About Me

Diana Fuller is a member of the Mescalero Apache Tribe. She received her Master’s degree from Illinois State University, in Environmental Studies, with a focus on Sustainable Development and Policy. She studied Renewable Energy, Economic, and Public Policy at Illinois State University, and received her Bachelor of Science degree in 2012. She plans to continue working with tribal and non-tribal communities pursue their sustainability goals.

The Renewable Energy Path for Tribes

I learned about the Tribal Energy Internship Program when I was an Undergraduate studying in the Renewable Energy program at Illinois State University. I was immediately attracted to it and thought it would be the perfect program where I could connect what it means to be associated with a tribe and have renewable energy projects. The program certainly met my definition, but it was so much more too.

Renewable energy is not often associated with tribes, but the internship has proven that renewable energy projects are having significant impacts for tribes and the surrounding communities. We were able to explore residential, community and utility scale projects. The site visits provided us with opportunities to speak with tribal members and employees. We learned what motivated the tribes to pursue renewable energy, how they pursued financing, and their challenges and solutions.

The site visits were valuable in understanding the uniqueness of each tribe. For instance, tribes were utilizing renewable energy to overcome transmission accessibility issues due to location. For some, these projects also served as the foundation to develop eco-tourism. A few of the tribes were just getting started by developing energy plans. Others were recognized for their leadership as environmental stewards. It was my hope to come away with an idea of how I could help my tribe, the Mescalero Apache Tribe, start down the renewable energy path. My research from this internship, which is discussed below, offers insight to get started.

Renewable energy projects helped many of the tribes to consider the benefits of other forms of sustainable development, such as utilizing energy efficiency practices or adopting green building techniques or certifications. Tribes also took the opportunity to train and employ members of their community. Success was found, by many, through partnerships with public and private enterprises, and financial and technical assistance from state and federal government agencies.

With the guidance of my mentor, Sandra, I identified a research topic that considered the opportunities for my tribe, while utilizing my education and previous experiences. The research is intended to serve as a guide for Mescalero to move toward sustainable building design at the Inn of the Mountain Gods Hotel and Casino. The research works through defining what sustainable design is, then explores the tribes that have pursued it, including those from our site visits, then examines what sustainable design opportunities are at the Inn of the Mountain Gods Hotel and Casino, as well as financial and technical assistance.

Looking back, I know we only scratched the surface. There are many other tribes who have started their renewable energy path. I know now, more than ever, that they each have unique cultures and different natural resources to be protected and developed. I know that these projects will contribute to improving the lives of their people, the surrounding communities and build a sustainable future for our country.