

# Promoting Land Stewardship Through Outdoor Recreation

By: Cheyenne Grabiec



What began as a social media project has cumulated into an outdoor company that promotes land stewardship through a Native lens.

Len Necefer (Diné) is not only a professor of American Indian Studies at The University of Arizona, but he is also a lifelong outdoorsman as well as the founder and owner of Natives Outdoors. In March 2017, he started a social media project with #NativesOutdoors to highlight stories and photos of Native people participating in outdoor recreation as a means to address the lack of representation of Native peoples in the outdoor industry.

Since its start, the company has grown to provide outdoor products, as well as advisory and consulting services to the outdoor industry on topics within the intersection of tribes, public lands, and outdoor recreation. The company works directly with tribal governments, community organizations, and individuals on increasing access to outdoor recreation and connecting resources and opportunities within the outdoor industry.

Natives Outdoors has been taking proactive steps to amplify the voice of Native people and nations in the discussion and decision making in outdoor recreation and public land policy. They provide consulting and services to companies, organizations, and individuals who are looking to build meaningful and productive relationships with Native peoples, organizations, and governments.

Recently, Len Necefer co-directed the film, *Welcome to Gwichyaa Zhee*, which explores the Gwich'in community's connection to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge was opened to drilling last year, ignoring Native rights and public wishes. The Gwich'in are fighting a similar battle as the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, a coalition of seven tribes that have united to conserve the Bears Ears landscape in southern Utah. However, where the Protect Bears Ears movement has received nationwide support, the Gwich'in have not. This film not only gives a national voice to the Gwich'in peoples, but it is also a call to action to support their fight to protect the Arctic Refuge for future generations. As Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous allies, it is our responsibility to stand with the Gwich'in to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.



**“The more people who stand up, the more likely we are to protect the Arctic Refuge forever. Help spread the word.”**

- Welcome to Gwichyaa Zhee Webpage

For information on Natives Outdoors visit:  
<https://www.natives-outdoors.org/>

For more information on “Welcome to Gwichyaa Zhee” and how to host a watch party visit:  
<https://www.gwichyaaazhee.us/>

Artwork by: Vernan Kee (Diné)

*"I think that all around the world, and especially in the United States, Indigenous people have been the first stewards of this land and I think we're often ignored by outdoor recreationalists or outdoor environmentalists in that regard. We are the first people that have lived here and we've been here since time immemorial. I know that Indigenous people have a lot of knowledge on how to care for the land and everything on it and the water. Our knowledge is super valuable to stewardship efforts because we've been managing this land for millennia."*

- Ashleigh Thompson (Red Lake Band of Chippewa), Natives Outdoors Ambassador



Ashleigh Thompson



Mariah running through Canyon De Chelly

*"I think of our environments, whether they be built or natural, as teaching tools. I know that for me, something I think about a lot is my understanding of the world has been rooted in the way that I grew up... It's uncomfortable to know that our environment isn't considered a classroom to the same extent as an academic setting. We no longer understand the world the same way that our grandparents did."*

- Mariah Claw (Diné)



The group of Yaqui runners from the US and Mexico that participated in the Vatnaatekai run



Deer dancer in Ciudad Obregón

Photos by: Alejandro Higuera

## Vatnaatekai – Pascua Yaqui 40th Annual Tribal Recognition Run

In recognition of the 40-year anniversary of federal recognition, members of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe took part in a 350+ mile run from the Vicam Pueblo in Sonora, Mexico to the Pascua Pueblo in Tucson, Arizona. The purpose of the run was to commemorate the Yaqui families of Vicam and surrounding villages who migrated north to Tucson in the late 19th century to escape war and violence. The run brought together the Yaqui communities throughout Mexico and Arizona. Alejandro Higuera, an Admissions Counselor who specializes in Native American Outreach through the Office of Admissions, had the opportunity to be a part of the run this year and this is what he had to say about the experience:

*"The fact that we're here [Tucson] and that we have a population here is amazing. Our ancestors traveled over 300 miles to get here... We all came together to remember that even though there is a border that divides us, we can come together for ceremony and remember that we are the same people."*

- Alejandro Higuera (Pascua Yaqui)