NYU Department of Environmental Studies
2021 Honors Thesis

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Title: Even the Water: An Analysis of the Navajo Water Crisis

Abstract: Currently, up to 15% of residents on the Navajo Nation do not have access to clean, running water. There is a lack of access for several reasons, including failure of the federal and state governments to uphold obligations to Native nations, legal ambiguities about the extent of the Navajo right to water in the Southwest, and a lack of infrastructure, mainly water lines and septic systems. These failures are a reflection of past injustices that are upheld to this day, and they are especially damaging to the Navajo Nation both physically and psychologically. In this paper, I aim to present a comprehensive review of why there are failures to provide water to these nations, how they are damaging to the environment and community of the Navajo Nation, and a review of the current policies and policy proposals that address this issue. There is a substantial water access problem on the Navajo Nation. The core question of this paper asks why. Why is there a significant lack of access to clean, safe water on the Navajo Nation? What is the history of Arizona reservation water policy? What is currently being done on a local level in the community? Where are the gaps in jurisdiction in the local, state, and federal governments? Which governments have both the capacity and the responsibility to address this issue? In answer to these questions, I argue that a driving force behind the Navajo Nation’s lack of water is the continuous power imbalance between the Navajo people and the United States government, an imbalance that has been present since the Navajo were pushed off their land in the 1800s. This power imbalance wholly cripples the Nation’s ability to advocate for themselves in regard to claiming and securing the right to water; if the nation does not have the power to claim their rights, or if that claim goes overlooked or ignored, they become powerless, and in fact, they have been powerless since the genesis of their status as a sovereign nation.