A Solar Future For an Ancient Civilization

*Hopi elders frowned on the idea of bringing electric lines into ancient villages. But solar panels are something else.*

By [***Winona LaDuke***](http://www.yesmagazine.org/%40%40also-by?author=Winona+LaDuke)posted Sep 30, 2001

 *The Hopi Foundation, formed in 1985, took on the challenge of bringing electricity to villages that had been without. Foundation leaders believed photovoltaics—which produce electricity directly from the sun—could provide power to people living off the grid while supporting the self-reliance and aesthetics so highly prized by the Hopi.*

*Since its founding in 1987, Hopi Solar Electric has installed photovoltaic systems on more than 300 homes. In many cases, it was solar technician Debby Tewa who installed the systems.*

*Hopi Solar Electric has since been renamed NativeSUN, and Tewa has moved on to other projects. But her story, told here by Winona LaDuke, is a story of people making choices about technologies, conscious of the impacts of those choices on the environment, on self-reliance, and on the job opportunities available to youth.*

It's a sun-baked mesa in northwestern Arizona. Debby Tewa straps on her toolbelt and hardhat. She clambers up a ladder onto the flat roof of a 200-year-old stone house. She looks out over 100 miles of desert, then glances across the village and sees the sun glinting off roof-mounted solar panels. She smiles. She is the Hopi Foundation's solar electrician, and she is home.

Since its founding, this community-based Native foundation, Lomasumi-nangwtukwsiwmani in their language, has placed hundreds of photovoltaic solar panels atop houses on the reservation. Most of them were installed by Tewa, a 32-year old Coyote Clan resident of Hotevilla, Arizona.

The panels make sense. One-third of Hopi villages refuse to accept electric power lines into their village areas. Village leaders are concerned about preserving their sovereignty as village entities. “They don't allow power lines into the villages because the utilities will also have the right of way,” Tewa explains.

They see their people becoming “hooked” on utility power, only to be compromised when the people are unable to afford the ever-increasing monthly bills.

Other arguments against the power lines are spiritual and cultural. The Hopi Foundation explains that “the force field of electricity emanating from the power lines is considered to be disruptive to the atmosphere, ambiance, and balance of the plaza and ceremonial areas, at the same time blocking the aesthetics of the sky and the panoramic vistas of the mesas.”

**The long road**

And so, each day before climbing onto the rooftops, Tewa begins with a cup of coffee at the office, lining up her schedule and her equipment.

Tewa came into this job down a long road. Raised by her grandmother on the Hotevilla plaza, Tewa moved later to nearby Tuba City, where she lived with her mother until the eighth grade. She graduated valedictorian from the BIA boarding school (Sherman Indian High School) in Riverside, California, and returned to Arizona to attend Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

“I wasn't doing too well in school so I quit,” she laughs. “Then I sold Avon for awhile, until I got a job as the coordinator for the summer youth at Moencopi in 1983.”

Tewa began thinking about her future career when a recruiter for the Hopi Tribe started interviewing her summer youth students who were interested in attending trade school. “I asked her if girls could apply, and she said yes, so in 1983 I got accepted to go to a trade school.” After a nine-month course in electrical contracting, she began a string of jobs with various companies in the Phoenix area. She got contracts, showed some real talent, and then got more and more jobs.

“Then the Hopi Foundation got ahold of me,” she says. “That was in late 1989.” After a stint at a solar energy training program in Carbondale, Colorado, she began working with the foundation's solar energy program.

**Solar power**

Hopi Solar Electric was the brainchild of the Hopi Foundation. The foundation recognized that members of the Hopi community wanted modern conveniences powered by electricity. But the foundation felt there were ways to do that without destroying a way of life or an ecosystem. The solution was solar energy.

“We look up to the sun a lot,” Tewa says. “And in this century it's helping us not just with our fields. It's helping us with our electricity, too.”

Solar energy is compatible with the Hopi value of self-reliance, and financing allows even low-income people to buy the solar panels. “People aren't getting a handout. It's your own power system when you pay it off. ”Tewa says. “There's no powerline, no right of way into the villages, and we keep our own land.”

Tewa talks about the change in perspective brought around by solar energy. “We're so accustomed to having continuous power coming through the grid system, we plug in and we pay the utility companies.”

But solar power teaches you to be conservative, Tewa says. “Because you're getting your power from the battery, which is charged by the solar array, you can't just leave your hallway light on for three or four hours. It teaches you to be independent.”

Solar energy and the Hopi Foundation also changed Tewa's life, allowing her to work in her own community. “I really enjoy the interaction with the customers,” she says. “I get to talk my language. I get to learn a lot up here, especially with the older folks. When you're in Phoenix, you talk to people, you get fired, or get these looks. Here you get to talk to people.”

Tewa lives in a one-room house. “My kitchen, bedroom, living room are one room, and they're hooked up to solar,” she says. “I don't mind hauling water or driving through the mud to get to work,” she says. “It sure beats driving in the big city traffic.”

Although Tewa has followed a nontraditional path, she feels supported by the community. “There may be people who talk about me. That's fine,” she says. “But I get a lot of encouragement, especially from the old people, and that's a real boost. They say something like this in Hopi: ‘You're taking care of yourself. It doesn't matter how you do it, but it's your own thing. Nobody's giving you the money to do this and that. It's your life.'”

And the young people respect her. “They ask me about being an electrician,” she says.

It should not come as a surprise that the Hopi are developing solar power, Debby says. “A long time ago, the Native Americans were all ecologists. Solar energy conserves; you don't use the electricity from generating plants, you aren't damaging the environment. I think it's something that each community should look at.”

Bottom of Form

*Winona LaDuke, a member of the Mississippi Band of Anishinabe, lives on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. She was the Green Party's candidate for vice president in 2000. For further information on NativeSUN, contact 520/734-2553 or the Hopi Foundation at 520/734-2380. Debby Tewa is now speaking, consulting, and teaching about solar energy. You can reach her at 520/853-0579.*

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