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Introduction

During the years I taught anthropology at Illinois State University (1972–1991) and later at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (1994–1995), students often asked what anthropologists did or could do to solve problems among the peoples with whom they worked. The Feather Distribution Project (1982–2015) was one example of an applied anthropology program that attempted to solve four problems. It was somewhat unusual in terms of applied anthropology projects in that it was informed by a heavy reliance on data from archaeology, ethnography, and ethnohistory and the author's field experiences among the Pueblos, and combined this knowledge with Sol Tax's (1952, 1975) concept of "action anthropology."

But what is "action anthropology?" Sol Tax, the late Chicago anthropologist, coined the term, and in an article describing a conversation he had with Tax, Robert Rubinstein (1991) wrote:

Action anthropology is an approach that seeks to develop the understanding of social and cultural life while helping communities address the challenges they face. In contrast to applied anthropology, when seeking to help the communities with whom they work, action anthropologists facilitate the communities' own decision making about what actions should be taken to address those challenges rather than implementing decisions made outside of the community or for the community by the anthropologist. In seeking new theoretical understanding, action anthropologists work on problems identified in collaboration with communities, rather than only

pursuing questions that emerge independently from social theory, in contrast to basic research. Action anthropology originated in the work of Sol Tax and his students in the Fox Project, conducted with the Meskwaki Indians in the 1950s. It has since been used with communities throughout the world to promote social change and develop anthropological theory.

Through time, the term “action anthropology” has become less common, and such programs are now subsumed under the more comprehensive discipline of applied anthropology.

The Feather Distribution Project, originally an “action anthropology” project, was directed toward the solution of four problems that affected Native Americans in general and, at first, the Pueblos of the American Southwest. It must be noted that the Project was created in 1982 as a direct response, albeit belatedly, to an earlier (1970) request for macaw feathers from Fred Cordero, a Cochití Pueblo man (see below) who had been introduced to me the year before by one of my mentors, Professor Charles H. Lange. The Project’s original purpose was to provide the Pueblos with macaw, parrot, and wild turkey feathers required for traditional religious practices in order to help the Pueblos secure their Constitutional First Amendment right to freedom of religion. The Pueblos had difficulty obtaining the feathers they needed for their ceremonies, and the Project helped to resolve this. Their difficulty was due to factors discussed below.

Archaeological evidence in the American Southwest demonstrates that the Pueblos, and their Ancestral Pueblo forebears, used wild turkey, macaw, parrot and other feathers over more than a thousand years (McKusick 2001) for a wide variety of ceremonial purposes including specialized clothing such as katsina masks, head-dresses, turkey feather robes, and macaw feather ceremonial aprons or kilts (Canby 1982:573; Lekson 1997:55). However, the loss of habitat had diminished wild turkey populations in the Southwest, and the Pueblos no longer kept large numbers of domestic turkeys as they once did (see McKusick 2001). Furthermore, fewer Pueblo men hunted wild turkeys (or other animals), and so the Pueblos had to rely on other sources for wild turkey feathers, which, as discussed later, are the single most important feather for traditional cultural practices.

Three unplanned but positive consequences developed during the thirty-four years of operation of the Feather Distribution Project, all of which related to factors in the difficulties the Pueblos had in obtaining feathers: first, the program apparently helped to reduce the smuggling of live birds and feathers from Latin America into the American Southwest, though it was difficult to assess accurately the degree to which this had occurred; this, in turn, alleviated some of the stress on the native bird populations and their habitats in Latin America. Therefore, the second, express

purpose (or problem) was to reduce the smuggling of birds and feathers, and the third problem, which followed from the second, was to lessen the destruction of native bird populations and habitats, especially in the rainforests of Latin America. In this context, a colleague once suggested that the Feather Distribution Project was also a conservation biology program.

How did this last occur? At the outset of the Feather Distribution Project, Pueblo men paid from 25¢ for a small macaw or parrot body feather, up to \$100 for a long, perfect, Scarlet Macaw tail feather. Many of these feathers probably came from illegal imports, though I believe that the Pueblos likely were unaware of this.

Advertisements offering to buy macaw feathers appeared, and *still* appear, in some bird magazines; it *is* legal to buy and sell feathers from captive bred and raised bred macaws in the United States. Based on prices that the feather dealers originally charged, the approximately 4.5 million macaw and parrot feathers that the Project distributed free of charge could have had a market value as high as \$18 million to \$20 million. Wild turkey feathers, by contrast, have no significant monetary value despite their immense ceremonial importance.

By distributing millions of feathers free of charge, the Project apparently reduced the number of commercial dealers, or at least the size of their operations. Pueblo individuals still purchased feathers, but many (most?) obtained them from the Project.¹ The average price of Scarlet Macaw center tail feathers, for example, dropped by about 75–85 percent, and there were far fewer buyers than previously. Advertisements in bird magazines to buy macaw and parrot feathers also decreased.² The diminished commercial market meant fewer birds and their habitats were exploited and destroyed to provide feathers for Native Americans such as the Pueblos. Nevertheless, smuggling birds and feathers across the United States–Mexican border remained a commercially viable business in some parts of the Southwest.

Starting about 1990, the Project focused on a fourth problem: the elimination of the plucking of those macaws and parrots kept by Pueblo individuals. Plucking live birds had a long history that extended well back into antiquity. More recently, Judd (1954:plate 75, 263) depicted and discussed a Military Macaw that he gave to the Macaw Clan at Zuni in 1924, and it lived in a heavily plucked state until its death in 1946; I have seen a few plucked birds in other villages.

Plucking hurts birds and makes them more susceptible to infections, diseases, and skin maladies. Birds regulate their temperature, in part, through their feathers, and a plucked bird is more vulnerable to problems of excessive heat and cold. Plucking also angers birds, and an angry macaw is *not* to be trifled with; its beak can do serious damage. I know this from our female macaw, Chip, who has badly hurt both Laura and me while ostensibly “playing” with us. I dread what she might

do if angry. While conducting my 1967 ethnographic fieldwork among the Chachi Indians in the Ecuadorian rainforest, I watched a pair of Scarlet Macaws, guarding their nest and newborn chicks, use their beaks to literally “unzip” an eighteen-foot-long Rainbow Boa in less than a minute. The speed of the macaws and the power of their beaks were remarkable and frightening.

The Project provided larger numbers of feathers to Pueblo bird owners specifically to encourage them *not* to pluck their birds and to use only their naturally molted feathers; for example, if a Pueblo individual had an Amazon parrot, we provided twice as many feathers as the bird molted in a year—a greater number of Amazon parrot feathers given to that individual than we would usually have provided—in exchange for a promise not to pluck the bird and to allow us to see the bird when we visited the village. We told the owner that there was another benefit for not plucking: the bird would likely live longer, ensuring more feathers available as time passed. The same was true for someone who had a Scarlet Macaw or other species. We had some success with this approach; some birds appeared less bedraggled and healthier on subsequent visits.

There was no way, however, to monitor this situation as closely as we would have liked, because we could not visit Pueblo homes on a frequent or regular basis; the 1,200 miles that separate Illinois from the Southwest were a formidable barrier to truly effective monitoring. We also had no accurate count of the number of macaws and parrots kept by Pueblo individuals, but it was probably not a high number, because of the purchase price of a bird: for example, as much as several thousand dollars for a Scarlet Macaw.

For those who might think that our behavior was patronizing, it is well to remember that the Project began in response to an initial request for macaw feathers from a Cochiti elder, and not on my initiative as a way to gain “favor” or special treatment from the Pueblos.

Feathers were provided to any Pueblo individual or Native American Church member who requested them, and were intended for religious and cultural use—to help the Pueblos and the Native American Church members maintain their traditional practices. However, in about a dozen cases since the founding of the Project in 1982, we learned that individuals used the feathers for decoration on native crafts sold commercially, and in a couple of instances, directly sold to others the feathers they had received gratis from the Project. One of the worst instances occurred more than two decades ago: eighteen Hyacinth Macaw tail feathers had been requested supposedly for a special katsina mask. The feathers had to be matched in width and length for proper placement and display on the mask. It took many months to acquire these tail feathers from donors, but eventually we had the necessary eighteen tails to be mailed to the man who requested them. Within a few days of

mailing them, we heard from five men in one afternoon: the recipient had set up a table outside a Pueblo-owned shop that sold jewelry, pottery, and artwork, and he was offering the feathers for sale. One man even sent me a digital photograph, taken with his cell phone, of the man offering the Hyacinth Macaw feathers for sale. The men of this Pueblo were monitoring themselves.

I wrote the offender a letter in which he was told he would receive no more feathers. He never responded, but I was later informed he still sold feathers, though I didn't know where he obtained them. I regretted having sent feathers to him for several years.

In all cases, the distribution of feathers to people who we learned sold the feathers we provided immediately ceased. The feathers were for religious use only; they were too culturally important to give to someone for profit-making ventures, which ran counter to the Project's goal to reduce or eliminate the commercial market for feathers. The Project neither bought nor sold feathers, and we expected those who received them not to sell them either. This was our agreement. Some Pueblo and other Native American individuals requested feathers specifically for their craftwork, but we refused such requests explaining that our feathers were for religious purposes.

Greed occasionally occurred in other ways. Sometimes requests for feathers far exceeded what any individual could possibly use at the time. For example, two men, cousins, each requested 144 Scarlet Macaw center tails and 144 Blue-and-Yellow (sometimes called Blue-and-Gold) Macaw center tails—twelve dozen of each. We usually provided three to six center tails per request. Their requests were not filled, and an accompanying letter explained why each of them would receive only four center tails from each of the two species.

In another instance in a different village, a man to whom we had supplied feathers for several years sent a large envelope containing copies of our request form—seventeen copies with identical requests for feathers, all at the same address, which included names of women as well as men. I was surprised by this, not only by the number of requests but also by requests made by women in this Pueblo where women did not directly receive feathers from us and, furthermore, also customarily left the room when I arrived at homes to distribute feathers to the men.

"Feathers are men's work," one man explained. I made a call to a Pueblo member and tribal official who I trusted to ask about this, an unusual thing for me to do since it involved breaking confidentiality. Nevertheless, I thought the risk worth it because the seventeen requests were excessive and came within weeks of a large shipment of feathers to the very individual who sent the seventeen requests (including feathers for himself). During the course of our conversation, the tribal official asked me if the person who had sent the forms was someone whom he then named.

I confirmed this, and he told that the names on the list were his wife, children (several under the age of ten), and his older children and their spouses. He further said the man had bragged that he would receive hundreds of macaw and parrot feathers and at least a thousand wild turkey feathers. He boasted publicly within the village of his attempt to “game the system.” His plan failed; not only did we not fill the seventeen requests, but he was told that in the future, he would not receive any more feathers. He had, effectively, “killed the goose that laid the Golden Eggs.”

One final example of greed stands out. I made it a practice at one village to visit the home of a clan mother to distribute feathers en masse to members of her clan and the religious society to which her son belonged. I had done this four or five times without incident. On this occasion, however, after I had laid thousands of macaw, parrot, and turkey feathers on the floor—tails in one group, wings in another, body feathers, etcetera, in others—calls were made to the society members, or children were sent to the houses of those without telephones (this was before the advent of cell phones), telling members that feathers were available. About fifteen men arrived, and after introductions, they were told to choose the feathers they wanted.

Two men immediately tried to scoop up all the macaw center tails, which started a heated argument. This seemed especially remarkable to me because *all* the men were in the same clan or religious society. Apparently, another call was then made during the argument by the clan mother, and within a couple of minutes, an elderly man arrived and entered the house. There was immediate silence. He made a brief statement in his native language, and all feathers were put back in place. He then instructed the men, one at a time, to choose a certain number of each type of feather—“only what you need”—and then to leave the house. Thereafter the distribution proceeded in an orderly fashion, and within fifteen to twenty minutes, all these feathers had been distributed. I later learned from the homeowner (the clan mother) that the elderly man was the head religious official for the village, and his statement in the Pueblo language included an admonishment against greed. He took no feathers himself, but I asked the clan mother, in whose house I was staying for a few days, what feathers he might need. She told me and then walked with me to his home, where I delivered a large bundle to him. He accepted them, inhaled a breath from them to absorb their power, offered the customary prayer, and then asked us to join him for a meal.

I have since learned that this event has apparently entered the local village lore—the story of the tall white man who laid out feathers only to have a couple of men attempt to take them all, necessitating that the head priest come to take charge of the distribution.

On another occasion at the same village, we had arranged ahead of time to distribute more than 200,000 wild turkey feathers. Some three hundred people showed

TABLE 0.1. Chronology of Southwestern Pueblos receiving feathers

<i>Year</i>	<i>Village</i>
1982	Cochiti
1982	Zia, Acoma, Hopi (Hotevilla, Bacavi, Mishongnovi, Polacca, Walpi, Sichomovi, Shungopovi, Sipaulovi, Oraibi)
1989	Zuni, Pojoaque, Santa Ana
1990	Santa Clara, San Felipe, Santo Domingo
1992	Tesuque, Taos
1993	Jemez, San Ildefonso
1995	Okay Owingeh (San Juan)
1997	Picuris
1999	Sandia
2000	Laguna
2001	Isleta
2007	Nambe, Hano
2010	Kykotsmovi
2012	Upper and Lower Moencopi

up, and several religious leaders were present to instruct each person to take a large paper grocery bag and to pick the feathers they wanted, which were laid out on tables—one handful of each type. Under the watchful eyes of the religious officers, the distribution went smoothly and without incident. Ironically, the woman janitor who cleaned up afterwards obtained the most feathers, by collecting those that fell to the floor during the distribution; she took them home to her family. These two events suggest that McGuire and Saitta's (1996) paper is incorrectly titled, and that its premise and content need rethinking.

By the end of its thirty-fourth year of operation (2015), the Feather Distribution Project had provided approximately 15 million wild turkey, macaw, and parrot feathers to all thirty-two Pueblo villages in New Mexico and Arizona³ (table 0.1), for use in traditional religious ceremonies.

An additional 200,000 feathers had been distributed to members of the Native American Church in a dozen or so states. Finally, some 300,000 wild turkey feathers were distributed to the Seneca (New York) and Wyandotte (Oklahoma) to make traditional headdresses, to the Cherokee in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, for arrow fletching, and to Pomo groups in California for feather screens (see figures 0.1–0.4). A limited number of wild turkey feathers were provided to other tribes and to Native American prison inmates. Except for macaw center tails, we did not count the



Figure o.1. Wyandotte traditional headdress (*kus-to-wa*).



Figure o.2. Seneca traditional cap (*gus-to-weh*).

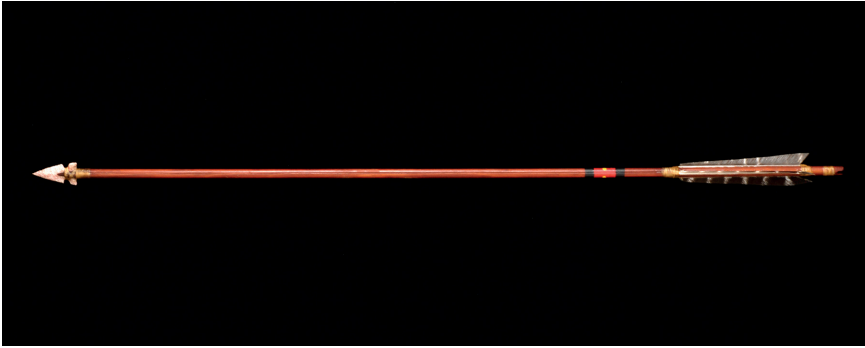


Figure 0.3. Cherokee traditional arrow made by Joe “Red Buffalo” Adams.



Figure 0.4. Pomo wild turkey feather screen.

feathers sent to recipients but weighed them beforehand. For example, seven hundred wild turkey back body feathers six inches in length weighed about one ounce, as did twelve to fifteen Scarlet Macaw center tail feathers. My worst nightmare was counting feathers—41,201, 41,202, 41,203 . . . Then the phone rings, I answer it, lose my count, and must start over. “Damn!” (and then I awake).

All feathers were provided free of charge, as gifts. We asked nothing in return. The Project neither bought nor sold feathers, but we did reimburse donors' shipping costs, if requested. The Pueblos and others sometimes reciprocated with gifts of jewelry or other items. These, in turn, were given to feather donors or those who otherwise helped with the work: bird club members, breeders, people with companion birds, turkey hunters, bird keepers in zoos and aviaries who collected molted feathers, and Project volunteers. The Project itself did not operate for financial or other material gain.

When the Project first began, I traveled alone to distribute feathers among the Pueblos. The Pueblos are family-focused, however, and I was repeatedly asked why I didn't bring my wife with me. I gave various explanations—excuses, really—about having different schedules, amounts of vacation time, and such, but it eventually became clear that Pueblo trust and hospitality were dependent, in part, on my having my wife with me, at least on some of the trips to the Southwest. Thereafter, I did so whenever possible. This resulted in improved relations between me and Pueblo families, and Laura was privy to information from Pueblo women that I was not.

Once, a woman graduate student in anthropology at an Arizona university requested to come along when I distributed feathers. I told her this might be possible, but only to a degree; I explained that she could not be present at most Rio Grande Pueblo homes when the distributions were made. She questioned this, and I further explained that in these villages, feathers were men's work from which women were excluded. She replied that this was sexist, and she was not going to be excluded. I explained this was Pueblo cultural practice, *their* villages and homes, and if she couldn't accept the reality of it, then she should stay home. She stayed home. Apparently, she had missed the basic lesson in anthropological ethnographic fieldwork about respect for and cultural acceptance of the views with whom one works.

As an archaeologist and anthropologist, I was deeply interested in Pueblo religious and ceremonial life. I was particularly interested in how feathers were used by individuals, religious societies, and the Pueblos in general, both today and in comparison with post-contact and Ancestral Pueblo times. However, the Project did not operate to obtain information about Pueblo religion and ceremonial practices nor about Native American Church practices. No questions were asked about sacred matters. Nevertheless, over the past thirty-four years, a great deal of information was freely given about Pueblo religious practices, individuals' clan and religious society affiliations, and the uses of feathers. Furthermore, Laura and I were regularly afforded the privilege of watching ceremonial activities, and, on occasion, I was asked to help make ceremonial objects when no other Anglos or non-Pueblo persons were present. The information received was never published nor discussed with anyone outside the Pueblo, and no specific information not already part of the

existing anthropological literature and general knowledge is published herein. No sacred information was ever released for research or other purposes. This reinforced the fact that feathers were an outright gift and not a means to acquire sacred knowledge for dissemination to other anthropologists or to the public. This maintained the trust on which the Project depended for its acceptance by Pueblo peoples and Native American Church members.

Anthropologists generally do not like to make “all” statements about cultural behavior. Humans are sufficiently diverse that almost nothing one can say about individual or group behavior pertains to all peoples. However, it *is* fair to say that all groups throughout the world, to one extent or another, have special relationships with birds. Many nations have a national bird; ours is the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Each state has a state bird: for Illinois, it’s the Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*), while for New Mexico it’s the Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*) and for Arizona it’s the Cactus Wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*). More recently, China chose the Red-crowned Crane (*Grus japonensis*) as its national bird.

Judeo-Christian belief states that birds were created on Day 5 (*Genesis* 1:21, Old Testament). For the Pueblos, who recognize more than 220 species of birds (see Tyler 1979:xiii and 272–277 for a list of these birds and the Pueblos that use them), these birds play an essential role in daily life and are fundamentally important to them: in much of Pueblo oral history and in many Pueblo origin tales, birds guided Pueblo peoples from the Underworld into this world. (Those migratory species used by the Pueblos are indicated with an “X” in appendix C.) Therefore, the Feather Distribution Project filled a basic need in the preservation and continuation of traditional Pueblo life. For more than a thousand Pueblo people (see below), the Feather Distribution Project was their primary source of feathers.