

# Our way of Life

By, Ofelia Rivas

The O’odham way of life is based on the land that has held the remains of our ancestors since the creation of this world. The O’odham did not migrate from anywhere according to our oral history. Our creation tellings record our history and teach the O’odham principles of life. The survival of O’odham today is based in our him’dag.

The Tohono O’odham Nation’s collaboration with the Department of Homeland Security’s inhumane border policies is an outright violation of the O’odham him’dag – the traditional O’odham way of life. Although the Tohono O’odham Nation is a sovereign nation, it has no control of its lands and has no control over the administration of it’s own tribal form of government. Without true sovereignty, the tribal government lacks the authority and ability to denounce the abuses of human life and the irreparable destruction of the natural habitat of our relatives – the plant life and animal life. This is in direct violation of the O’odham principles of life.

These violations also impact hundreds of tribal people’s from impoverished nations south of the United States/Mexico International Boundary. There is a high fatality rate for these people who cross this border due to their unfamiliarity with our homelands.

The recently completed construction of a joint use detention center on O’odham

land is an example of on-going collaboration and human rights violations, including O’odham him’dag violations. This detention center houses the Border Patrol agents and all other agencies in comfort inside of air-conditioned and heated buildings, while immigrant men women and children are held in a caged area outside the building (See above photograph). This region has temperatures that range from 120 degrees F. during the summer to 20 degrees F. during the winter.

The O’odham are not guaranteed their right to control their own lives. An example of this is the controversial casino revenue per capita payments made to individual O’odham. The Tohono O’odham Nation cannot directly assist their people by writing them a per capita check. The whole entire mess must first be approved by the Department of the Interior – the federal caretaker of the O’odham. Under federal mandate, the government controls the federal reservations and thus controls the lands, its resources and its entire people.



Undocumented immigrant detention center in the Chukut Kuk District, Tohono O’odham Nation  
*Photograph By, Ofelia Rivas*

The O'odham have made a historic survival through outright wars on the O'odham to exterminate the people (called the Pima Wars), to the forced assimilation by the boarding school system to the relocation project to remove O'odham from their sacred lands and way of life. This on going systematic governmental genocide of the O'odham is now furthered by the propaganda of apathy – insincere pseudo-O'odham lifestyles that have no compassion for their fellow O'odham and fellow Indigenous nations. The impacts of the violations of the O'odham him'dag are evident in the disharmony of the people, the rampant drug and human trafficking and the hundreds of young O'odham serving sever sentences of imprisonment for these actions. Violence and gangs in O'odham communities continue to grow. The misuse of sacred songs, sacred sites and sacred ceremonial instruments by the people continues to grow. An example is found with O'odham women carrying eagle feathers and O'odham using eagle feathers as vehicle ornaments. Other outright violations include the construction of buildings on ceremonial grounds and burial sites.

Another example is the recent action by the Tohono O'odham Nation Legislative Council that publicly condemned the existence of our language and our elders on the O'odham radio. It is a shameful public display of a people without integrity and without human compassion. These types of thoughtless actions brought disparity and death to two of our elders that were at this council meeting and may be responsible for many others. These on-going violations are part of the prophecies foretold by the elders – the greed of the people will bring an ending to everything.

We are living in this era where we see our elders and our mother earth being neglected and abused by the Department of Homeland Security forces, by our own O'odham and by Mexico's government. **The Mexican government has planned a chemical waste dump site on O'odham lands.** The severity of conditions at this moment I fear will fall on deaf ears. Our ground water will be more contaminated which will cause more O'odham to die from cancer and respiratory illnesses. The corrupt local Mexican government official will not enforce environmental laws to protect the O'odham and poor people that live in the proposed area. They will accept the monies paid to them to sign a permit and allow this project to go forth. The traditional elders and traditional council leaders and the ceremony leaders all strongly oppose this development. An example of this corruption is the previous approval of Hecla Mining Company from Idaho to mine gold and silver near our sacred ceremonial site. Hecla Mining Company obtained illegal permits and paid off an individual in the Quitovac community to operate the mine. Hecla Mining Company's cyanide leaching ponds were poorly planned and the ponds overflowed into arroyos killing wildlife. The site was unmonitored by the Mexican environmental protection agency. The site was covered, deemed a "clean-up," and is still closed off to the public. Now again, there is great risk to human life at stake; the storage of severely hazardous chemicals in the newly planned dump will likely be handled in the same manner. In addition, the storage of hazardous waste is only part of the hazard. The transport of hazardous chemicals through many communities will impact an unknown number of human lives. This is an outright attack on the O'odham Human Rights while the cry of the poor people goes unheard in Mexico. The line that divides the O'odham, the US/MX International Border, provides the justification for the O'odham Tribal Government to discriminate against its own people. This is just one of the imbalances and disruption in our Him'dag, the O'odham way of life.

