The goal of our project was to film and produce a documentary that focused on illuminating the experience of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation Tribes in a changing wild landscape. We were then going to screen the film at a local theatre in Lewiston Montana and bring together local ranching communities, tribal leaders, and conservationists for a discussion on the future of the landscape. There were no other fundraising efforts that contributed to the project.

I came up for the idea with the project when I first travelled to the area of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in 2018 to research how bison restoration was going. It was a captivating experience. Bison are such an integral part of both the local Great Plains ecosystem as well as the native cultures of the Aaniiih and Nakoda tribes. It was such a sad story to learn about how the bison populations were nearly wiped out by westward expansion (which in turn, wiped out much of the culture of native tribes). It was also an inspiring story to learn about all the efforts there were to restore the wildlife to the landscape. It was not just native tribes, but also ranchers and conservationists who were helping the effort. However, there are still conflicts with local ranchers who view efforts to rewild the landscape as taking a step backwards.

The project changed dramatically during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of local restrictions and safety precautions, we could not get a live screening of our documentary at the Lewiston Theater or a panel of ranchers, conservationists, and native leaders to discuss it. In addition, because of extra restrictions at the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, we were not able to fully-base the project out of that location. Faced with this daunting prospect, we decided to expand the scope of our project to include conservation stories across the west and involving many native tribes. Instead of one singular documentary, we edited around 10 different short films. In the end, we filmed stories at the Lower Elwha Reservation in Washington, the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho, the Yakama Reservation in Oregon, wildlife rehabilitation centers in Wyoming and Idaho, ranches near the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, and of course Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana. Rather than do an in-person film screening, we also chose to screen our films online on a dedicated website.

Many times, I felt like the project may not work simply because of how hard it was to find people to interview. In addition to the fact that it is hard to contact camera-shy tribal leaders, it was hard to meet up with people who were afraid of contracting COVID-19. In response to this challenge, we opted to do some of our interviews either outdoors or via Zoom. It was a challenge sometimes to communicate with people we interviewed as well, as each place we visited has a very different ecology and history. This would require us to do our research before each meeting.

The way we define peace is every living thing on earth living a content and meaningful life free of persecution. Our project will seek to heal the cultural wounds that exist not only among native communities but the wounds to ecosystems around the Western United States. By illuminating the problems facing these landscapes (both historical and present), we can spread awareness about what must be done to achieve peace in the ecosystems and native cultures of the American west. For example, we filmed several short films on potential dam removal in the Columbia River Basin. The removal of these dams will lead to more salmon inhabiting the river basin, helping the ecosystem recover but also helping the native tribes reclaim part of their culture: fishing for them. Short-term, we have given many tribal and conservation leaders a voice and a platform to share their struggles. In the long-term, we hope that by sharing their voices through these films, we engage more people in advocating for environmental and cultural reconciliation.

The project has greatly changed the way I think about the world. The world is much more complex than I had imagined. You always have to think about the myriad of different parties involved. For example, it is
easy to advocate for removing a hydroelectric dam on a native reservation so that a river ecosystem can recover. It is harder to consider all of the other effects that that may have. If the dam is remove, would lose the clean electricity that comes from it, cost dozens of workers their jobs, and initiate a decades-long recovery process that would cost millions of dollars. As a person, I am much more cognizant that environmental problems are much more complex than black-and-white issues.

To any future Projects for Peace grantees, I would offer the following advice on pandemics: be safe, but don’t despair! There are almost always ways to conduct your project and reach your goal even with unforeseen restrictions. Just be creative!

You can view our finished films at www.wild-voices.org.

Quotation:
“After travelling the Western United States to tell the stories of environmental restoration on native lands, I have been consistently surprised by one thing: the sheer passion of dedicated conservationists”- Noah Mihan

Contacts:
Noah Mihan (Team Leader): noahsam@me.com Sophia Kim-Brookes: skimbrookes@gmail.com
Section II: Photographs