decide. The opening speaker for the team selected to have the first word will then present, followed by the opening speaker for the other team. Student speakers will then alternate presenting arguments for their team’s position until all speakers have presented. The debate will end with each of the designated final speakers making their closing arguments, with the last speaker being from the team that did not have the first word.

When the debate is over, the members of the tribal council will openly discuss their ideas regarding the debate. If time allows, they may ask questions. If, after all is said and done, there is consensus, the tribal council will make a decision and explain their reasoning to both teams. If there is not consensus, the teacher will serve as a mediator and the tribal council will develop

a compromise solution. Once a final decision and/or compromise is made, the tribal council will share the reasons for its decision with the rest of the class.

■ Day 4 (Wrap-Up)

Following the debate, the teacher will facilitate a wrap-up discussion. Possible questions include the following:

- 1) What are the strongest arguments for development?
- 2) What are the strongest arguments against development?
- 3) What possible compromises regarding this issue can you think of?

Once the class has thoroughly discussed these issues, the teacher will read **Document 5**, an article that discusses the results of the November 2006 vote on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and examines possible future courses of action.

Assessments

Assessments for this activity can be formal or informal. If desired, the written questions and/or the discussion can be graded based on the thoroughness and accuracy of the responses. The debate has academic merit in and of itself. It does not need to be graded, but it could be, if the teacher so desires.

Extension ideas

Write a persuasive one-page letter to the editor regarding your position on coal or coalbed methane development on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

Compare the situation on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation to similar situations on other Montana reservations, such as coal development on the Crow Reservation or gold mining in the Little Rocky Mountains, near Fort Belknap.

Research alternatives and write an economic development plan for the Northern Cheyenne Reservation based on successful examples from other reservations in Montana or elsewhere. Conduct research to find out the current status of this issue.

Further information

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Marquis, Thomas B. *The Cheyennes of Montana*. Algonac, MI: Reference Publications, 1978.

Melmer, David. "Northern Cheyenne to Vote on Resource Extraction." *Indian Country Today*, October 30, 2006.

Nafzinger, Richard. "Transnational Energy Corporations and American Indian Development." In Institute for Native American Development, *American Indian Energy Resources and Development*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980.

Small, Gail. "The Search for Environmental Justice in Indian Country." *Amicus Journal* (March 1994).

Staff Reports. "Northern Cheyenne Block Coal Project," February 4, 2002.

Stands in Timber, John, and Margot Liberty. *Cheyenne Memories*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967.

Tribal Report Staff. "Members Attend CBM Development Assembly." *The Nation—Tribal Report of the Northern Cheyenne Nation* 1, no. 7 (June 2006).

About this activity

Derek Strahn, a high school teacher in Bozeman, Montana, developed this with assistance and review by Northern Cheyenne tribal member Dr. Richard Littlebear, president of Chief Dull Knife College, in Lame Deer, Montana. Funding for this project was provided by the Indian Education Division of the Montana Office of Public Instruction.

Document 1

Sweet Medicine's Prophecy

They will be powerful people, strong, tough. They will fly up in the air, into the sky, they will dig under the earth, they will drain the earth and kill it. All over the earth they will kill the trees and the grass, they will put their own grass and their own hay, but the earth will be dead—all the old trees and grass and animals. They are coming closer all the time. Back there, New York, those places, the earth is already dead. Here we are lucky. It's nice here. It's pretty. We have this good air. This prairie hay still grows. But they are coming all the time, turn the land over and kill it, more and more babies being born, more and more people coming. That's what He said.

He said the white men would be so powerful. So strong. They could take thunder, that electricity from the sky, and light their houses. Maybe they would even be able to reach up and take the moon, or stars maybe, one or two. Maybe they still can't do that . . .

Our old food we used to eat was good. The meat from buffalo and game was good. It made us strong. These cows are good to eat, soft, tender, but they are not like that meat. Our people used to live a long time. Today we eat white man's food, we cannot live so long—maybe seventy, maybe eighty years, not a hundred. Sweet Medicine told us that. He said the white man was too strong. He said his food would be sweet, and after we taste that food we want it. Choke-

cherries and plums, and wild turnips, and honey from the wild bees, that was our food. This other food is too sweet. We eat it and forget. . . . It's all coming true, what He said.

FRED LAST BULL
Keeper of the Sacred Arrows
Busby, Montana
September 1957

Source: Fred Last Bull quoted in John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), v–vi.

Document 2

Bob Struckman and Ray Ring, "A Breath of Fresh Air: Surrounded by a Massive Industrial Buildup, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe Defends Its Homeland," *High Country News*, January 20, 2003

BADGER PEAK, Mont.—Stand on a rocky outcrop on this modest, pine-clad mountain, the highest point on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, and gaze northward, and you can see the four smokestacks of Montana's largest power plant, Colstrip, clustered on the horizon, 16 miles away. The stacks puff like giant cigarettes. And today, from near the stacks, a separate black plume of smoke rises.

The plume drifts southwest on the prevailing winds, toward Badger Peak and tribal air space.

Jay Littlewolf, an air-quality technician for the Northern Cheyenne, says the smoke comes from the huge strip mine that feeds coal to the furnaces of the power plant. "Must be blasting to loosen the coal beds," he says.

Other than the smokestacks and the black plume, there is no trace of industry in sight. Red rocky ridges roll out to brown-grass plains under high wispy clouds and blue sky.

Littlewolf steps into the tribe's air-quality monitoring station on the peak. It's little more than a stuffy shack, with a dozen mousetraps on the floor. But the sensitive equipment housed here measures traces of air pollutants, such as nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide, and weather conditions, such as wind speed and direction. A new digital camera takes twice-a-day photos of the skies over the Colstrip stacks and mine.

"A few years ago, we would have heard rumors about a plume like that," Littlewolf says. "But with (the camera), we'll have visuals to go along with the rest of our data."

This is one of three mountaintop air-monitoring stations the tribe has deployed along the reservation border closest to Colstrip, making sure the drifting smoke doesn't violate the tribe's air-quality standards, which are some of the toughest in the U.S. It's a line of defense held by one of the most determined environmental programs anywhere.

In southeast Montana, the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is an island. The tribe has been nearly surrounded by no less than five huge strip mines, as well as the Colstrip power plant, haulage railroads and transmission lines. Montana's only active coalbed methane field sucks gas and groundwater from several hundred wells near the reservation's southern border, and there are proposals for thousands more methane wells. And a few miles east of the reservation, in the only direction still undeveloped, the Montana state government has allied with industry seeking to create a new strip mine, and possibly build another power plant and railroad.

Yet for 30 years, the Northern Cheyenne—a relatively small and isolated tribe—have fought powerful corporations that want to develop the coalbeds that underlie almost every inch of the reservation. They have done what many other tribes have been unable to do: protected their land and culture, and repeatedly reached beyond their borders to battle development off the reservation.

But economic paralysis is testing the tribe's

resolve. Some Northern Cheyenne are starting to see coal and gas royalties as a solution to the reservation's crushing poverty, crime, alcoholism and drug abuse.

"People are hungry here, they're dying, they suffer day by day. They fight over a \$15 food voucher," says Danny Sioux, who just finished a term on the tribal council. "I went to 47 funerals (last) year, mostly young people. We have tremendous social problems."

He is among those who want to take up mining and drilling to generate jobs and an economy. "That's the only option we have. We have spent the last 30 years in litigation (against coal companies), we've blackmailed the socks off these corporations, and how has it helped our situation?"

Will the Northern Cheyenne hold out, or give in to industrial development? Is there a third way—to avoid invasion by corporations, but still gain from small-scale development? These questions hold implications for Indians and non-Indians alike, as a new wave of energy development sweeps into the West.

A hard-won homeland

The Northern Cheyenne environmental stand continues a long tribal tradition. The tribe's resistance to white settlers, prospectors and the U.S. Cavalry is legendary: They helped the Sioux tribe wipe out Gen. George Armstrong Custer's men in the Battle of the Little Bighorn (just west of the reservation's present boundary) in 1876.

The Northern Cheyenne endured broken treaties and massacres, but even when the tribe was eventually relocated to Oklahoma with the Southern Cheyenne (who lived on the Central Plains), the resistance continued. In 1878, led by chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf, some 300 Northern Cheyenne men, women and children tried to walk from Oklahoma back to Montana,

trudging through snowstorms and dodging an estimated 13,000 soldiers and vigilantes.

More than 60 Northern Cheyenne were killed on that walk, memorialized in the semi-accurate Hollywood movie, *Cheyenne Autumn*. But some made it to Montana, and the tribe was granted a reservation here in the Tongue River country in 1884.

The Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation is not large. Over the years, its boundaries have been adjusted, and now it encompasses about 707 square miles of rugged, semi-arid country, rising up to Badger Peak's 4,422-foot elevation. Ponderosa pines dot the long red ridges, and sagebrush, skunkweed and prairie grasses fill the narrow valleys. The Tongue River meanders along the eastern border.

"We had to fight for it, with our spirit (and) our determination to continue and survive as a people on our land," says Joe Little Coyote, the tribe's economic development planner.

During community meetings, old men still rise to expound on the lessons learned at Little Bighorn and lesser-known confrontations, such as the Battle of the Rosebud on June 17, 1876, in which a woman warrior, whose name has been translated as Buffalo Calf Road Woman, fought bravely and saved her brother's life.

The struggles didn't end once the Northern Cheyenne won their reservation. Generations since have faced tough times, trying to survive on small-scale ranching, logging and federal assistance, far from any city, airport or interstate highway.

Yet under the reservation's surface lie arguably the biggest coal reserves held by any tribe—an estimated 20 to 50 billion tons, part of a coal belt that stretches from southeast Montana into Wyoming. The coal tends to be low-sulfur,

relatively clean-burning and desirable as a fuel for power plants. Large-scale strip mining began on land near the reservation in 1968, and when the Arab oil embargo sparked an energy crisis in the early 1970s, the coal companies ramped up production.

At first, the tribe saw this as an opportunity. From 1966 to 1971, the tribal council signed coal leases with a half-dozen corporations and speculators, including Peabody Coal, Consolidated Coal, and Amax Coal.

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs acted as trustee for the tribe, theoretically watching out for the tribe's interests. But the BIA didn't even complete an environmental impact statement, and the leases covered more than half the reservation. The agency sold the exploration rights for about \$9 per acre, and the tribe would have received royalties of no more than 17.5 cents a ton for any coal mined.

"The BIA had sold our coal for less than gravel," says Gail Small, the outspoken leader of Native Action, a Northern Cheyenne activist group.

"The federal and tribal representatives were clearly overmatched" in those lease negotiations, says Jason Whiteman Jr., a Northern Cheyenne who has worked in the tribe's environmental program since the 1970s. "We had no idea what the impacts would be," he says, and the terms of the deal were "unconscionable."

The Northern Cheyenne began to understand the implications as the corporations drilled thousands of exploration holes and announced plans to build power plants on the reservation. Such development would threaten more than the tribe's cattle ranches and crops. It would strike at the underlying tribal culture. "I remember seeing blueprints for boomtowns of 30,000 people on the reservation—we would've been a minority here," says Whiteman.

So the tribe set out to regain control of the reservation. Charismatic tribal chairman Allen Rowland—a former truck driver and janitor who carried Japanese shrapnel in his flesh, a souvenir of his service in World War II—led the fight in the 1970s. The tribe hired a series of lawyers, including an Osage Indian named George Crossland and a white lawyer from Seattle, Steve Chestnut. Some of the pioneering white environmentalists in Montana also came to the reservation to help organize.

"The first leaflet had (a headline summing up the threat of development): 'The termination of the Northern Cheyenne,'" recalls Bill Bryan, who ran the Northern Rockies Action Group back then.

Claiming the BIA had violated laws and neglected its role as trustee, the Northern Cheyenne presented a 600-page petition to then-Secretary of Interior Rogers C. B. Morton. It was a bold move. Working the highest levels of federal government, within a few years the tribe got all those coal leases canceled, forced the corporations to pay about \$10 million in damages, and gained control of another 7,000 acres one corporation had bought for mining.

Victory upon victory

Throughout the 1970s, Tribal Chairman Rowland helped foster a younger generation of budding activists and leaders, who were so inspired and empowered by early victories that they have retained a sense of mission and optimism ever since. This core has made all the difference.

Among the innovative steps taken by Rowland in those days was a youth program in which local kids traveled by bus to visit coal mines in Wyoming and on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Gail Small recalls sitting for a photograph with about 20 fellow students in a huge mechanical shovel near Gillette, Wyo., and feeling awed by the immense power of the mining operation.

“We were sent out as scouts, and on the way home we talked about it. We got fired up. We knew that, given the chance, we would be exploited,” says Small, who earned a law degree at the University of Oregon and worked with California tribes, then came home to work with her people.

Rowland also began the Northern Cheyenne Research Project, which tapped federal money to attract scientists from across the nation to the reservation to brainstorm ways to tackle environmental issues. Tribal members like Jason Whiteman apprenticed in the Research Project and began running the tribe’s environmental program.

With that momentum, the Northern Cheyenne took the offensive. When a consortium of utilities sought to expand the Colstrip power plant, the tribe found leverage through the federal Clean Air Act. It became the first government of any kind to voluntarily raise its air-quality standard to the highest level, a Class I Airshed—the same as national parks and wilderness areas.

“We got our Class I designation on August 5, 1977,” says Jay Littlewolf, who knows the date by heart, “two days before the first parks and wilderness areas got it.”

The Northern Cheyenne forced the utilities to spend \$500 million to equip the Colstrip stacks with the best air-pollution scrubbers, Littlewolf says. Those corporations also agreed to fund the tribe’s air-monitoring program, as well as provide college scholarships and job preferences for tribal members.

As industry pressures increased, the Northern Cheyenne continued to stand tough in courts and gain concessions from corporations in savvy negotiations. The tribe voided industry-friendly coal leases made on three sides of the reservation by the Reagan administration’s secretary

of Interior, James Watt, in 1982, and canceled the permit for the Montco mine just east of the reservation in 1997. The Northern Cheyenne also cancelled the allotment of much of the reservation’s subsurface mineral rights to individual tribal members and heirs—something coal speculators had hoped to take advantage of. Now the tribe effectively retains ownership of all the subsurface rights on the reservation.

Northern Cheyenne leaders have also worked with Native Action and the Northern Plains Resource Council, a Billings-based environmental group whose members include white ranchers, to block the development of a new railroad along the Tongue River, which has been pushed by coal speculators for several decades.

Now the tribe is working on a tough water-quality program, building its enforcement power on the federal Clean Water Act. “We’re developing our own water-quality standards,” says Joe Walksalong Jr., a tribal water-quality technician, “equal to or better than the federal and state standards.”

Reservation economy languishes

The Northern Cheyenne have done a remarkable job of looking out for their land and air, but they have had a more difficult time caring for their people.

These days, 4,200 Northern Cheyenne live on the reservation, and at least 65 percent are unemployed, with fully 87 percent living in poverty, according to the tribe’s own economic analysis in 2001. Average annual income that year was \$4,479.

In many places on the reservation, basic services like drinking water are not reliable. Housing is shoddy and hard to find. Up to eight families crowd into a single dwelling, while 700 families sit on a waiting list for housing. Infant mortality ranks among the worst in the U.S., and average

life expectancy is only 60 years, compared to 77 for the nation as a whole. There are high rates of substance abuse, diabetes, violence and crime.

A few families run B&Bs and other small businesses that cater to the scarce tourists who come here. But the tribal sawmill has shut down. Most grazing land is in the hands of a few extended families. Eighty-five percent of the cultivatable farmland is not being farmed, and most of that is infested with weeds.

The reservation's land, fought for by some, is neglected by others. Roads are lined with dirty diapers, aluminum cans and other litter, and right on the main highway, there's an open dump.

Things are so difficult, about 3,200 Northern Cheyenne live off the reservation. "Almost 50 percent of the population has moved away, because there is no opportunity here," says Danny Sioux, who served on the tribal council from 1986 to 1988 and from 1998 through last November, when he lost a bid for re-election.

If the tribe developed its own coal, he says, it would go a long way toward solving economic problems. Even at the low royalties of the leases that were canceled in the 1970s, the tribe's coal is worth at least \$3 billion.

In fact, despite the tribe's reputation for environmental protection at all costs, many Northern Cheyenne have pushed for some kind of natural-resource development.

A proposal for conventional oil and gas drilling on the reservation was put to a vote in 1980, and won overwhelming approval. The tribe struck a \$6 million deal with ARCO for exploration rights, but ARCO drilled a few holes and decided the project wasn't feasible. Tribal chairman Edwin Dahle, who generally took an environmental stance while in office, supported a proposal to

open a mine just east of the reservation in 1990. But that proposal stalled out.

Steve Chestnut, the Seattle lawyer who has represented the Northern Cheyenne in many environmental battles, says he's advised the tribe to do limited commercial coal mining on the reservation. "The Cheyenne have a fabulous coal reserve, and they can't bring themselves to develop even a small piece of it," Chestnut says, adding that while he respects that position, "they are paying a price for preservation."

Danny Sioux has worked in the mines and trained other miners; he has also worked for the power plant, at times in the control room, running a turbine. He's had tribal jobs as well, and now ekes out a living by repairing fences, leasing out his small piece of grazing land and doing odd jobs. He points out that industrial jobs pay far better than other local jobs, and that some Northern Cheyenne have had careers in the industry. "It would be a blessing for this tribe," he says, if the latest possibility of starting a mine just east of the reservation pans out.

The tribe should become "a shareholder" in that project, he says, and also develop the reservation's coal. He also believes that the tribe should try limited methane development, with small, 20-megawatt modular power plants linked to a few wells.

"The tribe could be in control of development. We could try to do it right," Sioux says. "Economically, that would generate a tremendous income to the tribe. We could set up a training program" and a facility where tribal members could be employed in a range of enterprises.

But when he lost the election last fall, Danny Sioux was cast as "Coalbed-methane Danny" by some opponents. Collective opinion is hard to measure now, but most Northern Cheyenne still apparently don't like the idea of strip mining

and coalbed-methane development on the reservation.

Development comes with a price

That kind of development, on the reservation or nearby, would add to the environmental impacts already being felt from the current mining, power-plant furnaces and methane drilling.

The mammoth Colstrip plant, with 2,000-megawatt capacity, burns about 10 million tons of coal each year. Even with the scrubbers on the smokestacks, the plant emitted about 19,000 tons of sulfur dioxide in 2001, and 35,000 tons of nitrogen oxide, 3,700 tons of particulates, 2,400 tons of carbon monoxide, and 343 tons of volatile organic compounds. The five strip mines altogether throw about 4,000 tons of pollution into the air each year, mostly dust from blasting and trucks on haul roads.

As the air pollution spreads over the vast open spaces, it has caused no noteworthy air-quality violations on the reservation in recent years. The power-plant operators, originally Montana Power Co. and now PPL Montana, report good relations with the tribe. But the emissions likely contribute to an occasional haze on the horizon, a haze also fed by more distant power plants, cars in Billings, Mont., and other sources of smoke.

The mines take bites out of the landscape, digging as much as 200 feet deep and a mile long. Jim Mockler, director of the Montana Coal Council, cites the success of some mine reclamation in the area. "We have shown we can mine the coal and do it right, return the (surface of the) land to good condition." But even good reclamation doesn't entirely restore native vegetation. The mines also consume sandstone cliffs that hold petroglyphs and pictographs, and affect groundwater, seeps and springs.

Coalbed-methane development, which requires

moving huge volumes of often salty groundwater, takes over entire landscapes and impacts water below and on the surface. The Tongue River is already receiving salty runoff from methane wells upriver, Joe Walksalong says, and the runoff in the river and in Rosebud Creek will likely increase with expanded methane development. There are plans for up to 16,000 new methane wells near the reservation.

The threats to water are particularly troubling to the Northern Cheyenne. Surface water is used for irrigating crops and pasture, but the meaning of water reaches deeper than its uses. Many springs and the river figure in Cheyenne sacred ceremonies that date back generations. "Cheyenne live all along the river," says Gail Small. "They bathe in the river, a ceremonial for healing, when the roots of a certain plant in the headwaters are at highest strength."

As much as he wants economic development, Joe Little Coyote agrees: "We don't want to do anything that might impact our water, no matter how good it looks." So he doesn't want mining on the reservation, and has instead put together 111 pages of analysis, calling for the tribe to establish a commerce department, seed local businesses, and develop energy projects tapping renewable resources such as wind and solar. Gail Small's group, Native Action, is pressuring a regional bank to open a branch in Lamar, so that loans will be easier to acquire. And other efforts to jump-start an economy are afoot.

Tribal President Geri Small—Gail Small's sister, who was elected in 2000—says, "I've been told that if we mined our coal, we'd be millionaires." But she is against mining and methane: "We want to keep our homeland, keep it intact."

Resurgence of the culture

In many tales of Indian sovereignty, tribes have given up control of their land and resources.

Just to the west, on the neighboring Crow Reservation, for example, that tribe leased some of its coal for a mine that has been digging for 30 years. And the Crow recently struck a deal with a Denver corporation to develop coalbed methane on their reservation.

But there are no good examples of tribes developing their natural resources so far, says A. David Lester, director of the Council of Energy Resource Tribes, based in Denver. Tribes that have tried coal mining, like the Crow and Navajo, don't have appreciably better living conditions and economies on their reservations, he says, because they let outsiders—corporations and the federal government—set low royalties and dictate the other terms.

"It's hard to say that natural-resource economic development, with the model that's been used, produces any real benefits for any tribe, or any sustainable economic activity," Lester says. A tribe is wiser not to make any deals until it can retain control of how development is done, so "it fits in your values and culture."

That's what the Northern Cheyenne are doing: Preserving the tribe's land and culture from an onslaught of outsiders, as well as defending the reservation against environmental threats.

The dismal statistics on economic and social problems don't show the strengths of the Northern Cheyenne culture. "It's a communal way of life," says Gail Small. "A lot of people who have never been part of a tribe have a hard time understanding it."

She and other Northern Cheyenne leaders cite a resurgence in the Northern Cheyenne language, and the revival of the sweat lodge and other sacred ceremonies, especially the Sun Dance—three days of fasting and dancing that purify individuals and the tribe.

"More young people are getting into the role of spiritual leader," says Zane Spang, who works at the tribe's Dull Knife College, where about 100 students pursue two-year degrees in fields such as business and computers. "I think it's a sense of pride. It identifies the individual as a member of the culture."

"Families pool their resources and give away (piles of) gifts at powwows and funerals," reports Duane Champagne of the University of California-Los Angeles, a sociologist who has studied the tribe. "Cheyenne values emphasize cooperation, sharing, generosity, religious spirituality and tribal welfare, all of which conflict with Western notions of competition, materialism, self-interest and individual achievement."

"The cultural infrastructure here has no room for individualists," agrees Joe Little Coyote. So far, that makes capitalism the odd man out. But if the tribal culture is going to endure, the Northern Cheyenne must address their economic and social problems somehow. If they continue to stand firm on protecting the environment, they will have to find new ways to meet those challenges.

Jay Littlewolf drives his pickup truck from Badger Peak on teeth-clacking dirt roads, past holy springs marked by cloth tied to bushes and trees. At the tribe's Natural Resources office, the rear half of a Quonset hut at the edge of Lame Deer, he meets Jason Whiteman and several more coworkers, who wear gloves and carry shovels and rakes. Everyone's talking about a cleanup that's under way today, of an unofficial dump near Lame Deer Creek.

Shortly, Whiteman and a technician head off toward the reservation's southern boundary, scouting for a site where one of six water-monitoring wells will be established to check

for impacts from current and future coal and methane development.

“The companies will never leave us alone,” says Whiteman. “They will always be knocking at the door.”

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Document 3

Summary of Pro–Coal Development Arguments

The Cheyenne reservation sits atop coal estimated to be worth over \$200 billion.

The Northern Cheyenne Reservation stands in contrast to surrounding areas where the land has been mined for coal and other minerals. The Cheyenne have not mined the land; rather, they have chosen not to develop, even though the reservation is plagued by poverty.

The Northern Cheyenne are an impoverished nation, hungry for economic development to provide jobs for tribal members and to reduce the reservation's dependence on shaky federal aid, according to tribal council president Eugene Little Coyote.

Little Coyote described his reservation as in a “perpetual Great Depression” with about two of every three people out of work, and said the Cheyenne want to work with the state in finding new jobs and revenue sources. “We’re the neediest of the needy,” he told Governor Brian Schweitzer and top administration officials in June 2005. He said finding new sources of money for the tribe is essential at a time when many reservation jobs are tied to federal government programs that are expected to face spending cuts. Participation in employment and job training programs is high, but waiting lists are long and available jobs are scarce even for qualified applicants.

The Cheyenne people widely recognize poverty to be at the root of many of the physical, mental, and social ills that afflict the Cheyenne commu-

nity. Abject poverty on the reservation has bred increased rates of infant mortality, crime, drug use, high school dropouts, teen pregnancy, child abuse and neglect, and other forms of family dysfunction. The unfortunate effects of such experiences especially affect children and are passed down in families. In other words, the Northern Cheyenne constitute not just a distinct population but also one that is uniquely vulnerable.

Unfortunately, many public services on the reservation fall far short of the needs they serve. The reservation faces a severe housing shortage, with more than eight hundred families needing new housing and with two-thirds of the existing housing stock in substandard condition. Several reservation communities lack access to reliable drinking water supplies, the sewer system in Lama Deer operates in violation of the Clean Water Act, and the reservation's solid waste transfer stations have been allowed to become open dumps. The reservation's law enforcement and fire protection services are seriously underfunded and understaffed. Funding for drug and alcohol treatment is also woefully inadequate to serve the needs of a reservation in which chemical dependency is endemic.

The tribe lacks the resources to fix these problems and must compete for limited funding with several other reservations with equally serious deficiencies. Tribal members are increasingly dropping off the welfare rolls due to onerous eligibility requirements and are being forced to rely on tribal programs of last resort, such as commodities, emergency food vouchers, and low-income energy assistance, to meet their basic physical needs.

In June 2005, Montana governor Brian Schweitzer expressed an interest in developing a plant on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation that is capable of producing diesel, gasoline, and other fuels from coal mined in the Otter Creek tracts, which the state obtained from the federal government a few years ago.

Schweitzer predicted such a plant could operate for fifty years, providing hundreds of high-paying jobs on the reservation for two generations and creating little pollution. Expensive and unsightly power lines would not be needed because the product would be shipped in underground pipelines, he said.

But Schweitzer warned Little Coyote and other Cheyenne leaders that such plants can be located in many sites throughout Montana's coalfields and that tribal willingness to embrace the proposal is important. "If you don't have an active interest in this, there are other places to take this project," he said.

Coal mining offers a long-term solution to the severe economic and social problems now plaguing the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. By developing their own resources on their own terms, tribal members can create numerous high-paying jobs, generate substantial revenues for civic improvements and public services, and decrease their dependence on unpredictable federal and state assistance programs.

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Document 4

Summary of Anti–Coal Development Arguments

The Northern Cheyenne Reservation is the last refuge where the Northern Cheyenne can retain and continue to live their unique culture. Many Northern Cheyenne believe that they have a sacred trust to protect their remaining homeland and that the continuing health of the reservation land and resources is crucial to the continuing survival of the Northern Cheyenne.

Although relatively small as western Indian reservations go, the Northern Cheyenne Reservation is unusual because the tribe or its individual members own and control almost the entire reservation land base. Only about 2 percent of the land is fee land (that is, not held in trust and thus capable of being bought and sold), and only about 1 percent of the land is owned by non-Indians. None of the Indian-owned land is leased to non-Indians. Tribal ownership and control of the reservation land base is not a historical accident but the result of determined effort, much sacrifice, and skillful leadership and negotiations by earlier generations. It is one tangible expression of the value in which the Northern Cheyenne people hold their remaining homeland, which many tribal members regard as a sacred trust inherited from their forebears.

For many Northern Cheyenne, the land and the associated resources are not simple inanimate objects. Rather, they are living beings—relations of the Northern Cheyenne—who deserve respect, nurturing, and careful consideration. The spiritual characteristics of natural resources are important to the Northern Cheyenne because they give meaning to the landscape in

which they live. Thus, destroying the landscape or wasting resources is, from the traditional Cheyenne perspective, both shortsighted and immoral.

Although still dealing with the legacy of a tragic past, the distinct culture of the Northern Cheyenne is still very much alive today and every effort is being made to sustain it far into the future. The Sundance ceremony, for example, was revived during the 1970s and has been held regularly ever since. Today, you will find at least forty families that have sweat lodges, and it is not unusual to find at least six sweat lodge ceremonies going on every evening of the week in the reservation districts. Traditional prayer ceremonials are being held every weekend of the year. And, beginning with the ceremonial season in the early spring and lasting all summer long, many of the people and their families are going out into the hills, on and off the reservation, to hold individual ceremonies.

The ceremonial, cultural, and burial sites are considered sacred belongings of the Cheyenne people and are not to be disturbed by anyone, because they are part of an intimate relationship the Cheyenne have with Grandmother Earth, similar to the nurturing care relationship between a child and its mother.

Among the present life of the Northern Cheyenne, young people are discovering that the sacred ways of their ancestors have meaning and purpose for today's times and conditions. They are finding that these sacred ways are the source of their identity as a people, and that they also have healing value for restoring balance and harmony with their cultural-based humanity.

Many Northern Cheyenne fear that commercial coal development on the reservation would have a destructive impact on their homelands and unique culture. Long-term disruptions to their sacred lands, water, habitat, and other natural and cultural resources would likely result from the quest to obtain short-term economic gain through coal development. Consequently, many Northern Cheyenne have concluded that depleting their natural resource base will not lead to a sustainable future for their children and culture.

Joe Little Coyote summarizes the tribe's attitude toward coal development as follows: The Tribe has been under tremendous pressure to develop its vast fossilized energy resources to address its impoverished conditions. In spite of this, the Tribe—prior to the November 2006 election—has chosen not to exploit these resources due to the uncertainties of potential impacts to the environmental and cultural integrity of its homelands and its people.

At present, the land-based culture of the Northern Cheyenne tribe is transitioning through an adaptation process to a new self-sufficient and independent livelihood that will maintain the environmental and cultural integrity of its reservation homelands. As an alternative to coal development on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, the tribe has chosen a developmental direction of a land-based, sustainable, renewable energy resource development of its own lands, with primary focus on solar, wind, and biomass to energy conversion resources.

Renewable energy sources currently account for about 15 to 20 percent of the energy in the United States. They are on the rise and are expected to reduce and/or replace much of the pollutants that contribute to greenhouse gases and ozone-depleting chemicals. Renewable energies such as trees, crops, and solid waste (trash) are the feedstock to produce fiber, sugars, and fuels,

which are then further processed to produce such items as plastics, bio-diesel, and ethanol.

The development of renewable energy resources will offer needed economic development opportunities for the Northern Cheyenne people and is far more sustainable over the long term than developing coal-based resources. Moreover, such development is far more compatible with Northern Cheyenne cultural beliefs and practices. Renewable energy resource development is, therefore, far more preferable than coal-based development.

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Document 5

Clair Johnson, "Northern Cheyenne Coal Future 'Delicate Issue,'" *Billings Gazette*, November 16, 2006

With the passage of an initiative supporting coal development, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe plans to move forward, but cautiously.

Tribal President Eugene Little Coyote said this week that coal development is a "delicate issue." While a majority of tribal members support coal development, many don't, he said. The tribe will proceed "very carefully" and publicly with its members, he said.

Tribal members considered two energy issues in the election Nov. 7. Members approved, 664-572, an initiative calling for coal development but rejected, 841-365, a similar initiative on coalbed methane.

Little Coyote said the results surprised him because he didn't think either initiative would pass. While he maintains a neutral position, he said, "I have to stand with the majority of my people."

Developing the tribe's coal resources is a delicate issue because of its history and its experience with environmental justice, the president said.

In the late 1970s, the tribe fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to get coal leases canceled. Nearly two-thirds of the tribe's land had been leased to coal-development companies, Little Coyote said, "but we were getting a terrible deal." The tribe succeeded in getting the leases canceled. Later attempts to develop coal resources went nowhere.

The latest effort for coal started with tribal members who gathered 740 signatures on a petition to have the issue placed on the Nov. 7 ballot.

The tribe already has a good idea of its coal reserves but will need to do more studies and planning before it gets to the exploration stage, the president said. His concern is to proceed in an open manner with tribal members and to keep everyone informed "every step of the way," he said.

Little Coyote will meet with the tribal council to discuss how to proceed.

The tribe is not engaged in talks with any coal company other than communication it has with Western Energy, a coal company in nearby Colstrip. The discussions with Western Energy come from an agreement settling a lawsuit, Little Coyote said.

There is "a fresher stigma around coalbed methane in the minds of our people," Little Coyote said.

The tribe has been involved in several lawsuits over coalbed methane development and water quality issues with the Tongue River, which forms the reservation's eastern boundary. A gas development company has challenged the tribe's eastern border.

"That kind of ruined it as well," Little Coyote said. "We didn't take that lightly."

The president said he has heard comments that an open-pit coal mine would be a large physical presence, while coalbed methane might have a lesser footprint on the land. But coalbed

methane would disturb the tribe's water and aquifers, and water is very important in Cheyenne culture.

"It's so complicated," Little Coyote said.

The coalbed methane measure got on the ballot after a citizen group called the Association for the Advancement of Indigenous Resources asked the tribal council to place it before voters.

Coalbed methane supporters may take another run at the issue, and coal opponents also may try to stop any development, Little Coyote said. The tribe's constitution allows for members to call for a referendum vote to challenge actions by the council.

Energy development offers economic opportunity, Little Coyote said.

"It could be exciting," he said, adding, "My administration does not want to fall out of step with what is socially and culturally acceptable to my fellow Cheyenne."

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Worksheet

Mining Sacred Ground

- 1) Why does the article describe the Northern Cheyenne Reservation as “an island” in southeast Montana?
- 2) Why have the Northern Cheyenne resisted developing their coal reserves for more than thirty years?
- 3) What factors are now testing the tribe’s resolve?
- 4) How is resistance to outsiders part of a long tradition with the Northern Cheyenne?
- 5) How large are the Northern Cheyenne’s coal reserves?
- 6) Why have the Northern Cheyenne resisted developing these reserves up to this point?
- 7) What steps have the Northern Cheyenne taken to preserve their environment in the past?
- 8) What are some of the economic problems currently faced by the Northern Cheyenne?
- 9) How might developing the reservation’s coal reserves help the Northern Cheyenne?
- 10) How might developing the reservation’s coal reserves hurt the Northern Cheyenne?
- 11) How specifically are the Northern Cheyenne currently experiencing a “resurgence in culture”?
- 12) In your opinion, should the Northern Cheyenne develop their coal reserves or continue to resist such development? Why?