

Tribal forum forges new connections

By Kelly Lenox

Representatives of more than 20 tribes joined the University of Arizona Southwest Environmental Health Sciences Center

(<http://swehsc.pharmacy.arizona.edu/>)

(SWEHSC) and NIEHS April 16 in Tucson, Arizona for a tribal forum. NIEHS regularly holds community forums around the country to learn about local environmental health concerns and to share NIEHS research.

Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., NIEHS and National Toxicology Program director, accepted the suggestion to invite tribal partners to the forum, made by Marti Lindsey, Ph.D., director of the SWEHSC Community Outreach and Education Program. An outreach committee with representatives from SWEHSC, the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona (ITCA), and the Environmental Protection Offices of the Tohono O'odham Nation, and Ak-Chin Indian Community developed the program, [Tribal Stories of Health and the Environment](#).

(<http://swehsc.pharmacy.arizona.edu/outreach/tribal-stories-health-environment-forum>)

With a focus on environmental health challenges faced by Native Americans, the forum drew more than 115 tribal community members. "The event was the largest forum yet," said John Schelp, NIEHS special assistant for community engagement and outreach.

Numbers were not the only sign of success, according to Lindsey. She said the outreach partnership and the center had been trying for six years to bring environmental and health professionals and university researchers together at a conference. "This is the first time health and environmental workers met in the same room at the same time," Lindsey said. "I expect the ripples from the forum will last for many years."

Forging stronger ties and new connections

According to event planners, Birnbaum's presence helped achieve a high level of participation from regional tribes, as did her approach of treating the event as a dialogue, with a focus on listening to what tribal members had to say.

Marc Matteson, representing the Ak-Chin Indian Community of Maricopa, Arizona, served on the planning committee. "[We saw] a lot of freedom in putting together this conference — which you don't see that much," he said. Lindsey agreed, emphasizing the wisdom of asking tribal leaders and researchers to work together on setting priorities. "The planning committee was able to inform each other and seek collaboration across Indian Country," she said.

Putting needs of tribes first

Souta Calling Last, water systems environmental specialist with ITCA, articulated the theme of the forum in her keynote address, saying participants were "lashed together, bundled throughout life." That interconnection was reflected by the day's sessions.

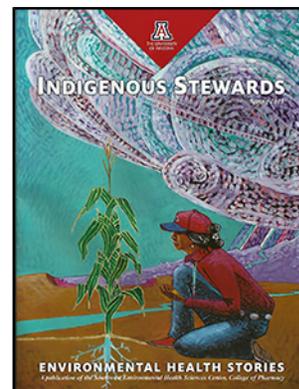
- **Water and Human Health** — presentations addressed drinking water exposures from arsenic, uranium, cryptosporidium, and other contaminants.
- **Air Quality and Respiratory Health** — speakers discussed dust, pesticide use in agriculture and communities, and indoor air quality.
- **Climate Change and Epidemiology** — speakers focused on health effects of climate change and epidemiological perspectives on tribal issues.
- **Environment and Health** — presenters shared concerns ranging from health disparities and cancer prevalence, to health education and children's health.
- **Resources for Addressing Environmental Health Disparities** — staff from SWEHSC, NIEHS, and other groups discussed resources available to address tribal health disparities.

Each session provided time for feedback and discussion. "Every table mixed Native American representatives with NIEHS scientists and University of Arizona researchers," said Schelp. "At the end of the day, each of us shared what had struck us most," he continued. "It was a powerful way to end the gathering."

Planning for the future

NIEHS staff also visited the University of Arizona to speak with graduate students. Ericka Reid, Ph.D., director of the NIEHS Office of Science Education and Diversity; Mike Humble, Ph.D., health scientist administrator in the NIEHS Division of Extramural Research and Training; and Schelp discussed topics ranging from NIEHS research to career opportunities within the National Institutes of Health.

Addressing the near term, Birnbaum announced a December 2015 workshop to focus on the concept of tribal ecological knowledge. "Workshop goals are to explore ways to improve trust in academic-tribal research; to identify methods for incorporating community-acquired data and local tribal ecological knowledge into environmental health and biomedical research studies; to consider ethical approaches for tribal-specific data collection; and to build capacity to respond to long-term and immediate disaster events," she said.



The first issue of *Indigenous Stewards*, (<http://swehsc.pharmacy.arizona.edu/content/indigenous-stewards>), published by SWEHSC, reflects the center's holistic approach to environmental health, which respects interconnections with water, air, food, and land. (Photo courtesy of Patrick Tso)



Gilbert Rivera Jr., left, tribal liaison for SWEHSC, worked closely with NIEHS on the forum. "We need to understand the problem before pushing for solutions," said Birnbaum, right. (Photo courtesy of Gilbert Rivera Jr.)

Joint meeting of NIEHS core centers and training directors

While in Arizona, Birnbaum also participated in the NIEHS Environmental Health Sciences Core Centers and Training Directors annual meeting April 14-15, hosted by SWEHSC at the University of Arizona.

As with other core center meetings (see [story](#)), the agenda offered a vast array of scientific talks and poster sessions, meetings on administrative needs, and presentations by new investigators, combined with opportunities for informal discussions.



1/8

While in Arizona, Birnbaum toured sites on Tohono O'odham Nation lands, where cliffs like these are formed when land gives way due to groundwater extraction. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



2/8

Inside a greenhouse on a Tohono-O'odham cooperative farm, Bob Sotomayor, left, San Xavier Co-op Farm coordinator, discussed agricultural water use with Birnbaum. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



3/8

After the greenhouse tour, Sotomayor, center, spoke with, from left, Schelp; Serrine Lau, Ph.D., director of SWEHSC; Clark Lantz, Ph.D., deputy director of SWEHSC; Lindsey; Birnbaum; and Liam O'Fallon, who oversees the NIEHS Community Outreach and Engagement Cores. Of the tribe's agricultural practices, Sotomayor said the coop uses only things from the land when cultivating their crops. (Photo courtesy of Gilbert Rivera Jr.)



4/8

From right, Phyllis Valenzeula, San Xavier Co-op Farm catering coordinator, shows Lau, Lantz, and Birnbaum one of the edible cactus fruits that grow in the area. (Photo courtesy of Gilbert Rivera Jr.)



5/8

Sally Pablo, right, director of natural resources for the San Xavier District, described to Birnbaum the successful restoration of riparian wetlands carried out by the Tohono O'odham Nation. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



6/8

On a visit to Mission San Xavier del Bac, Birnbaum, left, listened as Lindsey, center, and Lau discussed area health concerns. (Photo courtesy of John Schelp)



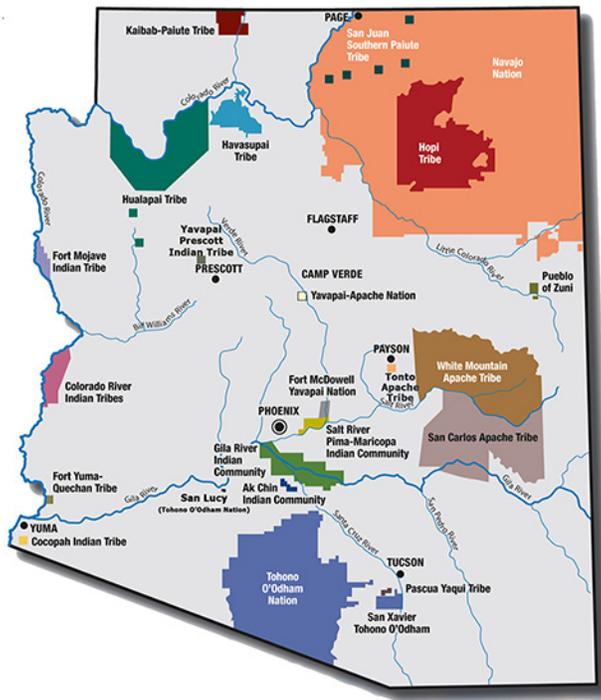
7/8

Students from Ha:san Preparatory and Leadership School in Tucson, Arizona, opened the forum with traditional songs. (Photo courtesy of Gilbert Rivera Jr.)



8/8

Forum organizers assigned seats to participants, to ensure stakeholder groups would mix with each other and encounter new points of view. (Photo courtesy of Gilbert Rivera Jr.)



Map of tribal lands in Arizona – many of the 21 member tribes of the *Inter Tribal Council of Arizona* (http://itcaonline.com/?page_id=16) participated in the forum. (Photo courtesy of Inter Tribal Council of Arizona)

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