



March of memory: hundreds of Sioux withstood subzero winds on their 355-km ride to mark the 100th anniversary of Wounded Knee

rights movement, the country's 700 Native American lawyers are using the judicial system. "There has been more Indian litigation in the last 20 years," says John Echohawk, executive director of the Native American Rights Fund, "than in the previous 200."

Most of the conflicts, in one way or another, grow out of a commitment to the land. Despite anthropologists' evidence that they crossed the Bering Strait land bridge to North America, many tribes believe their ancestors emerged from an underworld through a hole in the earth known as the sipapu. Their religion, their art and their well-being are tied to the land they have guarded and revered. Now, many generations after white settlers bribed, swindled and threatened thousands of Native Americans out of millions of hectares, they are determined to seek restitution.

In the Black Hills of Wyoming, 15 tribes from Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas are fighting off an effort by the U.S. Forest Service to turn their sacred site of Medicine Wheel into a tourist attraction. The 4,000-member Northern Cheyenne tribe of Lama Deer, Mont., is battling coal miners and railroad developers on their lands. They fear that development would bring tourists flooding into the middle of their religious ceremonies and disturb areas rich in medicinal plants and yellow-ocher earth paint needed for those rituals. "How would

you like it if I took my picnic basket, my family and dog into your church while you were praying?" asks Bill TallBull, tribal elder of the Northern Cheyenne.

Many tribes are trapped between ancient environmental principles and modern economic pressures. One Alaskan tribe, in dire need of funds, is reluctantly trying to decide whether to sign away logging rights around Prince William Sound, permit oil drilling in a delicate wildlife area, or allow an airfield to be built in the midst of a vast habitat for Kodiak bears. Other tribes have allowed waste-management companies to use reservation land for dumps and disposal sites, then suffered from the contamination of their land and water as a result. Across the vast Arizona tracts of the Navajo Nation, high-voltage wires run like silver threads to the Pacific Ocean, carrying electricity all the way to California—but not to the 200,000 Navajo who live beneath them.

A central controversy shared by Native Americans of many tribes is the crusade to have relics and remains of Indian ancestors removed from museums and returned to the tribes for burial. Some tribes believe the soul cannot rest until the body is returned to nature, by burial or cremation. Hundreds of thousands of Indian corpses were dug from their graves and carted

away to be displayed. "Grave robbing was so widespread that virtually every tribe in the country has been victimized," says Pawnee Indian Walter Echo-Hawk, staff attorney for the Native American Rights Fund.

In a landmark accord with Indian leaders last year, the Smithsonian Institution agreed to sort through its collection of 18,500 remains and return for burial all those that were clearly identifiable as belonging to a certain tribe. Stanford University then pledged to return its entire collection of remains of the Ohlone tribe. Other museums and collectors followed suit, and in November President Bush signed a bill to protect Indian grave sites in the U.S. and return remains to the tribes. In some instances, however, tribes have actually asked a museum to retain permanent control of the objects so they could be properly conserved.

In all areas of conflict, over land or tradition or scientific collections, years of litigation remain ahead. The BIA will have an uphill battle persuading Native Americans that it is prepared to protect their interests rather than confound them. Given the U.S. government's track record in dealing with the North American continent's original owners, the task of rebuilding trust will take considerable will and faith on both sides.

—Reported by Nancy Harbert/
Albuquerque and Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles