

Millions of Gifts for the Gods

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Photo: © Aaron Gonzales

July 14, 1970, Cochití, New Mexico:

As I prepare to leave at the end of the annual Cochití Pueblo Feast Day dances, I am approached by an acquaintance, Fred Cordero - a short, wiry, middle-aged man. We briefly discuss the dance, and then he asks, "Can you get us macaw feathers?"

"No. I don't know where to get them. Sorry."

"It's okay. Possibly you will think of something."

February 2, 1982, Ottawa, Illinois:

In the Hillside Pet Shop to buy rawhide chew bones for Justin, my Brittany Spaniel, I see a sign in one corner of the store. It reads, "Corby's Corner," and beneath it perches a Scarlet Macaw. The floor is littered with feathers. Fred Cordero's question from 1970 inexplicably pops into my mind.

I pay for the chew bones, introduce myself, and ask, "What do you do with Corby's feathers?"

"Why?"

I explain that Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona use macaw, parrot, wild turkey, and other feathers for religious ceremonies, as they have for more than 1,000 years. Bob Steffel, the shop owner, says he throws the feathers away.

"Would you save them for me to give to the Pueblos?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied simply.

Jasmine Gonzales of San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico wearing Blue-and-Yellow Macaw from the Feather Distribution Project and eagle feathers which come from other sources. The white overdress is accented with embroidered designs and yarn tassels in the sacred color red.

June 24, 1982, Cochití, New Mexico:

During a research trip I visit Fred Cordero. After mutual greetings, conversation and lunch, I hand him a long package. He opens it and his eyes widen as he sees several hundred macaw and parrot feathers.

"Aieeee!" he exclaims loudly. He then takes a breath from the feathers to absorb their spiritual power, thanks me, and says, as though our previous conversation occurred only a few days earlier, "You thought of something."

The Feather Distribution Project had begun.

SINCE THE PROJECT was founded in 1982, some eight and a half million wild turkey, macaw and parrot feathers have been distributed to all 31 Pueblo villages in Arizona and New Mexico (Map on Right). It's interesting to note that at the start of The Project, the Pueblos generally did not distinguish between macaws and parrots. Most languages had only one term for both. This caused problems when trying to provide the specific feathers requested, e.g., macaw tails vs. Amazon Parrot tails. Macaw feathers are generally much more important than parrot feathers and the distinction provides clarity for both donors and recipients.

Native peoples in the Southwest, especially the Ancestral Pueblo peoples from whom today's Pueblos in Arizona and New Mexico are descended, have used macaw, parrot, wild turkey and other feathers for religious rituals for more than 1,000 years. Wild turkey feathers are the most important feathers used on a daily basis and constitute about two-thirds to three-quarters of the feathers provided by The Feather Distribution Project.



A Native American Church peyote fan made from Amazon Parrot tail feathers.

SINCE NO MACAWS OR PARROTS, except the Thick-billed Parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*), were indigenous to the Southwestern United States, ancient traders carried the birds and their feathers into the Southwest from what is now northern Mexico. The Pueblos did domesticate wild turkeys starting perhaps 1,500 years ago and raised them in their towns and villages for centuries. A few Pueblo people still raise turkeys, but the loss of suitable habitat means there are not enough wild turkeys for their ceremonial needs. And the international border between the US and Mexico means that people can no longer freely carry macaws, parrots, or feathers from Mexico into the Southwestern states. Nevertheless, thanks in part to this project, visitors today can see macaw, parrot, and turkey feathers in use as they watch age-old Pueblo ceremonies.

To date, the Pueblo Indians and Native American Church members throughout the United States have received almost three million macaw and parrot feathers free-of-charge from The Feather Distribution Project to maintain traditional cultural activities. The project neither buys nor sells feathers; all feathers we receive are given away. Zoos, bird clubs, breeders, individual bird owners, and bird rescue facilities donate macaw and parrot feathers. Many of the zoos and other donor organizations are shown on the project's Web site.

THE FEATHER DISTRIBUTION PROJECT has three goals, all related to conservation. The first goal is to provide macaw, parrot, and wild turkey feathers to Pueblo Indians, Native American Church members, and other American Indians for use in religious

ceremonies. This helps them maintain and preserve their traditional cultural practices and ensures their right to Freedom of Religion under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The project does not provide feathers from federally protected species such as eagles, hawks, and other raptors, or from federally protected migratory and passerine species. We have a permit from United States Fish & Wildlife Service to distribute feathers from captive bred and raised macaws and parrots. The collection and distribution of wild turkey feathers from legally hunted birds recycles a resource that would otherwise be discarded. By collecting and distributing macaw and parrot feathers free-of-charge we lessen the dependence of Native Americans on the commercial market



This Hopi prayer plume incorporates a single tiny Blue-and-Yellow Macaw body contour feather. Prayer plumes accompany requests for health, rain and other blessings.

Thirty-one Pueblo villages in the American Southwest receive feathers from the project.

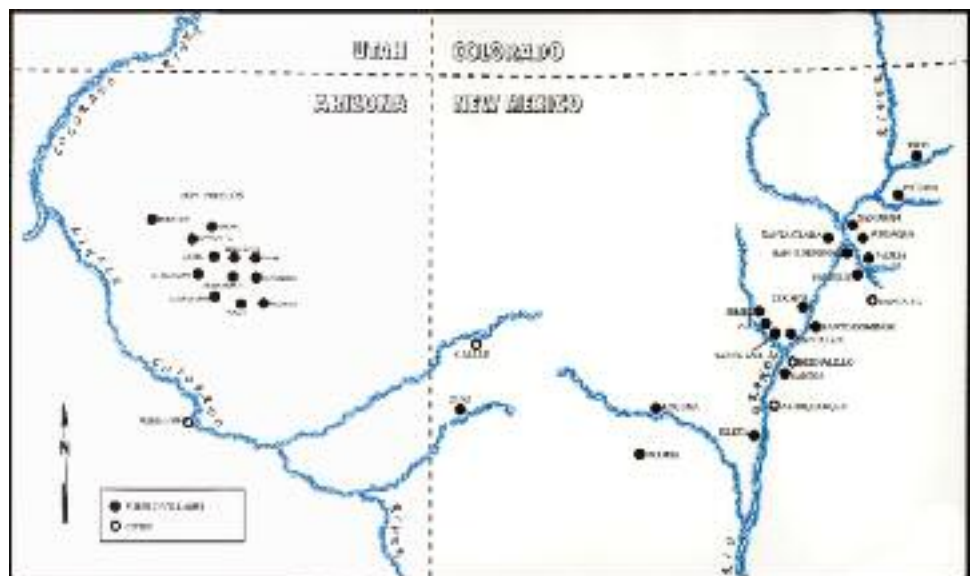




Photo: © Troydon Chavez.

The annual Zuni Harvest Dance uses hundreds of macaw tail feathers (right). While such feathers are prized, the Sandia Pueblo man's head bundle (far right), made from cut and trimmed broken and damaged feathers, demonstrates that all feathers are precious.

for these feathers, thereby reducing the market for feathers from illegal sources.

This leads to the project's second goal: To reduce and eventually eliminate the smuggling of macaws and parrots, at least to the United States, and, in turn, to lessen the destruction of native bird populations and their habitats in Latin America. Again, the emphasis is on conservation of resources; by giving away feathers, we hope the commercial market for birds and feathers declines to the point that capture and killing of birds and destruction of habitat are not profitable.

The third and final goal is to eliminate feather plucking by Pueblo macaw and parrot owners by providing them with the feathers they must have so that they will use only molted feathers from their own birds. Plucking is both painful and harmful to birds. The project will provide twice as many feathers as the birds will molt during the course of a year if Pueblo bird owners promise not to pluck feathers and agree to let us check the birds during our periodic visits to the Southwest.

What happens to all these feathers?

Most – 99% – are used in traditional ceremonies for Pueblo ritual masks, clothing, altars, and other objects. The most valuable and prized feathers are the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) center

tails and the white-tipped feathers from Merriam's Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo merriami*), but all feathers are precious. Even cut and trimmed broken or otherwise damaged feathers that would otherwise have been discarded are conserved and used for important ritual objects. Most macaw and parrot feathers are used to make objects that last for years. However, wild turkey feathers on prayer sticks and prayer plumes placed at shrines with requests for rain, health, farming success, and other blessings are used only once. This is one reason for the large and ongoing need for turkey feathers.

A FEW FEATHERS have quite different uses. Years ago we received thousands of domestic chicken feathers dyed almost every color imaginable, including psychedelic yellow, orange and green. Pueblo and Native American Church members wouldn't use them: they weren't "natural." So we offered them to the American Indian Dance Theater, which accepted them to add "flash" – bits of bright color – to tips of dance bustles, headdresses, and other costume parts. No feathers are wasted, even dyed chicken feathers!

The Hopi and some other Pueblos use feathers from Australian and South Pacific species such as cockatoos and cockatiels and damaged feathers unsuitable for ceremonial use to

instruct children in the making of ritual clothing and objects as part of their enculturation as tribal members. Native American Church members use cockatoo and cockatiel feathers and those from other exotic species for fans and other ritual objects. All feathers are precious, and all are used one way or another.

BIRDS AND FEATHERS have great symbolic significance. For example, Scarlet Macaws, specifically the colors on their shoulders, represent the rainbow, an important phenomenon in an area of scarce water. The Blue-and-Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) embodies many paired meanings: male (blue) vs. female (yellow), night (blue) vs. day (yellow), east (yellow) vs. west (blue), and much more. Turkeys live on the ground but roost in trees and so connect Mother Earth with Father Sky and the Upper World. From a ceremonial and also an everyday perspective, birds and feathers make Pueblo and Native American Church life possible. Native Americans' freedom to live according to the precepts of their beliefs is a fundamental right to be guarded just as we guard constitutional rights for all Americans.



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