

## Native Footprint

by Ann Prince

*"We will be known forever by the tracks we leave."* DAKOTA PROVERB



*"The American Indian is of the soil... He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings. He once grew as naturally as the wild sunflowers..."*

*Black Elk (1863-1950) OGLALA*

Two local Native Americans, Distant Eagle and Dreaming Bear, have more in common than their native heritage. They believe in the traditional Indian ideal that humanity must live in balance with all life.

Last winter members of the Wampanoag tribal council unveiled the design for a proposed resort casino in the rural southeastern Massachusetts town of Middleborough. Preliminary plans include a thousand-room 15- to 18-story hotel; an adjacent quarter-million-square-foot, two-story casino; restaurants and shops; and a possible future water park and 18-hole golf course. Route 44, just 900 feet away, would be widened from two lanes to four and have three new interchanges; and a six-level parking garage would accommodate up to 10,000 vehicles.

Many Native people do not embrace this concept.

Distant Eagle, aka Reverend James David Audlin, is a member of the Kanienkehaka, or Mohawk, Nation and the pastor of two Reform churches in the Catskills. He is also on the board of the Coalition Against Gambling in New York. "Casinos are abhorrent to

Indians," he says. He says that a casino imposes a tremendous environmental footprint, destroys animals' homes, and inflicts damage upon the earth.

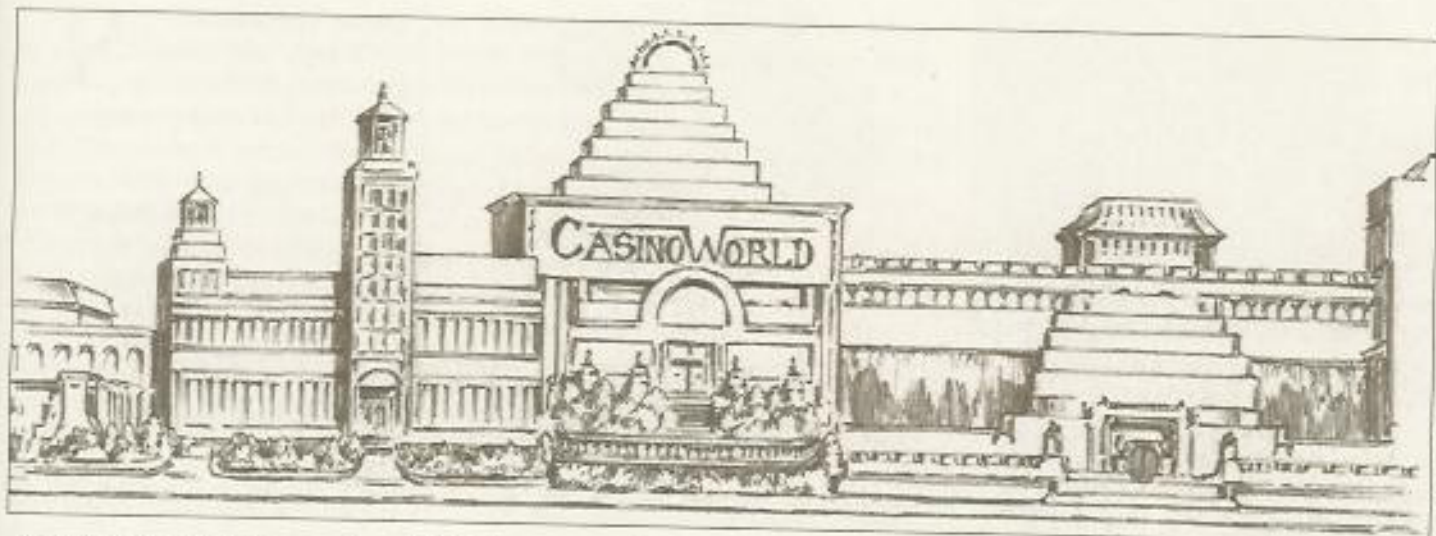
"The land is sacred," declares Distant Eagle, "because it is holy, because it exists, because *it is*. We are best judged by how we treat our most vulnerable. The Tree Nations, the Bear Nations, All Living Things are sentient beings. We need to listen to them and learn from them. They have their own intrinsic value. This is the way it is supposed to be."

Last March, in a speech before the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a member of the Massachusetts tribe named Dreaming Bear, whose English name is Faries Gray, responded to the Middleborough casino proposal.

"My concerns in Middleborough are twofold. One—this is not Mashpee territory. Two—destroying trees, the four-legged, the winged ones, all the creatures that will be destroyed if they build the casino is not the Indian way...."

"What about the trees? How many trees are going to die? How many? Does anyone know? What about the creatures? How many will lose their homes?"

## THE LONG VIEW



*"Hills are always more beautiful than stone buildings, you know.... Lots of people hardly ever feel real soil under their feet, see plants grown except in flower pots, or get far enough beyond the street lights to catch the enchantment of a night sky, studded with stars. When people live far from scenes of the Great Spirit's making, it's easy for them to forget His laws."*

*Walking Buffalo (1871-1967) STONY NAKOTA*

"I don't understand how the Mashpee can make sense of what they are attempting to do. They say that they care about the land; they have been good stewards of the land. But they are going to destroy the land. What little we have left they will destroy for financial reasons—what gives the Mashpee the right to take the lives of our brothers and sisters, our cousins—the creatures that live there? That is not the Native way. That is the way of the settlers. That is not the Native way—it never has been.

"I am Dreaming Bear, spiritual leader of the Massachuset, and the words I speak are true."

Middleborough, which was once known for its wild lands and agriculture, is at a literal crossroad: Routes 44 and 495 converge there, making it a convenient location for a massive project such as the casino. But in an era when many are striving to decrease our cumulative carbon footprint, a project of this magnitude seems counterproductive. Environmental League of Massachusetts President George Bachrach and Conservation Law Foundation President Philip

Warburg asked in their February 2008 column in *The Boston Globe*: "Have the governor's capable advisors clued him in on the environmental costs of creating miles-from-nowhere mega-magnets?..." Remotely sited "destination casinos" will give an "unwelcome boost to automobile-generated greenhouse gas emissions—the state's fastest growing contributor to global warming," they write. "All of this comes at a time when we must be strengthening our towns and cities rather than promoting sprawl."

Distant Eagle concurs. "Vast numbers of people are drawn to casinos, and any single casino means millions of cars per year and the associated carbon-infused exhaust." Furthermore, he notes that the building of a casino itself and use of the "attraction" strains water resources and pollutes the air, land, rivers, and lakes. He cites a northern New York State Indian casino on a reservation where nearby wells belonging to Native American residents were contaminated as a result of the casino.

"Tinkering with nature has grave consequences," says

Distant Eagle. "Humanity must accede to the dictates of the natural world."

He explains that originally Indian gaming, which was part of their traditional way of life, had a circulator effect—no one would gain or lose; all who participate benefited. By contrast, casinos currently being built on sovereign land are sucking money out of the local economy. He describes true Native gaming as a small community activity for enjoyment and entertainment, or a way to offer assistance; the "winnings" were meant to favor someone in need. In modern-day casinos, he says, "There's a tilt in the wrong direction. The house always wins. Those who are traditional in their philosophy consider this regressive taxation and unethical."

According to Tom Elias writing in the California *Santa Monica Mirror*, there is little documentation of significant benefit to Native people, except for a very select group that enjoys the profits of these multimillion-dollar businesses. "There's no sign most casinos are willing to help other Indians out of poverty and into solid medical care and middle class life," Elias says.

The Wampanoags themselves were known traditionally as peacekeepers and a people who have lived in harmony with their homeland. According to Laurie Weinstein, author of *Indians of North America: The Wampanoag*, "Reciprocity was at the heart of the Wampanoag's religion, in their sense of having a relationship with all things in the Universe. Deer, bear, rocks, trees—everything that existed—had its own spirit." At their summer home sites, they planted corn,



*Artifacts of a casino*

*"A good chief gives,  
he does not take."*

MOHAWK PROVERB



*Bird head ladel from  
Middleborough site*

*"When we show respect for  
living things, they show  
respect for us."*

AROPAHO PROVERB

beans, and squash. They foraged for acorns, chestnuts, tubers, and berries; and they fished and hunted.

Though the ancient form of governance of the Native people is through consensus, many are dismayed that Wampanoag members are not permitted to speak out against the casino in Middleborough.

According to *Cape Cod Today*, "The tribe is still in the grips of a so-called government under the rule of an elected tribal council who will not give in to the will of the membership or the chief." A distinguished Wampanoag elder and her family are being shunned for requesting access to the books, despite a vote by members to revoke the shunning and the clear message of Chief Silent Drum, Vernon Lopez, that the shunning is not justified. "That council, though elected by the membership, is clearly controlled by outsiders whose only interest is how to use Indian sovereignty to profit from gambling," *Cape Cod Today* contends.

In a presentation to the Middleborough Resort Advisory Committee in January 2008,

Casinofacts.org raised a list of questions related to the proposal:

"How would the aquifer be affected by the casino project?"

"What impact would the increased traffic have on pollution?"

"How would endangered/protected species be affected by the developer?"

Yet the ultimate question is: What will prevail, Sacred Mother Earth or the Almighty Dollar?

*Ann Prince is associate editor of Sanctuary. She worked as a park naturalist for the first five years of her career.*