

# Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world, indigenous people stand up for their traditional sacred lands in defense of cultural survival, human rights and the environment.

## Standing on Sacred Ground

BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

When I first met Caleen Sisk and her great-aunt Florence Jones, the Winnemem Wintu healer, back in 1993, Caleen often asked if I knew “whether there are indigenous people in other parts of the world doing their jobs and taking care of sacred places?” As the Winnemem prayed at their healing spring on Mt. Shasta that is both their point of origin and the place their departing spirits pass through as they return to the Milky Way, I looked out at the ridges descending to the horizon and felt the pull of sacred places beyond. Caleen’s question flowed like a gathering stream into the river below and stretched my imagination to revered mountains, springs and rivers of people around the world.

This past summer, I watched Caleen

circumambulate a lake beneath the revered Uch Enmek Mountain in the heart of Siberia. With the passing of Florence Jones, she is now the Chief and Spiritual Leader of the Winnemem Wintu. Her new friend, the Altaian leader Danil Mamyev, had led Caleen to a pair of lakes he calls “the eyes of Uch Enmek” so she could gather water to carry back to her spring on Mt. Shasta to link their sacred places and mutually strengthen land and culture. I heard Caleen’s song ripple across the water and I marveled at what a long journey we have been on to find that, yes, there are sacred site guardians all over the Earth praying, singing, dancing, listening to and protecting their ancient sacred lands. When Caleen returned, Danil told her with a big smile and tears in his eyes, “This lake has not heard that song for a long time.”

Indigenous people make up 4% of the world’s population, yet their lands contain



Danil Mamyev blesses Caleen Sisk before she gathers water at a sacred lake in the Altai Republic of Russia.



Altaian shaman Vasily Mogulchin offers milk to the fire at the Uch Enmek Nature Park summer solstice fire ceremony. Milk is a pure offering and fire a doorway to the spirit world.

80% of the planet’s biodiversity. At the heart of those traditional lands and cultures lie sacred places that absorb songs, prayers and offerings, and give back knowledge, healing and direction. When they pray, these guardians and caretakers pray for all of us. As Australian scientist Brendan Mackey acknowledges in our new film series’ final episode, “Every plant and animal species we see around us today co-existed with Aboriginal people. So, they must have been doing something right.” These truths highlight the strategic importance of maintaining the cultural and biological integrity of indigenous nations on every continent in the face of growing threats.

When we celebrated the completion and premiere of the *Standing on Sacred Ground* series in October, a grant from the Full Circle Fund enabled our project to truly come full circle as sacred site guardians traveled from

PHOTOS LEFT AND ABOVE BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

all over the world to join us for five days of conversation and strategic planning about how best to use the films for education and protection of indigenous rights, traditional homelands and sacred sites.

Our intention in making the films was to honor the uniqueness of the eight cultures we profiled but also to show the profound commonality of values that these diverse people share—they all follow one law, the law of nature. Confronting these values are a similarly linked array of threats that are all products of an industrial, extractive value system.

one. As Danil described it, the ceremony links sacred sites and their guardians, strengthens ecological systems, deepens traditional knowledge and clarifies the path forward.

When the Altaians made a pilgrimage to Mt. Shasta in 2007—four months after our first film trip to Altai—a deep bond was formed. Beyond giving us a great film scene to connect the stories of the Altaians and Winnemem, the discovery that the Winnemem sacred spring had gone dry for the first time in tribal memory created a reciprocal relationship—a need for support,

on *Sacred Ground* in the place the story starts: the mountains of Altai. With the Winnemem story following Altai's in the first hour of the series, it was appropriate to have Caleen participate in the fire ceremony and then travel with Maria and Danil to sacred places around Altai during our two-week visit. For Miles and Fiona, it was a chance to see why their dad has been going away for such long trips over the past seven years.

On the second day of the fire ceremony, Caleen was asked to perform a ritual at the fire. Her suitcase had been lost in transit so her regalia was missing. With the other shamans clothed in age-old leather, feathers and ribbons, Caleen was down to her bare essence—and she shone. She explained that protecting water is her mission in life, helping the earth achieve a natural balance between fire and water, so her ritual focused on the waters. As she prayed and sent pipe smoke skyward a gentle rain began to fall, a lush enveloping mist. It was awesome—and everyone fell in love with Caleen.

After the huge closing fire under a rising full moon, Danil invited everyone to the world premiere of *Pilgrims and Tourists*, one episode of our series, complete with Russian subtitles. As the shamans ate dinner in the central yurt and the stubborn Siberian sun finally crossed the horizon at 10 p.m., I set up an outdoor screen and projector with some trepidation: would anyone come? They all came. In the emotional discussion that followed the film, here's a sample of the shamans' comments: "It is very, very clean." "It touched my heart." "I just stood there and cried." "I'm so happy, and a little surprised, that non-indigenous people have made this film." "Many people were crying." "We talked about it all night." "We have just the same problems." "Caleen is so strong; she is an important leader." "We are not alone." "We are together, we are united,

At the David Brower Center, from left: **Christopher McLeod, Tantoo Cardinal, Caleen Sisk, Jennifer Castner (translator), Danil Mamyev, Davianna McGregor, Emmett Aluli, Q'orianka Kilcher, Oren Lyons and Barry Lopez.**



PHOTO BY JESSICA ABBE

From mining to missionaries, from pipelines to archaeologists, our consumer culture is now attacking the most remote lands and cultures.

As Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons told the audience after watching all four films, the urgent need of our time can be summed up in four words: "value change for survival."



The fire was hungry. It consumed milk, vodka, bread, cheese, barley, lambs' heads, cows' legs, cedar, juniper, water and the prayers and songs of a dozen shamans from all over Asia who had gathered at Uch Enmek Nature Park in the Altai Republic of Russia. The fire sparked, smoked, roared, called out to ancestors and spirits, and seemed very happy to be fed by the people. On the summer solstice, Danil Mamyev and shaman Maria Amanchina presided over a three-day ritual that honored and blended many fires into

dialogue, prayer and mutual care. So when the Altaians invited Caleen to visit their Golden Mountains to gather water to help heal her spring back home, the invitation spawned another pilgrimage.

*"With this film series, you have forged the foundation of an international objection to the violation of sacred land—and the protection of intact ecosystems for the psychological benefit of all people, regardless of cultural background." —Barry Lopez*

With a grant from the Trust for Mutual Understanding, I traveled to the Altai fire ceremony with Caleen, along with my wife, co-producer and writer Jessica Abbe, and our two teenage children, Miles and Fiona. Caleen's quest was to collect water to bring back to Mt. Shasta. For Jessica and me, our main purpose was premiering the first episode of *Standing*

we cannot be defeated."

Our amazing journey continued on the following day, after Caleen's suitcase finally arrived, as we mounted horses and headed toward Uch Enmek Mountain. The last time I was up in the headwaters of the Karakol Valley with Will Parrinello and Andy Black we filmed Danil in a wet, freezing blizzard. This time



LEFT AND CENTER PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD  
PHOTO AT RIGHT BY MASAYA TAMEGAI

Radio host **Rose Aguilar** of KALW's "Your Call" interviews **Danil Mamyev** and **Caleen Sisk** for KALW's facebook page; **Emmett Aluli, Q'orianka Kilcher** and **Danil Mamyev** during a meeting of sacred site guardians in October; **Caleen Sisk** after a screening.

the sunshine was glorious and wildflowers were everywhere. Caleen's obstacles continued as she tore a calf muscle mounting a moving horse, but she found a walking stick and carried on with great humor and determination all the way to two small lakes at the foot of the sacred mountain. Danil lit a fire and introduced Caleen to a place he guards with care. He explained that one is a lake of sadness and death, "the crying lake," and the other a lake of joy and life, "the laughing lake." Caleen walked slowly around each one and gathered water to take back to Mt. Shasta, to connect the mountains and waters spiritually. When she had finished, Danil said, "I think the lakes were surprised to hear songs they have not heard for a thousand years. I think they liked it very much."



Starting on October 10, the four films that comprise *Standing on Sacred Ground* had their world premiere at the Mill Valley Film Festival in California. In a series of 15 screenings over the following 10 days, the Sacred Land Film Project team celebrated completion after seven years of production and editing. Sacred site guardians from all around the world led inspiring conversations and discussions with audiences.

Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons, Emmett Aluli and Davianna McGregor from Hawai'i, Danil Mamyev from Russia, Winnemem Wintu Chief Caleen Sisk of California, actress Tantoo Cardinal (who was raised in Canada's tar sands region), actress Q'orianka Kilcher and author Barry Lopez appeared with the films and spoke up for action on an array of issues.

At the Mill Valley Film Festival, Danil Mamyev sat in the balcony as the audience

below watched our most heart-rending episode, *Profit and Loss*, on the tar sands of Alberta, Canada. There were audible gasps and groans from the audience. In the Q&A afterwards, Danil offered an uplifting observation: "That sympathy and compassion is important. It's the same feeling we get from the spirits and from the ancestors."

Oren Lyons, who feels that we are running out of time to turn things around, was more blunt. "The loss is what we share. We don't share the profit. We share the loss. And the percentage of people who share that loss is very, very large, while the percentage of the people who share the profit is very, very small. It's the 1% who share the profit and the 99% who share the loss. And the bad guy, as you saw in the film, is not the diggers, not the extractors, it's the government that is complicit in this. It's your leadership—so-called."

At a special screening at our home base, the David Brower Center in Berkeley, the great feeling generated from those profoundly caring and resolute leaders was something I'll never forget. These are the people who hold the key to restoring our damaged relationship with nature, and they share their wisdom and insight with us all in the films. With the continued support of our invaluable funders and the continuing partnership of sacred site guardians, we can help realize the vision of transforming our cultural values.

In front of a packed house, Barry Lopez observed, "With these films you've tapped into our cultural anxiety about what the loss of sacred land means. Damage to landscape obviously affects indigenous people: we see the breakdown of sacred places. But urban people are in the same breakdown lane at the cellular level. We live in pain. Euro-Americans feel

anxiety over environmental destruction at a psychological level. This is not wilderness preservation—taking remnant land and defending it. This is the sanctity of intact ecosystems, which has always been the blueprint for art, culture and history. It is immersion in something that works beautifully and will reconstitute our ability to do our work. Sacred land: it is the wellspring of a reconstituted psyche."

Barry offered a solution: "We need to forge a relationship between Anglo-Saxon suffering, urban people and indigenous people—and the pain and anxiety we are all suffering. With this film series, you have forged the foundation of an international objection to the violation of sacred land—and the protection of intact ecosystems for the psychological benefit of all people, regardless of cultural background."

This network of guardians is now connected and working together, supporting each other. As they heal their cultures and sacred places, the strength and mutual support is growing tangibly. The road ahead is open.



As our year drew to a close we received the Best Documentary Feature Award at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco—our first award for *Standing on Sacred Ground*. To be recognized by the native community is humbling and thrilling. It reminds me of the responsibility we have to distribute the film series with the same skill and passion that went into making it.

Our thanks go to the indigenous people who have trusted us to film their ceremonies and tell stories of their sacred places. It's a risk, and a sign of how crucial this moment is in the crisis our planet faces. Together we can turn it around.

