

# Ponce de León Hot Springs transfer a game changer

FOR THE  
LAND



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ATENCIO

I left my position at Taos Land Trust several weeks ago, but there was one last thing I had to finish up: transferring ownership of the Ponce de León Hot Springs from the land trust to Taos Pueblo.

The land trust and the pueblo started talking

about this prospect the end of 2005 and have been working on it on and off through numerous tribal administrations and board configurations ever since. A very complex transaction, years of relationship building and negotiations, finally came together this year with a formal signing ceremony at the Taos Pueblo Powwow on July 14, amidst the swirl of dancers and representatives from dozens of tribes from across the country.

The stars were finally aligned.

This was not by any means an easy decision for the land trust board of directors, and those board members deserve a lot of credit for their vision about what this would mean and their courage to see it through. The war chief's and governor's staffs this year were great and enjoyable to work with. This transaction would have not have come to completion without them, but we were all building on the momentum and relationships we had established with previous administrations.

Like anything important, it was not easy and it took the efforts of many people who contributed and advised and creatively toiled along the way.

Over the years, the land trust entertained numerous proposals and considered other alternatives for ownership and management of the 44-acre property. But in the end it came full circle and was returned to the first people of this valley.

Members of Taos Pueblo have been using the springs for ceremonial activities as long as they have lived in the Taos Valley. Archaeological remains of ancient Tiwa settlements are found near the springs. They are the original indigenous owners and caretakers of this site. Now they will be caretakers on behalf of the



Courtesy Taos Land Trust

**Ownership of the Ponce de León Hot Springs has been transferred to Taos Pueblo after a long process led by the Taos Land Trust.**

entire Taos community.

Simply put: "This is the right thing to do," said former land trust president Crestina Trujillo Armstrong.

At the ceremony, War Chief Benito Sandoval said, "It's not every day that someone gives a sacred site back to a tribe." Indeed. It's not even every year or decade or century that such a thing happens. We're not sure, but it could be a historic precedent for a land trust to return land to a tribe.

One colleague from Vermont said, "This is a real game changer" for the national conservation movement. It changes what people think is possible for land trusts and tribes and other community interests. We've just raised the bar for conservation projects that address the thorny issues of our history and intercultural relations. I acknowledge that those issues will never be easy to deal with, especially in Northern New Mexico, but I do know that actions speak louder than words.

I am sorry that there are a few who opposed this move, but overall there was strong general support. Local community members of all cultures were at the signing and I've heard from many more since. Recognizing what a big deal and important precedent this was for our community, Taos Mayor Darren Córdova was there to read a proclamation declaring "Ponce de León Hot Springs Day" and Governor Susana Martínez sent a public statement to support and commemorate the historic event.

Despite the few who did not agree, I believe that returning this special place to Taos Pueblo is an event that will strengthen relations among all of us who live in this multicultural community and care about the land. So it is a victory for everyone.

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