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# From Dreams to Rights: Water Access and Justice for Native American Tribes

Evelina Morillo Monegro  
Reading Area Community College

## Introduction

Access to clean water is a fundamental human right for health, safety, and community development. Native American tribes in the United States lack this essential resource, and it remains scarce. Water insecurity is a real problem for our communities, but it is also the result of centuries of broken treaties, inadequate infrastructure, and systemic neglect. Addressing this issue requires legal, ethical, and moral recognition that water is not a privilege, but a right tied to cultural survival and sovereignty. Gaining access to clean water for Native American tribes goes beyond a legal framework; it is a moral duty of our society. It is fundamental to community development, providing well-being, security, and growth, which, in turn, identifies and affirms a culture deserving of the same equity as ours.



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“If we must die, we die defending our rights.”  
Sitting Bull

## Methodology



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### Research Questions

- How have historical U.S. policies shaped current water insecurity for Native American tribes?
- What legal frameworks, such as the **Winters Doctrine**, define tribal water rights today?
- Why do modern Native communities still lack access to safe and sufficient water?
- How do environmental injustices like **uranium mining contamination** continue to impact tribal health?

### Historical Context

#### Treaties and Trust Responsibility

The U.S. government signed treaties promising to safeguard tribal lands and resources. The **Federal Indian Trust Responsibility** binds the government to protect tribal property, including water.

However, repeated violations—such as in *Seminole Nation v. United States* (1942) show how treaty promises were altered or ignored.

#### Forced Removal and Water Loss

Under **Andrew Jackson**, the Indian Removal Act (1830–1850) displaced tribes from homelands rich in water.

Relocation to unfamiliar, often arid areas disrupted cultural and environmental systems tied to rivers, springs, and lakes.

### Legal Framework

#### Winters Doctrine (1908)

Established that tribes retain **reserved water rights** when a reservation is created. Rights exist even if water is not explicitly mentioned in the treaty. Forms the foundation of modern tribal water claims.

#### Modern Barriers

Settlements take **decades**. Many water systems are controlled by **non-tribal agencies**.

Federal and state water projects often divert water for urban, industrial, and agricultural use before reaching tribes.



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## Results

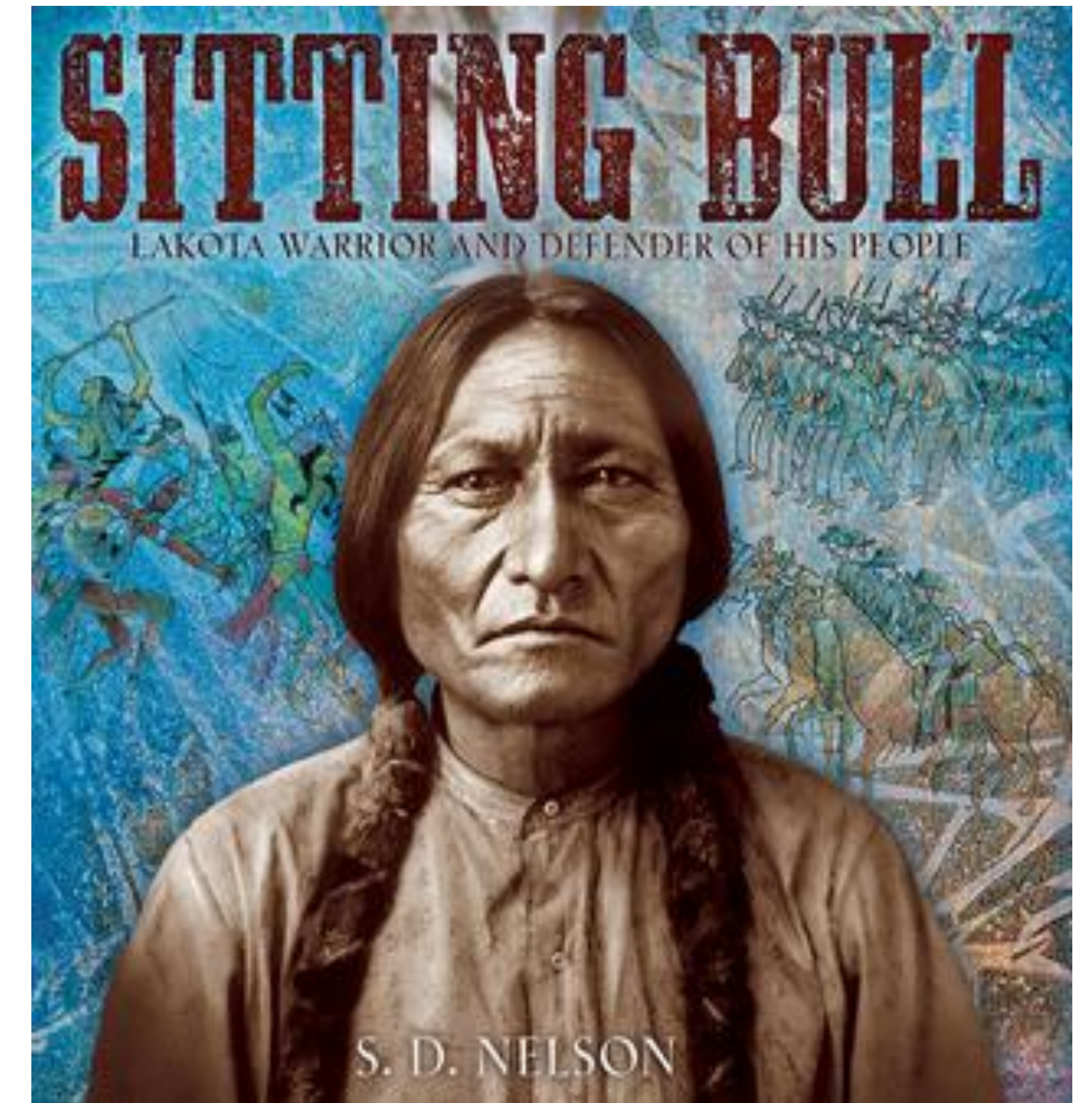
### Environmental Injustice

#### Uranium Mining & Health Impacts

Navajo communities became central to the uranium boom (1944–1962). Miners were not informed of radiation risks; there was **no word for “radiation”** in Diné. Result: cancers, respiratory illnesses, contaminated wells, and long-term water pollution.

#### Cultural Loss (Lakota Woman Book)

Mary Crow Dog connects water and land loss to broader patterns of oppression. Water is a **living spirit** tied to identity, healing, and resistance. Her narrative shows that the fight for water rights continues today.



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### Current Challenges

#### Infrastructure Inequity

Native households are **19x more likely** than white households to lack indoor plumbing (U.S. Water Alliance).

Poor infrastructure = limited access to drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene.

#### Water Adjudication Issues

Water can be sold even before adjudication is finalized.

Property owners can **separate water rights from the land** and sell them elsewhere.

This system disadvantages tribes that are still seeking legal recognition of their.



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## Conclusion



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The struggle for Native American water rights is not solely about resource distribution but about justice, equity, and respect for sovereignty. Ensuring reliable access to clean water will fulfill long-overdue promises, improve health outcomes, and strengthen cultural identity. Addressing these disparities is a moral duty that reflects the values of fairness and human dignity in American society.

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