

# The Southwest Environmental Health Sciences Center

## Introduction

Housed at the College of Pharmacy at the University of Arizona (UA), the Southwest Environmental Health Sciences Center (SWEHSC) is focused on improving the lives of people in the Southwest by understanding the mechanisms behind a variety of human disease risks from environmental exposures.

Supported by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), SWEHSC is dedicated to developing approaches for reducing hazardous environmental exposures and increasing environmental awareness.

The SWEHSC community outreach and education core (COEC) has four major goals:

- to promote environmental health science literacy
- to serve as a non-biased source of scientific information to the public
- to provide environmental health educational resources
- to support connections between SWEHSC investigators and the community.

The SWEHSC COEC supports these goals by translating and disseminating our scientists' research findings to communal entities and stakeholders – many of whom include Indigenous communities located in the Southwest region.

People living within tribal communities are disproportionately affected by environmental exposures like uranium, arsenic, and trichloroethylene-contaminated drinking water. Agricultural dust and high particulate matter in the air are also of great concern for Indigenous communities in the Southwest, as are excessive sun and ultraviolet light exposure.

SWEHSC is proud to begin a tribal environmental health magazine because we believe it highlights the important people and ideas across Indigenous communities that protect our environment and, by doing so, help protect the people from these environmental exposures.

## American Indian Environmental Health Stories (AIEHS) Project

*Indigenous Stewards* is the outcome of the American Indian Environmental Health Stories: An EHS Core Center Multi-site Pilot Project. At the urging of the UA and the University of Washington (UW), the AIEHS Project was constructed to address environmental health disparities within Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest and Southwest regions.

This project has been an exciting, collaborative opportunity built on the tribal community engagement strengths of both centers.

Conversations regarding environmental health and science between Indigenous communities and both universities have guided and facilitated the creation of *Indigenous Stewards*. At the UA, Marti Lindsey, PhD, oversaw a series of these conversations and the subsequent development of educational environmental health science materials to be shared with partner communities.

Key conversations for the creation of this magazine occurred at an environmental health and science conference and summer school session for high school students attending the Tucson, Ariz.-based Ha:sañ Preparatory & Leadership School in 2014, and with students at the Tohono O'odham Community College and the UA.

Other important conversations occurred among environmental managers associated with the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc., and at two conferences: the Native Research Network Conference in Phoenix; and, the United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) Conference in Portland, Ore.

In conversations with Indigenous leaders, scholars, and community members, SWEHSC members collaborated to develop a model for discussing environmental health issues with Indigenous communities.

This edition highlights people who have been significant contributors to our conversations and have devoted themselves to the dispersal of environmental education and awareness. Furthermore, this issue celebrates modern-day Indigenous environmental scientists who combine traditional knowledge in order to provide for the future of the people and the land.

Historically, Indigenous people have been responsible stewards of the land, treating it with respect for providing their communities with plentiful food, water, and homes. The quality of the air and water sources in communities affect the land and food from which it originates. Water, air, food, and land issues are interconnected. This model depicts the relationship between environmental elements as they pertain to Indigenous communities.



*This preliminary sketch of the environmental health model for working with Indigenous communities is based on a conceptualization from advisory board member, Agnes Attakai. We have found it most effective in explaining a holistic approach regarding the environment to Native youth.*