

# PAATUWAQATSI: RUNNING FOR WATER, RUNNING FOR LIFE



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What do you think about when you run? This is my favorite question to ask long distance runners. Aside from being in good shape, and the ability to tolerate relative physical discomfort for hours on end, a long distance runner must also be able to occupy their mind for great periods of time.

When I asked Hopi runner and farmer **Bucky Preston** this question, he thought of the thousands of miles he has run to honor and protect his people's water, but also to raise awareness to regional environmental justice issues that involve water. "I'm always thinking about life, about how to resolve some of the things that are questionable about environmental impacts here on Hopi — recently I've been thinking about the Animas spill. I try to think about how we can be more at the table, where decisions are being made for us." Mr. Preston mentioned several issues in which running to raise awareness has played a key role. "One thing I do have is my running. I announce that I will be running because this thing is happening, like Peabody's use of our water for coal slurry, or the use of reclaimed wastewater by Snowbowl on the San Francisco Peaks, uranium mining, or coal mining on Zuni," said Mr. Preston. "Even right here, we have high levels of arsenic in our water. I run to raise awareness to those issues; the newspapers and TV find me and it helps bring attention."

"When I run, I meditate and pray, and see where the running takes me; I just like to get into a trance," he said. "But I always come back to water." This is why, in 2003, Mr. Preston started the **Paatuwaqatsi Trail Run**. Translated, "water is life," Paatuwaqatsi is an annual running event to celebrate and commemorate the sanctity of water. There is a 50k ultra-marathon, as well as a 10 and 4-mile run.

Mr. Preston was born and raised in **Walpi**, a village on top of First Mesa, about 300 feet above the canyon below. His earliest memories are of running. "We ran everywhere; there are foot paths connecting the villages from all directions." When asked what prompted him to start an organized run, he remembered back to when he left the reservation to learn a few trades. "When I came back, a lot of the trails weren't there — covered in bushes and rocks — but I knew where they were because I spent my life running on them," he said. "So I started doing maintenance on them."

Every year Mr. Preston leads a prayer just before the start of the run at 6AM. This year, as the ultrarunners gathered around him at the trailhead minutes before the sun rose, he explained how important running was to the land, their culture, and the success of Hopi crops. "These trails are like the blood vessels of our body — spread out, but all connected. They bring energy through our bodies," said Mr. Preston, the sky clear and purple behind him. "When you put the foot prints on the land, that's calling the rain, and it's calling the Kachina and the cloud people; we're here and we're asking for your help."

Since Mr. Preston started the run in 2003, he's seen an increase in more local people getting back into the tradition of long distance running. "That's what I wanted to see for our people, to get back to long distance running because that's who we are."

Mr. Preston and others stress that Paatuwaqatsi is not a race. He recently told *Indian Country Today*, "It's a remembrance run to keep the ancient trails alive." Run coordinator Kim Secakuku said, "It's a monument to community, heritage, and preservation."

In his former role in tribal relations for the **Sierra Club**, Flagstaff resident **Andy Bessler**, helped Mr. Preston start the run by helping to fund it during its first year. "Bucky wanted to start it because this was when Peabody Coal was pumping their aquifer for slurry water, so we were really trying to help him draw attention to that, and it's impact on the springs." At the same time, Mr. Preston sought to heal the aquifer through prayer, in the best way he knew how: by running. Unlike other organized runs that turn a profit, or raise funds to benefit an organization, Paatuwaqatsi has remained true to its roots. "The runners have kept it going, every year it essentially pays for itself and is completely volunteer run." Today Mr. Bessler is one of those many volunteers. "Even though I left Sierra Club, I see this as part of my job description still," he said.

Mr. Bessler has also helped Mr. Preston with trail maintenance along every section. "It's amazing to be working on these trails that are thousands of years old, and you're securing loose rock steps thinking about ancestral Puebloans setting these stones here," he said. "I think of why these trails are there, some of which are used ceremonially to bring water from the springs to the villages."

With some exceptions, the largely white outdoor recreational culture of the southwest — specifically skiers, ATVers, rockclimbers, sandboarders — have not always had the best relationship with regional Native people. ATVers and Sandboarders flock to Sand Mountain in Nevada despite objections from the Paiute-Shoshone tribe, who consider the serpent shaped dune to be sacred. Rockclimbers have a long history of climbing all over the Navajo Nation despite a reservation-wide ban on such activity since 1971. And of course Flagstaff residents should be quite familiar with the controversy over development on the San Francisco Peaks, where at least 13 regional tribes hold the mountain sacred in different ways, and therefore object to the way reclaimed wastewater is currently being used to make artificial snow for skiers and snowboarders.

Paatuwaqatsi, however, is something different, and considering the mutual respect and compatibility of running and Hopi culture, perhaps there exists a good model where desecration is not always pit against recreation. Mr. Bessler is starting to see how the run is "kind of creating a new tradition that incorporates bahana culture and hopi culture," he said. Every year the Hopi communities come out in larger and larger numbers, passing out water and snacks, cheering on the runners. "*Kwakwhay!*" yell the men; "*Askwali!*" yell the women. Both phrases are gender-specific ways of saying the same thing: Thank you.

They thank the runners because they're helping to ensure the success of their crops by doing the prayer run, said Mr. Preston, who designed the run so that runners go right through his cornfields.

Mr. Bessler pointed out how the run is mutually beneficial, and mutually respectful. "It's really acceptable for Hopi people — everyone I've spoken to thinks it's great — and the Anglos feel very humbled and honored to be there," he said. "To me, this is something that's been created that everyone can get excited about."

Contrary to other runs, when Mr. Preston started Paatuwaqatsi, he didn't even want there to be a clock, and he was weary of commercializing it with sponsors. But over the years, he has warmed up to both ideas, especially after years of witnessing younger Hopis get more involved. "They're young and in cross-country, and there is some competition there," Mr. Preston said. "But as a community, we can use this run to help them learn and understand the role that running plays culturally, and spiritually."

When asked what he would like to see non-Native runners get out of the experience, Mr. Preston said he hoped people would learn to "become spiritual runners," and to understand "water is sacred." "We are told from a very early age that we run for life, and I think the ultrarunners that come from outside of Hopi are starting to get it, especially the ones that return year after year," he said. "They're usually very spiritual people; they run for life, a long healthy life for all of man kind and all living things out there."

Now 65 years old, Mr. Preston is realizing how hard it is to keep the run going. "People don't realize how hard it is," he said. "I was raised to be a hard worker, but I'm getting old now." This year, the Hopi reservation saw a lot of rain prior to the run, and many of the trails required extensive repair. Mr. Preston still runs, even on a sore ankle and a broken toe, and he will be involved in the run for as long as he can, but he's looking for someone to take over his role. "I've asked people to take it on, but so far nobody's been willing."

Mr. Bessler is confident that someone will step up to the challenge. "I hope there is some young person who is inspired; someone will pick up Bucky's torch," he said.

Mr. Preston said Hopi stories and songs have predicted the loss of ancient footpaths, the poisoning of precious water resources, the loss of rabbit hunting, and more. "There's not much water left in this world anymore that human beings have not polluted or destroyed," he said, describing water ethics as "something that really touches my heart and reflects how I was raised. "A long time ago, they said that these days were going to come and I'm seeing this happening in my lifetime," he said. "So the most important thing we can do is bring awareness to these issues and rekindle a spiritual relationship with water, to respect it." 📍

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