

# **Extractivism's Human Cost**

**By Alexis Stephens Mercy Associate**



It's hard to know what to expect when you embark on an extractivism pilgrimage. You enter into this journey prayerfully knowing that your life will be impacted. Our pilgrimage began with a visit to the Los Alamos National Laboratory. I was pleasantly surprised at the lush green grass and the beautiful lake, but later learned that the lake was highly contaminated. Over the next week we started our day with communal breakfast followed by prayer. It was a time to be spiritually sustained, and this was particularly helpful for me because each stop brought us to stories of exploitation, racism, degradation of the earth, failure of leadership at all levels, and lives and bodies traumatized. At each step we were accompanied by our earthen vessel, a special clay pot made by Marian Naranjo of the Santa Clara Pueblo, to house our prayers for the healing of the earth and for reconciliation.

For me, the full horror of what we were being called to bear witness to was at Red Water Pond, listening to our Indigenous host talk about the impact of uranium mining on the Diné settlement where she resides ("Diné," meaning "The People," refers to the Indigenous nation better known in English as Navajo). She has told the story many times about deception that led to long hours in the uranium mines for Diné people. It was also a story about the failure of leadership, the fight to decontaminate her community and finally about the cancer in her blood that she survived, but that was now in her breast. Her sister brought out the family album to show how their animals were also affected by the uranium. Before we left, we joined in prayers led by our host's brother, a medicine man who himself was sick because of the long hours he also spent in the mines. We asked forgiveness for what had been done to the earth and the Diné people. The stories of fear, pain, suffering, exploitation, racism and extractivism were repeated often with every stop from Los Alamos to Window Rock and Church Rock, The Laguna Pueblo, Fort Sumner, and the Permian Basin.

As I stood on the grounds of the Bosque Redondo Memorial, I wept for the suffering of the Diné and Apache peoples. At the Permian Basin, I looked out at the vast oil fields, the obvious signs of flaring, the methane plumes invisible to the naked eye, and the landscape dotted with oil rigs. Was this going to be our fate now that Exxon Mobil has started drilling for oil in Guyana? What about Pope Francis' call to the "Care for our Common Home?!"



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