

# Navajo Nation Arizona, Arizona

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Western Side

Arizona

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## Community Profile

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The Diné People (also known as Navajo) occupy the largest Native American reservation in the United States. The land area is approximately the size of West Virginia. Nearly 400,000 Diné are living throughout the United States, and about 173,000 live within the boundaries of the reservation. The Diné (Navajo) retain a unique identity and language and comprise one of the most distinct subcultures within the United States.

The Diné Nation (Navajo Nation) has its own government that exists as an entity under the US government. The Reservation is divided into 110 chapters of which each has a governing council. Consisting of an executive, legislative, and judicial branch, the seat of Navajo government is in Window Rock, and there the Navajo council convenes with 88 members representing the 110 chapters. The Nation has its own laws, and there is a tribal police department. The Navajo government owns the entirety of Reservation lands, and residents lease the parcels for various uses such as home site leases and church site leases.

## Natural Environment

The Navajo Reservation is set in the desert of Northeastern Arizona and Northwestern New Mexico and stretches into the southern section of Utah. The area is classified as high desert and typically ranges from around 5000-7000 feet in elevation. This makes for a harsh climate plagued with scorching heat in the summer and cold temperatures with snow and ice in the winter. It is very dry and in most places wide open, so severe dust storms can develop. Most of the land consists of desert plains, but there are sections of canyons, hills, and mountains. There are many natural and historic attractions, such as canyons and ancient ruins, throughout the reservation. These ruins can be found in such places as Betataken - Navajo National Monument, Chaco Canyon, and Canyon de Chelly. Other tourist attractions include Four Corners Monument, the Bisti Badlands, and Monument Valley.

## Lifestyle

The Diné (Navajo) dwell in isolated houses or small compounds all over the Reservation. Many families continue to herd sheep and farm, but it is also common for Diné to work skilled trades or commute to the cities. Modern amenities have not reached every area, and there are still high percentages of Diné (Navajo) living without electricity or running water. While most Diné (Navajo) live in contemporary homes, there are still some who live in traditional hogans, and in Canyon de Chelly there are households living much as they have for hundreds of years. A growing number of people have mobile phones and internet connections, but cell service can be spotty and landlines are rare.

## Needs

Because a lack of economic development, unemployment among the Diné (Navajo) is very high. Further, alcoholism and drugs can be common struggles. Many of the older people do not speak English. They often live alone without family members to help care for them. There is often a great need to care for the elderly. For

some of the elderly, it is a struggle to keep adequate food and nutrition, and proper home maintenance is at times unattainable. Many Diné live in trailers that were poorly constructed and have been used far beyond their adequate functionality. Many houses and trailers are structurally unstable or leaking, creating a need for improved living conditions.

## Language

The Diné (Navajo) language is considered to be a part of the Athabascan language family, which is spoken by various tribes from the Southwest all the way up to Alaska. This language group has been traced back to its roots in Asian languages. Navajo is a very difficult language for English-speaking people to learn. It is tonal in nature, and many modern words do not have exact translations or have developed in a descriptive manner. For instance, the Navajo word for "airplane" simply means "car that flies." The language was not written down until recent times, but it has now been put into written form, and there is a Navajo translation of the Bible. There are, however, very few people who are able to read Navajo because often those who speak exclusively Navajo are older and never learned to read, and the younger Navajo read English. The Navajo language is famous because it was used for codes in World War II. The Navajo who administered the codes are known as "the Navajo code talkers." This is the only code used in World War II that was not deciphered by the Japanese.

## Religion

Traditional Navajo Religion is still the most common belief system on the Reservation. Like most indigenous cultures, the Navajo are very spiritual and do not draw a sharp distinction between daily life and religion. The Navajo have a mythological structure that is used to explain elements of the world, and their community leaders are medicine men who actively engage in the spirit world. The Diné (Navajo) believe in a multiplicity of gods, and they believe that these spirits are active in the world. It is common for Diné (Navajo) to assume that physical ailments are a result of spiritual torment. The traditional Diné (Navajo) lifestyle is full of ceremonial significance. There are also many churches and Christians throughout the Reservation, but they are commonly disregarded or disdained by those who adhere to traditional religion, for the infiltration of the "white man's religion" is viewed as destructive to their native culture.

## History

It is believed that the Navajo's ancestors originally came from Asia and crossed the Bering Strait into Alaska, and moved down from there to the Southwest several hundred years ago. The Navajo traditionally lived in houses called hogans, which were made out of mud and sticks, and these rounded structures are of immense ceremonial significance to their tribe. Originally, hunting was an integral means of subsistence, and gradually herding and farming became more primary. By the nineteenth century, sheepherding was a core aspect of Navajo life, and it continues to this day.

During the civil war, tensions between the Navajo and area settlers began to grow, and US Military Colonel Kit Carson was recruited to bring an end to the Navajo crisis. What ensued was one of the darkest chapters of Navajo history. Carson began a mission to capture as many Navajo prisoners as possible, but the first few months proved largely unsuccessful. This all changed when he realized that many of the Navajo were dwelling in the Canyon de Chelly. He began looting villages, stealing livestock, destroying water sources, and taking prisoners when possible. This campaign lasted 16 days, and upon its completion, he camped at Chinle and waited in hopes that the Navajo would surrender.

It soon became apparent to most of the Navajo that they had little chance of surviving the winter, and they began to admit defeat. Many walked to Fort Defiance and Fort Wingate and turned themselves in where they found that the soldiers treated them well and provided blankets and food. Word began to spread and more

and more Navajo came to the forts to surrender. By the spring of 1864, there were so many Navajo that supplies began to dwindle and accommodations became limited, so they were prompted to make the long trek to the Bosque Redondo Reservation at Fort Sumner to settle there. They were promised more provisions when they arrived, and these reports were substantiated by a small minority of Navajo who had already surrendered and returned from Bosque Redondo to encourage them to cooperate.

The trip turned into a disaster. It is estimated that around 8,000 Navajo made this journey which has since been known as the Long Walk. While there were some wagons, there were not enough, and most people were forced to walk and snow and cold made it extremely difficult. Further, the Navajo became sick from the food that was provided, and many who fell behind from sickness or fatigue were left to die. There were thousands of deaths. When the Navajo finally arrived at Fort Sumner, they encountered some of the same problems as they had at Fort Defiance, and they found themselves far from their home and among strangers.

Eventually, Chiefs Barboncito and Manuelito, two of the more prominent Chiefs from those remaining in their homeland, made the long, dangerous excursion to Fort Sumner and negotiated the freedom of the captured Navajo through the Treaty of 1868. With the signing of this treaty, the current Navajo Reservation was formed in sections of present-day Arizona and New Mexico, and it has since been enlarged to include a portion of Utah.

When the Diné (Navajo) returned to their native land, they made great economic strides, enjoying a time of prosperity in the 1880s and '90s that they had not experienced before and no longer enjoy today. It is believed that the Navajo tribe doubled in population from 1868-1892.

While herding and farming continue to be a component of the economy, during the 20th century many Navajo traveled to the cities to work and each member of the tribe receives financial aid from the federal government. Both coal and uranium were found, and the mining of these resources became a component of the economy. Handmade crafts such as rug weaving, pottery, and jewelry were historically a part of the lifestyle and with the rise of tourism, this has become a significant portion of the livelihood for many Navajo families. Today, any visitor to the Navajo Reservation is sure to have ample opportunity for quality souvenirs.

The Navajo Tribe has gradually become more modernized, but they retain their cultural identity. Most Navajo still speak their native language and adhere to the traditional tribal belief systems. For a time, many Navajo children were forced to go to school off the reservation and were punished for speaking Navajo, so they began to lose their cultural heritage. In recent years, however, that trend has ceased and Navajo children are taught to appreciate their ancestry. Still, young Navajo are becoming more and more assimilated into American culture.

Sources:

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