The Sacred Owens Valley: An Interview with Kathy Jefferson Bancroft

An interview with the Paiute-Shoshone community leader and environmental protector.

Charlotte Cotton
It’s an honor to meet you, Kathy. Can you start by telling me about your relationship with the Owens Valley?

Kathy Jefferson Bancroft
I was born in this valley and my ancestors have lived here for thousands of years. My relationship with Owens Lake goes back to when I was a baby and I heard stories about things that happened on the lake from my grandmother. We did a lot of stuff out on the lake growing up. My relationship to it became very intimate around 2002, when I moved home and began working as a tribal cultural-resource monitor on the lake, monitoring the dust mitigation project being undertaken by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. I've been out here ever since, changing roles several times; now I'm the tribal historic preservation officer for the Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation. I oversee a group of monitors that know their stuff; we watch everything that goes on out here.

CC
I'm so glad you're here. Can you go back in time and tell me something about the Paiute-Shoshone sovereignty of this land? What is the story that you were told?

KB
I was close with my grandmother and I used to have her teach me how to make bread and other things. She always told me stories about this valley — some that she was there to witness and some that happened before she was around. A lot of them were about the lake. She remembered as a little girl when this lake was full. Her Grandpa Sam would dream and predict the future. He told everybody, “You're going to see a day when this lake is dry.” Everybody said, “Yeah, whatever, that's too big of a lake to dry out.” But sure enough it did.

She used to talk about the migrating birds that flew through this valley and how they would darken the sky for days. And how my family lived with the lake as a big part of their lives because it was a source of food. It was a saline lake but it has freshwater springs all around it. There was a lot of water in this valley and a lot of food. It took time to get it, took time to gather and prepare it, but it was a good life. It was hard but you were with your family, going to the mountains in the summertime and gathering stuff to get you through the winter.

They knew what to do and they survived for thousands of years in this valley without destroying the environment, which is very impressive given the story

of the last one hundred years or so. A lot of destruction is happening. It's a little scary around here right now; I think we're on that edge.

CC
Yesterday, we went to see Julie Fought. She described the creek that she and Cole live on. She said they realized, after really looking at the creek, that the extent of the greenery on either side of it meant that the Paiute Shoshone tribe had nourished it, had spread the living system along the creek. I wonder if that resonates with you in terms of this sense of being of the land.

KB
When I was young, I lived up there where they live now, so I'm very familiar with that creek. The creeks were important because this is an arid valley, you know. We have the rain shadow from the Sierras, and a lot of water running off of the mountains. From here up past Bishop there are irrigation ditches dug thousands of years ago — not to grow agriculture as it's done now, but simply to enhance the natural vegetation that already grows here. We have a lot of food in this valley but working with the creeks enabled people to grow more and make life easier. So, the creeks were very important in learning how to spread that water and make it last — to enhance the land for both people and animals, to cultivate medicines, to grow basket materials. . . . It's true knowledge and it was implemented very successfully for thousands of years.

CC
So, when does it start to go wrong?

KB
I think it starts to go wrong when the first settlers came into this valley said, in writing, that these indigenous people should not be disturbed because they live in a paradise. But that didn't happen. That's where I see it going wrong, when other people came to mine silver and gold in the mountains. They brought in cattle to feed the miners; the Indians were just in the way. And so it came down to destroying food supplies and eventually gathering up the Indians here and trying to take them out of the valley.

They marched them down south of Bakersfield. My grandmother was a little girl at that time and was taken out of the valley with her family. They escaped but everyone else was caught. She hid under a bush. She was small enough that they didn't find her, and then she made her way all the way back to this valley by herself. And I always think about things like that, you know, when I think of hardships in my life and I think of how much I love this valley. You think, "What did it take for a young girl to make it back here?” This valley meant the world to her and it still does to all of us who live here.

CC
How many reservations are in the Owens Valley?

KB
In the Owens Valley there are the Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation, Fort Independence, Big Pine, and Bishop. There is also Timbisha, over towards Death Valley; Benton; and up north there's Bridgeport, Lee Vining, Walker, and others. And then we have some to the south, both federally recognized and unrecognized tribes. Quite a good population remains. At first we were all part of one reservation, which caused a lot of arguing and fighting. We then split up into several reservations but have since learned that it's going to take all of us working together. So there is a good working relationship between all of the tribes. We've got a big job ahead of us to protect this valley. That's what we're working hard to do and we're doing it together.

CC
When did you start to become such an active advocate, an activist?

KB
That's a funny question because I don't think of myself as an activist. Somebody called me an activist and I'm like, "What?" I've always cared deeply for this valley. I had to leave this valley to go away to school; when you leave this valley you appreciate it even more. You realize what you don't have in other places.

As a young girl I was kind of quiet, I didn't want to speak up. As I got older I didn't really want to talk about things I care about. I thought that if I told people, they might destroy them. I grew up learning the lesson that if you speak out, something will go wrong. But eventually there were proposals to bulldoze land in an area that was pretty significant to me and my family. I went through the proper channels, talked to the LA board of commissioners, and when I came back out to Owens Lake they were sending in a crew to begin the demolition work. And I thought, "Hold on a minute. Stop!" We got the plans suspended but had the sense that the authorities were just waiting for the suspension time to run out and for us to go away so that work could go ahead. I had a lot of friends back then who said, "We can do this." We had a rally out here to save our sacred sites and it was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen. There were more than sixty people here from the Owens Valley and from LA; half of the crowd came from every tribe and townspeople made up the other half. I was looking around and thinking, "In town, these people would never even talk to each other." But they were all concerned about what was going on. The *Los Angeles Times* came and asked if they could write an article; I was hesitant but I said yes. I said, "I want to see what you say before you print it." They were great and it worked.

The article went out on the Internet and that's how people learned about what was happening here. I found out later that it went clear to the governor's office, and the attorney general. The work was called off. It has not gone away entirely, so watch and fight every day. And that's why I am still here.

I've fallen into this role and I don't care what you call it. I just like that I can help. And I like that people are communicating. When we first formed the cultural resources task force for Owens Lake, nobody had talked before. This whole lake project had started with everybody on their own page, everybody trying to do their own thing. And it was hard at first but now people have come together and there is real communication. We have more meetings than anybody should ever be committed to, but things happen. There is a solution if you're talking to each other. I've been on this lake since 2002, when I came back from school. People ask, "How do you know so much about his lake?" And I say, "Well, when you work out here ten hours a day, six days week, you've got a lot of time to think." Everybody said, "How do you find your way around it? It's crazy. There is a maze of roads out here." I said, "Because I watched every one of the roads being built." We always say it's not a job, it's a way of life, because you realize what you're here for. It's not the money.

CC
Can you tell us about the sacred sites on the Owens Valley lakebed?

KB
The way we look at it, this whole valley is sacred. Here is where my ancestors walked — on every part of this valley. That's who makes me who I am, that's where I get my strength from. They're all still here. There are places where special things happen and places where terrible things have happened. I know of six or seven massacre sites on the lakebed. It's sad but it's a part of history and they need to be preserved, remembered, and respected for us to know what people went through to stay in this valley. I have an aunt who is 101 years old. She lived out here for years, doing what it took to survive in this valley. Outsiders have been here a little over one hundred years, but we'll still be here long after everybody else is gone. And we've got to clean up the mess, so we're going to start now.

CC
Lauren talks about her responsibility for water, something that underpins her *Bending the River Back Into the City* action. I understand that you are protecting not only the sacred sites here but also that you are an environmental watcher, that you are protecting this land and its water in several ways

KB
It really meant a lot to me that Lauren stands up and says, "Nobody has a right to water, it's a water responsibility." I thought that was the coolest thing. We are all responsible for the water and if people took this attitude, and thought about where our water comes from and how to use it in the best way, we'd all be in better shape. I appreciate that she thinks of it that way. I always remind people that cultural resources aren't just these shiny little rocks, things you find on the ground. Cultural resources are all your plants, all your animals, the whole environment. I don't even call those shiny rocks mine — they belong to the person that left them there. That person is still

here watching over them. It's my job to protect them along with everything else. We are trying to encourage a remembrance and respect of this history, and to bring that back because that's what this valley needs to survive. And we need to get LADWP, Crystal Geyser, and other people to realize that if you take water from this valley, you've got to give back some of it to keep this valley in a balanced state. If you do so, it will provide for you.

CC
How did you meet Lauren Bon?

KB
I met the Metabolic Studio team first, then met everyone when they were out here playing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on the glass orchestra at the PPG site. Since that winter I have just loved what the studio has done in this valley. It's all positive. And we appreciate the help. There aren't very many of us here, so the more we can get on board, the more we can do.

CC
What do you think Lauren and the studio contribute here?

KB
I think they contribute a lot of inspiration and help. I think about the *IOU Gardens*, the *Hundred Conversations About Water*. They give people an outlet, a way to express themselves, and make everybody more aware of what's going on around here. It's easy when you're in this valley to get stuck in your little rut and think you're the only person who cares. They have provided places to gather and learn about how we can help, how we can make things happen.

CC
What is the biggest disconnect between the profound knowledge of indigenous people and officialdom that governs the Owens Valley?

KB
That's easy to answer because I face this daily. My perspective is that we have to look at the whole picture and have a sense of longevity. I think the governing agencies tend to divide the aims into small packages, to think only of the next phase, with very little and always last-minute consultation with the tribes here. The situation is a little better now; the drought made people wake up. And now with this flood, they're realizing a lot of what they thought were answers aren't going to hold up for very long. These floods are supposed to be coming faster and more often so things need to be rethought. It's a lake, it's supposed to be a lake. That's the thing that bothers me most when I sit out here and we are tasked with coming up with solutions and compromises — how to prepare for the flood. It's like, it's a lake, it's supposed to have water in it. Here's your chance to do something right! Why are you taking so much water down the aqueduct to LA? You've got no room for it down there. Let it fill this lake and start over. That's what I remind them: now is your chance. You can have the natural flow. Isn't that what rivers do? Water knows

where it wants to go. You can't tell it. It's going to go where it wants and it's pretty smart. There is plenty of room for water in this valley and that's when I get frustrated — when I see them taking so much water out. It's like, come on, do the right thing and leave some here. We deserve it, we've been good to you guys.