



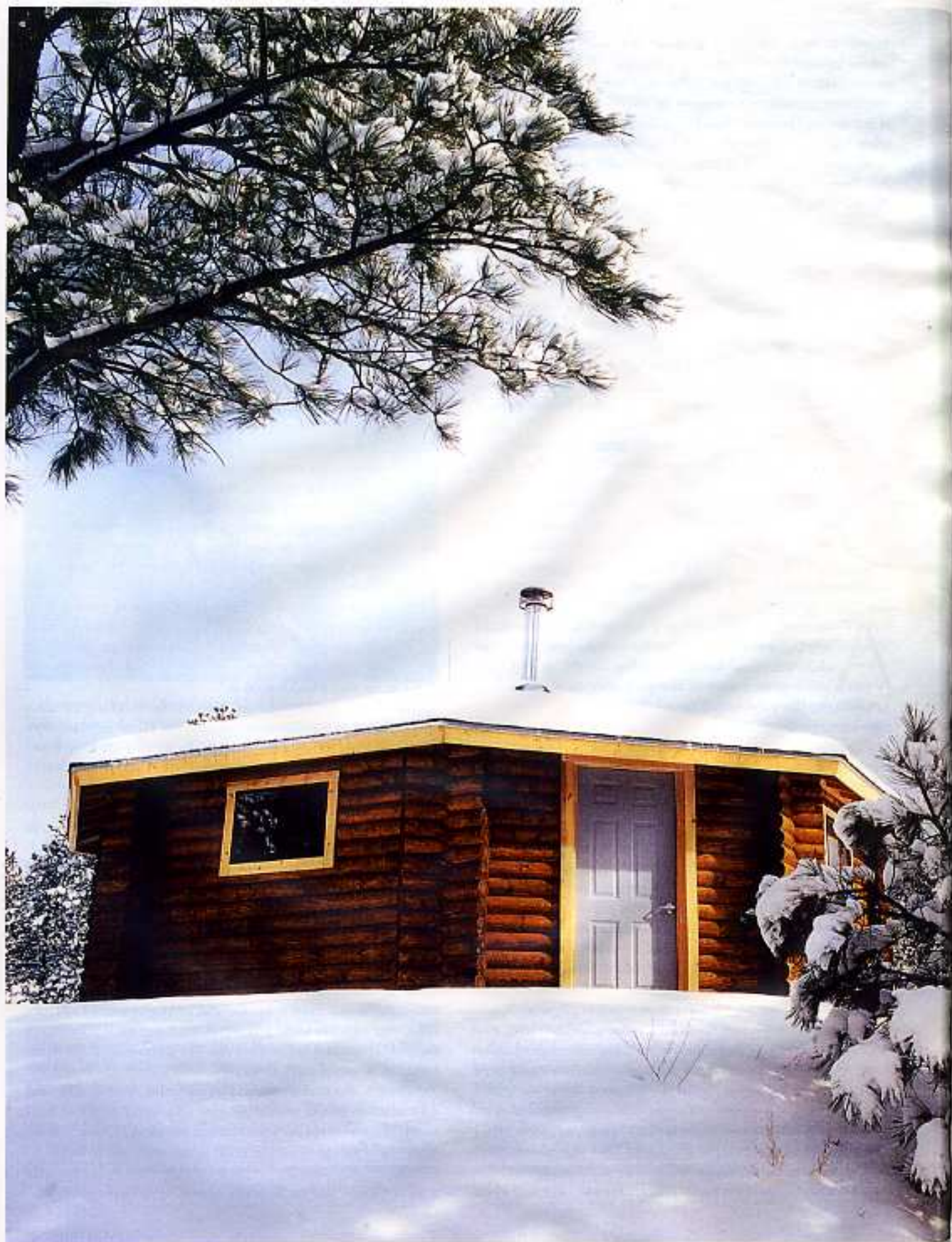
T ree Houses

Loggers and environmentalists rarely see eye to eye, but in Northern Arizona, where thousands of ponderosas are being salvaged to build homes on the Navajo Reservation, that's exactly what's happening.

by James Bishop Jr.



photos by Janise Witt



A modern hoasn at Northern Arizona University.

At midday, the sun hovers brightly above the San Francisco Peaks to the south. Two Navajos pause atop a sandy hillock in Cameron, 60 miles north of Flagstaff, and not far from the Painted Desert. Gusts of red dust swirl around them as Mae Franklin and Tony Robbins step out of Franklin's office — a newly constructed Navajo hogan. It's traditional, with its octagonal shape, but it comes with all the modern conveniences.

Gazing off toward a tapestry of pale blue buttes and mesas in the middle distance, their attention swings back to a long green shed nearby. Two brawny Navajos are pulling small-diameter ponderosa pines from a 1954 green Chevy pickup and piling them onto a fast-moving conveyor, which delivers the trees into the maw of a torpedo-shaped log-peeling machine.

Minutes later a log tumbles out. Now sleek and naked, the log is not for burning. Instead, it'll be used in another new hogan — like Mae Franklin's, and thousands like it being built by larger plants on the Navajo Reservation.

The modern hogans are arriving just in time in the Navajo Nation, which has a critical need for 30,000 new homes on its 17-million-acre reservation. "Navajos have never had new hogans as a choice before," Franklin says, explaining that existing hogans, typically very old and earth-covered, have been slapped together with just about anything — tarpaper, wood scraps and even rusted vehicle fenders.

"We call this project 'hogans for hope,'" she says, with streaks of gray glistening in her dark, wind-blown hair.

"Everything that's happening here is due to people thinking outside the box," says Tony Robbins, a senior official with the Cameron Chapter House, one of 110 such chapters on the Reservation. "I know the needs of my people — better housing, jobs and hope. Here we are creating something they will understand and use. We can't let them down."

The Cameron mill, the first of many on the horizon, is the brainchild of a little-known nonprofit organization in Flagstaff called Indigenous Community Enterprises (ICE). Since 1999, Northern Arizona University's School of Forestry has sponsored the group, along with the U.S. Forest Service, various regional nonprofits, a number of foundations (including the Arizona Community Foundation) and, more recently, private investors.

ICE was created from a bittersweet mix of fear and hope in order to deal with twin calamities: wildfires, like the one that nearly engulfed Flagstaff in 1996, and the sense of hopelessness that pervades the Navajo Nation. (A palpable feeling that life has passed them by exists among many people who believe that the problems of high unemployment, sickness due to widespread alcoholism, the lack of decent housing and the flight of well-educated youth to the cities are beyond solution.)

From the outset, Fortune's wheel has played a key role in ICE's success. Indeed, it was Mae Franklin herself, the Tribe's liaison with the Forest Service, who made the connection between the forest's frightening buildup of fuel (2,000 small pines per acre today versus 12 to 30 huge trees a century ago) and the plight of her people. Appropriately, the connection was made one day in the forest. Franklin, who was traveling with the

late Shawn Muldoon, an official with the Kaibab National Forest, and the late Ella Big Horse, the coordinator of one of the Navajo's chapters, noticed stacks of small-diameter pines that had been thinned from the overstocked forest to reduce the hazards of fire.

For Franklin, the sight of the stacked pines being readied for burning brought back memories of the round, juniper-arched hogans in which her grandparents had lived — homes that smelled like the earth and warming fires. At the same time, she pictured the "metal matchbox houses" that most elders occupy today — homes that are hard to heat and often unstable.

She reasoned that some of the Navajo elders, who were stuck away in seedy trailers, might come around to remembering their ancient traditions if they could live in modern hogans equipped with decent heat and plumbing. Since both the Coconino National Forest and her people were deteriorating, why let these logs be burned? Why not use them to manufacture a variety of projects on the Reservation, including corals, fences, traditional hogans and ramadas?

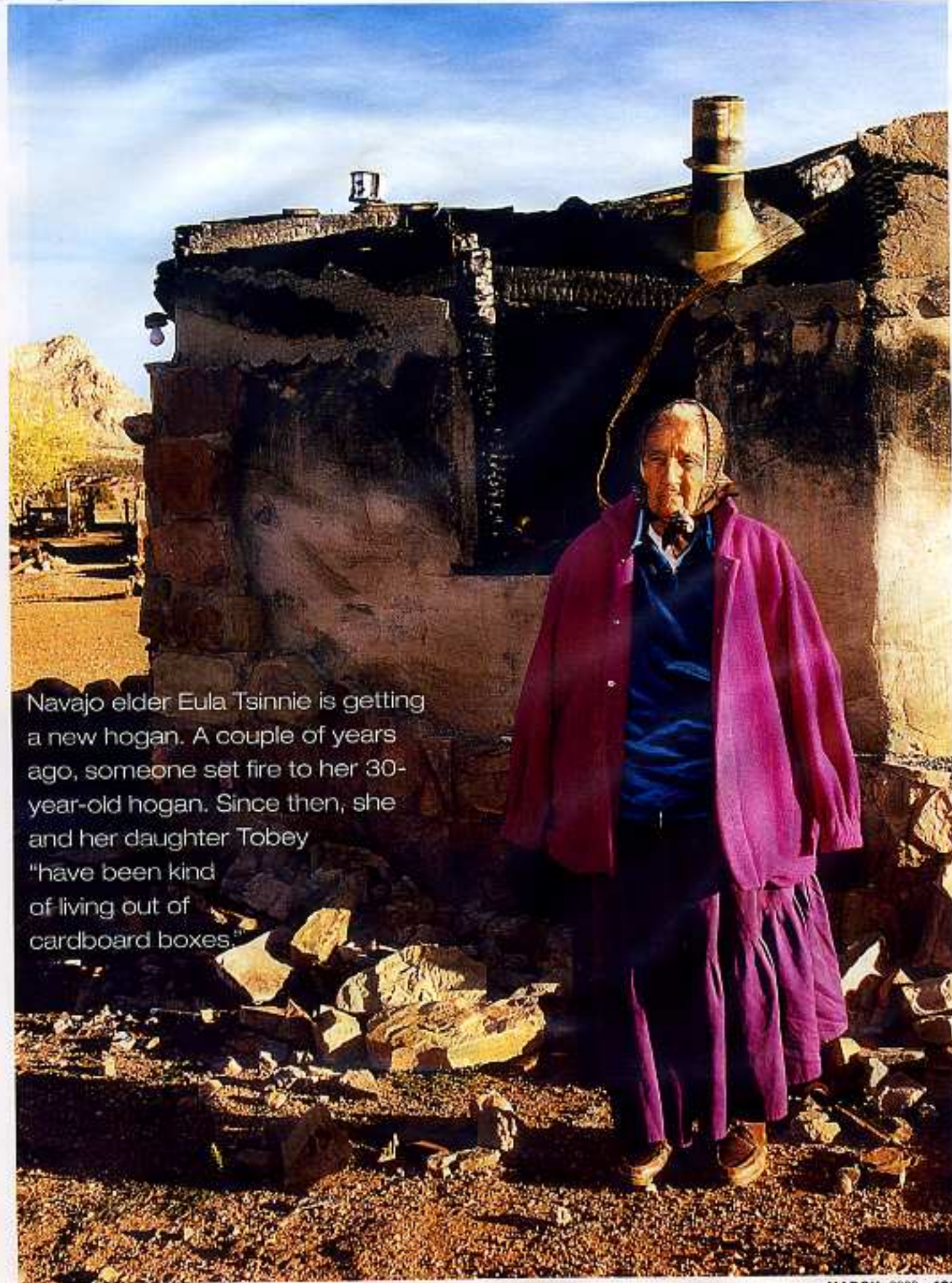
As her brainstorming continued, she realized that building the hogans would pay for itself over time. So, the concept was presented to the Grand Canyon Forests Foundation, which was created by the Grand Canyon Trust and the Coconino National Forest. Going in, they were aware that this unique federal, state and local partnership had identified at least 250,000 acres of the Coconino's 1.8 million acres to be in need of thinning (at a rate of 10,000 acres annually). Thus, their idea might receive a sympathetic ear. Instead of burning the logs, they planned to argue that it made more sense to help indigenous people.

As luck would have it, they met the right person — then-staff director Brett KenCairn, a passionate and eloquent Princeton graduate with a record of working with forest communities across the West. He was skilled at navigating the choppy waters between environmentalists suspicious of the Forest Service on one shore, and the timber industry and the U.S. government on the other. It didn't take KenCairn long to see the potential linkage between forest restoration and the needs of the Navajo people. And so it was that in 1999, KenCairn, a non-Indian, and Franklin founded ICE to launch what would be known as the Hogan-Roundwood Project.

"Off we went," KenCairn (ICE's first executive director) says. "We were just a bunch of dreamers with big ideas and a few rough drawings of log hogans. Our dream was to create a synthesis that could restore the land and the native community at the same time."

Some \$600,000 was raised from grants and foundations in order to convert a vacant ramshackle building in Cameron into a usable structure. With another \$800,000, a small-diameter mill was installed. Soon, Navajo workers were hired at good wages, and logs from the forest started arriving at the new plant.

By early-2002, after overcoming numerous financial and cultural obstacles, KenCairn and ICE's board of directors had some good news: Important parts of their dream were coming true. Numerous hogans had been purchased by NAU and the Navajo Nation Housing Authority, and vocational programs had begun at high schools like the one in Tuba City in order to train stu-



Navajo elder Eula Tsinnie is getting a new hogan. A couple of years ago, someone set fire to her 30-year-old hogan. Since then, she and her daughter Tobey "have been kind of living out of cardboard boxes."

dents to construct hogans for the elderly. Also, financial institutions from beyond the Reservation, such as Wells Fargo, are now showing interest in helping the Navajos purchase their own housing.

In addition, another piece of ICE's dream has come true — the board voted to spin off a for-profit company called Indigenous Community Ventures. The company will be primarily Navajo-owned, and will produce a variety of housing and wood products, construct electric power plants run by wood chips, look for ways to revive the wool business, and someday train Navajos to operate tourist programs and become river guides.

Sandy Kowitz, a Phoenix-based consultant on social welfare and environmental issues, says, "The for-profit decision is very important because the Navajo Tribe has investment resources, and major investments will be required. Make no mistake... the market potential is enormous. It's not rocket science. The elements are quite simple. It means connecting the dots. With leadership, the potential positives are enormous."

Tony Skrelunas, an active ICE board member and a former economic development official in his tribal government, agrees: "This is the first big effort on the Nation's part. What has been missing for Navajos is venture capital, bank loans. No mechanism has ever existed before for getting capital to the communi-

ties. Until now, too, a variety of our cultural traditions discouraged organized business efforts like this project.

"We know that Navajo elders recognize the need for new housing, so long as projects are culturally appropriate. Now attitudes among the elders are changing and the word is out. Navajos are even coming in from New Mexico to order hogans."

To be sure, needy Navajos have started seeing the results. And slowly, their suspicions about a combination of Anglos and Navajos working together are fading. Mae Franklin confirms the change: "The chapters are coming around; reality is setting in. This is going to happen."

In fact, it *is* happening.

In Tuba City last fall, an elderly Rena George looked on as Tuba City High School students raised the first pine-log wall on her new hogan, which will have electricity, a full bathroom and a working kitchen. This, the first of many hogans to be donated to the elderly on the Reservation, was the result of a partnership between ICE, Coconino County, the U.S. Forest Service, the Tuba City Chapter House and the Navajo Housing Authority. George was selected by Tuba City Chapter officials and by Louise Yellowman, vice-chair of the Coconino County Board of Supervisors.

In the nearby village of Gap, Navajo elder Eula Tsinnie is also getting a new hogan. A couple of years ago, someone set fire to her 30-year-old hogan. Since then, she and her daughter Tobey "have been kind of living out of cardboard boxes," Tobey says. Both ICE and the Gap Chapter contributed funds to build Eula's new home.

Judging from the reactions so far, the project certainly seems like a win-win. Some groups, however, wonder whether ICE's activity will attract major corporations and reopen logging's Pandora's box — tying forest restoration to selling trees.

"The key issue is scale," says Ken Cairn, adding that larger-scale operations like paper mills, plywood plants or large, wood-fired power plants — which consume hundreds of millions of board feet of thinnings — may not be sustainable over their 20- to 30-year life spans. "People who invest the \$200 million to \$500 million these plants take, would have a strong financial interest in making sure the wood fiber keeps flowing."

At ICE, he says, they're taking a different approach: "We think smaller-scale, community-based enterprises are a more responsive and practical solution. ICE's small, locally owned and controlled plants [costing from \$1 million to \$4 million] will be more flexible and adaptive to available materials, and will better fit the scope of a conservation restoration program."

ICE leaders say the next challenge will be to make the hogans affordable to a populace whose annual individual income is \$6,400. The cost of a hogan kit ranges from \$15,000 to \$25,000. Add in construction costs, and the price of an 800-square-foot hogan with a septic system can run between \$50,000 and \$75,000. "Some of the elders," Franklin says, "are suffering sticker shock."

Still, the hogans cost less than the HUD housing that proliferates across the Navajo Nation — \$126,000 for a one-bedroom house and \$133,000 for two bedrooms. ICE and Navajo officials



Tuba City High School students build a hogan.



Cameron Mill prepares salvaged ponderosas for use in building modern hogans.

are working on a number of ways for Navajos to own the new hogans. The Tribe is providing economic assistance for very low-income elders, while the tribal government, which builds rental homes with HUD money, is in the process of redirecting such funds to ICE to build more plants like the one in Cameron.

"Using logs, we can build hogans for \$90 a square foot, compared with \$120 a square foot off the Reservation," says Tony Skrelunas. "Until now, efforts to modernize the Navajo culture have been to make them [appreciate] western products — cars, lighting, TVs, refrigerators. We no longer think that that's the only option. It's to make them more comfortable, but still maintain their cultural traditions."

Day in and day out, and from one end of the Navajo Nation to the other, ICE leaders are sending this message to the people. In KenCairn's words: "We don't want to just catch up with the Anglo society. We want to go beyond and jump over the limitations of how Anglos think and behave."

Empty rhetoric? ICE and its for-profit spin-off aren't just building new homes with sustainable materials, these homes will be sustainable in and of themselves because they'll be equipped with solar and wind power, and waste systems that produce gray water for irrigation. Nevertheless, ICE board members concede that clouds still persist amid their blue-sky plans, and lurking in

the background of everything on the Reservation is the specter of tribal politics. There's also the question of a sustainable pine supply, considering that the contract loggers are already overworked and behind schedule as they try to thin the forest.

The first years have been rough going, says Debra Tuck, a board member and veteran foundation official with 15 years of involvement with various tribes across the country. "If we can't do this community-based model here — the most innovative I've ever seen — then there's no hope that it can be done anywhere else."

"Only a handful of people could have brought this together to this point. It's a combination of vision, grace, tenacity and humility."

While the political melee over forest management rages in Washington, it's ironic that in an unsophisticated land of hopelessness, seemingly disconnected goals have come together as a hopeful vision, and the future is bright. "If there is one thing I've learned," KenCairn says, "it's reciprocity. If we take, we have to give back. And that's what is happening in Cameron."

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Sedona-based writer James Bishop Jr. is a former Washington correspondent for Newsweek. He's covered tribal and environmental issues in the West for many years.