



NISGUA
 Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala

2019 Delegation: Environmental Indigenous Leadership

“This journey to Guatemala was impeccable and the experience elicited emotions that are partially inexpressible. Some of the stories that were shared are only for the ears that heard them, but were experiences that when I find myself embraced by mother nature, listening to her songs, I will recall with clarity. Throughout this experience I felt a multitude of varying emotions, including but not limited to fear, anger, hope, inquisitiveness and bliss. The sights, smells, aura, and life stories are a reflection of perseverance and survival. *Tengo sangre indigena pero no soy indigena en mi cara ni en mi vida.* Despite this, the community welcomed me like family, and for this I am forever grateful.”
 -Toteona Gray (Choctaw descendant)

This March, NISGUA partnered with New Mexico State University to host a week-long exchange between Indigenous undergraduate students and Maya Q’eqchi’, Mam, Q’anjob’al, and K’iche’ environmental defenders. Ten NMSU students visited with ACODET (Association of Communities for Development and the Defense of Land and Natural Resources) to learn about their grassroots organizing model that builds community-level Indigenous leadership to defend ancestral territories against the imposition of megaprojects like the Xalalá dam.

This delegation culminated a year of organizing to build relationships between Indigenous water protectors in Guatemala and the U.S., and served as a direct follow-up to our fall speaking tour, “How to Stop a Dam with Indigenous Resistance.” **It was also our first delegation to focus exclusively on facilitating direct exchange between Indigenous leaders**, a dream originally conceived by NISGUA activist and exchange co-organizer, Kayla Myers (Eastern Shoshone Descendant), when she was an accompanier through GAP.



The delegation was comprised of ten students and two facilitators. First row left to right: Kayla Myers (facilitator, Eastern Shoshone Descendant), Abby Nayra (facilitator, Filipino-Chinese-American), Buffy Charley (Diné), Kori Marmon (Laguna Pueblo, Zuni Pueblo, Otoe-Missouri), Charlene Juanico (Zia Pueblo), Toteona Gray (Choctaw descendant), Chantelle John (Diné). Back row: Antonio Garcia (Jicarilla Apache and Mexika), Adrienne Dawes (Hopi), Antoinette Benally (Diné), Reyaun Francisco (Diné), Elijah Harry (Diné).

From accompanier to delegation organizer

“In 2016, when serving as a human rights accompanier in the Ixcán region, I stood on a sacred site with an ancestral authority of the Copal AA community as he explained the history and hopes of that land. His teachings had become a source of healing and transformation for me, and, then and there, the prayer of bringing Indigenous Youth from the North to experience this journey was born. After finishing a Mayan ceremony on that same land in Copal AA in March of 2019, the ancestral authority put his hand on my shoulder and said “I remember that day, and now you are here with us.”
 - Kayla Myers (Eastern Shoshone Descendant)

Cover image: Students walk up the path to the high school in Copal AA. Photo credit: Chantelle John. Bottom image: The whole group poses in Guatemala City.

We are deeply grateful to Kayla Myers, Aggies Go Global NMSU, NMSU Indian Resource Development Program, our partners in ACODET, and the communities of Copal AA and Las Margaritas Copón for their generosity, vision, and collaboration, and to all our grassroots donors who made this exchange possible.



Getting ready to go

In the months leading up to their departure, students gathered at the NMSU campus in Las Cruces, where Kayla works as a Senior Program Specialist for Indian Resources Development, **to get to know one another, discuss their hopes for the exchange, and begin their learning about Guatemalan history and social movements.** This work included a screening and discussion of Skylight Pictures' *500 YEARS* and facilitated reflections on Indigenous People's rights and the importance of transnational solidarity.

The delegates also volunteered at a church where recently detained immigrants, many of them Indigenous, were released by ICE with no access to food and shelter.

Day One: History

After a long flight on Saturday, delegates settled into their hotel and had a welcome dinner in Guatemala City. The next day started with a workshop on decolonization frameworks co-facilitated by NISGUA and NMSU staff, and a visit to Casa de la Memoria, where delegates learned about **500 years of Indigenous resistance and survival in Guatemala.**

In the afternoon, we met with Maudi Liset Tzay Patal, Maya Kakchiquel community social psychologist and 2016 NISGUA tour speaker, to talk about how her work allows her to practice **Indigenous leadership and support the healing of survivors of violence.**



Day Two: Welcome

On Monday morning, we met our driver, Ardámi, and journeyed 10 hours in a van to Copal AA La Esperanza, located in the far north department of Alta Verapaz. We were greeted with fresh coconuts and a warm welcome from community leaders, including Indigenous mayors, ACODET organizers, and members of the Community Development Councils.

After dinner with host families, students met with the **Grand Council of Ancestral Authorities to discuss ceremonial practices and hold vigil over offerings brought to Copal AA by the students.** Students shared about ceremony in their communities and noted similarities and differences across cultures.

Top image: The delegates sell Navajo Tacos to fundraise for their trip expenses. Photo credit: Chantelle John. Middle image: Delegates learn about the racist history of Guatemalan "Independence" in the Casa de la Memoria. Photo credit: Chantelle John. Bottom image: Delegates Adrienne, Toteona, and Kori laugh in the Chixoy river. Photo credit: Chantelle John.

Day Three: Leadership

On Tuesday, we traveled by boat down the Chixoy River and hiked for forty minutes through the hills to Las Margaritas Copón, Ixcán. We learned about **Indigenous community organizing, leadership structures, and how communities respond to problems and threats in their territory.** NMSU students shared about their communities and cultures in English and/or their native languages, which NISGUA and ACODET staff then interpreted into Spanish and Q'eqchi'.



Day Four: Education

On Wednesday, we participated in an Indigenous language exchange at the elementary and high school in Copal AA. High school students prepared music and political theater highlighting the **role of education in preserving Indigenous identity and environmental defense.**

In the afternoon, we learned about the history of resistance to the Xalalá Dam and the founding of Copal AA by returned refugees of the Mayan genocides. Students asked questions about the intersections of Indigenous language and culture, community organizing, and environmental defense.

In the evening, the ancestral authorities invited us to participate in a **ceremony for the Nahaul Kej**, which included fire offerings from delegates. Out of respect for ceremonial norms, no photographs were taken.



Day Five: Travel

On our final day in Copal AA, we went to the local artisans' market, where we learned about the role of agriculture and craft in the local economy. Following a warm community farewell and invitation to return, we got back in the van and headed back to Cobán for rest and reflection in the Quetzal Cloud Forest.

“My takeaway is the power of community. The beauty of a community built on common demands, which ensures accountability, flexibility, and an equal distribution of power through formed groups that represent the entire community was art in motion. It was overwhelmingly empowering and restored my hope for my own community. The words of the elders will continue to be a foundation stone in my own life that I will continue to reflect upon to restore my spirit and remind me of the power of community through organization. I am eternally grateful.”

– Kori Marmon (Laguna Pueblo, Zuni Pueblo, Otoe-Missouri)

Top image: Community leaders listen to Kayla Myers speak about the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in the U.S. and efforts to defend the rights of Indigenous women everywhere. Middle image: Diné delegates hold their flag representing the Navajo Nation outside of the Copal AA school. Photo credit: Chantelle John. Bottom image: The whole group says goodbye to the Chixoy River and the Copal AA community before our bus trip back to the capital.



Day Six: Reflection

Before heading back to the capital, we enjoyed a day of hiking, reflection, integration, and planning for next steps. On this day, delegates had the opportunity to reflect on the impact the delegation had on their learning, their activism, and their leadership, while considering what long-term solidarity with Guatemalan water protectors could look like back home.

“What an empowering and incredible experience it was to be in Guatemala, and most importantly learn from and be welcomed by the Indigenous Mayan communities. We did many things, explored many places, and ate many, many, many tortillas. I am honored to have been a part of the first Indigenous Environmental Leadership Exchange and owe the most gratitude to the facilitators for making this trip meaningful and astonishing for us all. The Maya are a beautiful and gracious group of powerful and strong people that have been living in resistance, living in the struggle to protect their territory against forced removal by the U.S. and Guatemalan governments for extraction of minerals and the construction of hydroelectric dams along their river. There has been a history of removal and genocide within Indigenous Mayan communities and we stand in solidarity with them to say no, we have the right to our land that our ancestors have lived on for hundreds of years and will continue for generations more. Thank you, thank you, thank you, it was the best time of my life.”
– Adrienne Dawes (Hopi)

Urgent update: Threats to Parroquía Lancetillo

In conversations with the delegation, ACODET warned of a threat against their Maya Q’eqchi’ comrades in Parroquía Lancetillo, Uspantán. In 2010, Uspantán communities rejected hydroelectric and other extractive projects in the municipality through a community consultation. However, it appears that a transnational company is threatening to construct a hydroelectric dam in their territory on the Cuatro Chorros River.

In the face of this threat, local environmental defenders, most of them women, educated and organized their community to stand firmly against corporate attempts to win their support. The company has tried to divide the community and has criminalized and intimidated the women organizing against the dam. Nonetheless, with their allies in ACODET, the community has coalesced around this struggle to protect their river and life.

You are reading our 100th NISGUA report! As we celebrate this milestone we send thanks and admiration to all the minds that crafted these reports over the years, and to all the hearts that pushed us to commit more deeply to grassroots education, every day.

ABOUT NISGUA

The Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) links people in the U.S. and Guatemala in the global grassroots struggle for justice, human dignity, and respect for the Earth.

Top left: The group gathers to reflect and dream together in the cloud forest. Top right: Several delegates walk up a path in Las Margaritas Copón. Photo credit: Chantelle John.