

New Mexico Extractives Pilgrimage Exposes The Harm Amid The Beauty



Abandoned uranium mines in Navajo Nation continue to pose a danger to the land and people.

Beneath the glorious vistas and majestic beauty of New Mexico lies an ugly reality of the damage done by extractivism, in many cases in troubling combination with colonialism. The Institute Justice Team led a group through an inaugural extractivism immersion experience in September, traveling from Los Alamos in the north of the state to Carlsbad Caverns in the south, to witness how the nuclear and oil and gas industries have turned much of the state into a sacrifice zone, treating Earth and the native peoples as disposable.

Sisters Marlene Perrotte, RSM, and Joan Brown, OSF, led the group, which included a Mercy sister and two Associates. They were privileged to meet with elders from the Navajo Nation and Pueblo peoples, praying with them for healing and receiving their blessings, even as they heard stories about the ongoing environmental damage. The expanding nuclear industry in Los Alamos has contaminated the soil and water, and radioactive waste sits in bins around where people live and their children play. At Red Water Pond Community, waste from old uranium mines and a massive but little-known spill nearby, which was bigger than Three Mile Island and the third largest in the world, have not been cleaned up, even after decades of discussion.

In the Permian Basin, in towns like Artesia and Carlsbad, oil wells dominate what used to be farmland, many located just steps from houses. Members of Earthworks demonstrated how they use specialized cameras to detect the constant emissions of methane and other chemicals from the facilities. Regulators have taken action only in a handful of cases, despite numerous complaints by Earthworks. Local activists are working to raise awareness of the health dangers to the community, but they struggle to counteract the view that the industry is bringing jobs.

Along the way, the group visited the Bosque Redondo Memorial, which honors the 10,000 Diné (Navajo) and Ndé (Mescalero Apache) who were driven from their land and force marched to the inhospitable area near Fort Sumner, where many died of disease and starvation. But they have not been erased and continue to struggle for their land and traditions.



Members of the extractives immersion pilgrimage visited Window Rock on the Navajo Nation. (Front row, from left) Heather Scott-Molleda, Cynthia Gonzalez, Marianne Comfort, Sister Joan Brown, OSF, Sister Marlene Perrotte, RSM, Arcelia Isais- Gastelum. (Back row, from left) Melissa Mendonca, Sister Marlys Jax, OSF, Wesley Cocozello, Brother Ryan Roberts, Sister Aline Paris, RSM, Alexis Stephens.

The participants witnessed the beauty of God’s creation in Carlsbad Caverns, including the awesome sight of hundreds of thousands of bats flying out of the cave into the night. But they also saw evidence everywhere of the lack of care for people and for Earth. The trip was timely as 2023 marks the centennial of both Carlsbad Caverns and the first oil well in the Permian Basin.



Oil wells in Carlsbad, New Mexico, dominate what used to be farmland and spew methane and other chemicals into the air.

A dragonfly, the symbol of hope, change and love, joined the group for the final gathering, as they buried the “earthen treasure vase” that accompanied them on their pilgrimage, along with the prayers of many who encountered it on the journey.

This article was first published in Mercy Now, the newsletter of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. For further information on the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, please visit their website <https://sistersofmercy.org/>

To read a reflection from one of the members on the pilgrimage please visit: <https://sistersofmercy.org/walk-in-beauty/>