

The Cultural and Spiritual Effects of the Gold King Mine Spill

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Introduction

In 2015, a disastrous event occurred in the now inactive Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado. A crew from the Environmental Protection Agency had accidentally released millions of gallons of heavily contaminated water from the mine. This water leaked into the San Juan river system and had catastrophic effects on the ecosystems, agriculture, reservoirs, and the indigenous tribes in the Navajo region. Fixing this spill goes beyond engineering practices, as it’s had long term effects on indigenous communities and their spiritual practices. Addressing this problem will require scientific repairs, as well as acknowledgement of the social and cultural impacts of this spill to make amends to all affected.

The San Juan River

This river flows through the American Southwest, winding through desserts and canyons. This river has allowed geologist to study exposed layered rocks that can date back millions of years. This waterway is responsible for sustaining the life of many indigenous tribes, especially in the Navajo Nation. The People here continue to rely on this river for agriculture, cultural, and spiritual practices.

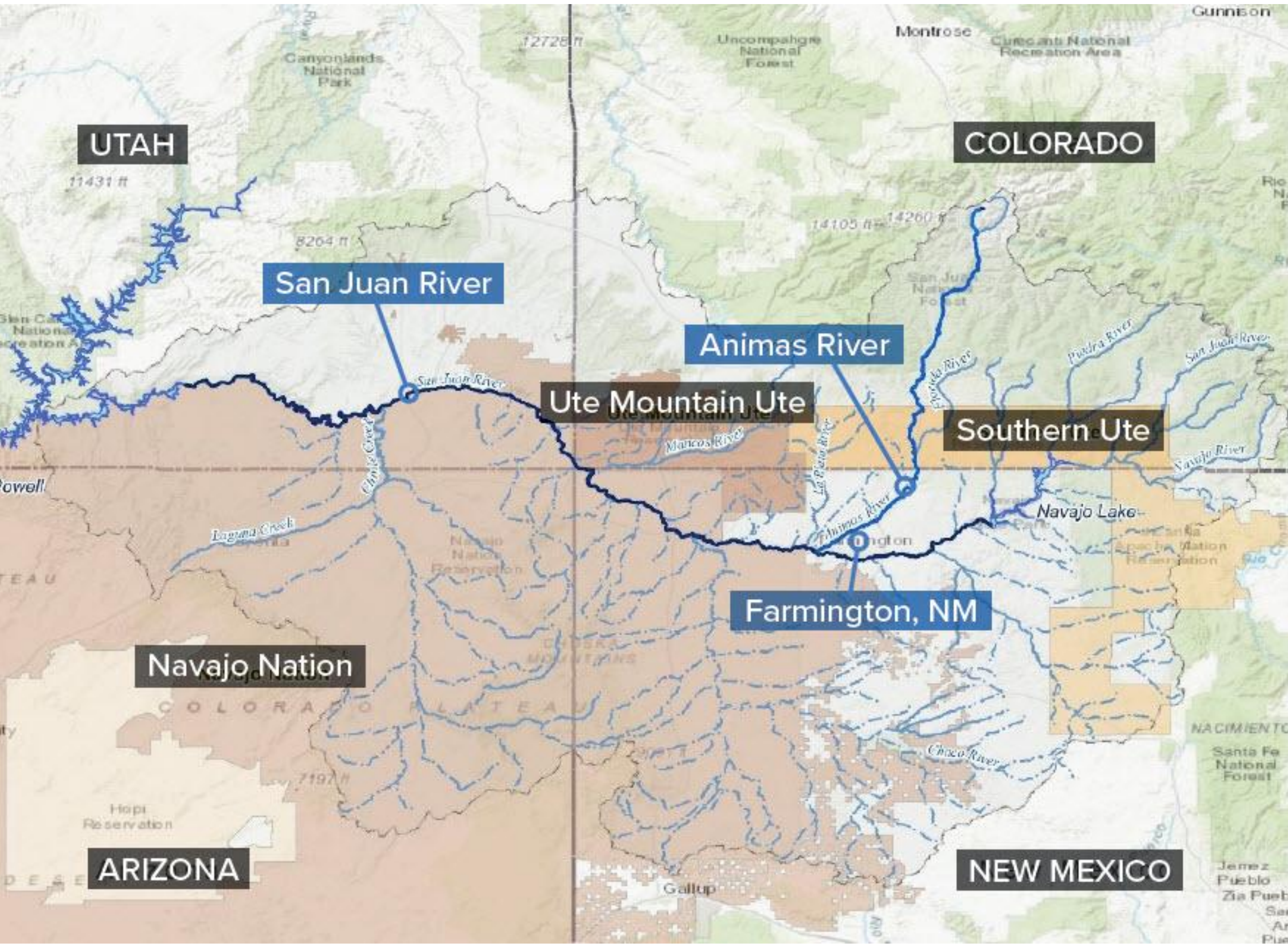


Figure 1. The San Juan River and encompassing rivers. (EPA)

Environmental Impacts

The accidental Gold King Mine blowout resulted in copious amounts of toxic and acidic metals to leak into the river and the soil surrounding it. The river would carry these toxic materials downstream for miles. Irrigation farms around an affected watershed showed a high concentration of arsenic, lead, and uranium in their soils when compared to a control site located upstream (Ingram 2021). Lead, Arsenic, and other metals are also toxic to the aquatic life inside this river system. They can damage gill tissue and interfere with the fish's natural osmoregulation. Luckily, there were no large-scale die-offs that the Gold King Mine spill was responsible for (EPA 2017).



Figure 2: The Animas River Before and After 2015 Gold King Mine spill (The Southern Ute Drum 2018)

The Spirit of the River

In Navajo tradition, rivers, mountains, and other natural forces are often seen as living entities. The Gold King Mine spill was not only a danger to the environment but was also seen as an assault to the spiritual nature of the river. It is stated that water is the foundation to cultural identity, worldview, and spiritual practices. All beings are “relatives” based on the principles of Hózhó, therefore the health of the water is inseparable from the health of the community (Clausen 2023). Hózhó emphasizes the importance of balance and peace among all beings, the disruption of one being means the disruption of the natural order of life. The disruption of the purity in the water meant a disruption in cultural affairs and agriculture as well. Some members of the Navajo Nation even called for spiritual offerings to help heal river, not just technological solution or monetary compensation.

Cultural Affects and Historical Trauma

After the spill, activities that centered around the river dropped by approximately 56% (Van Horne 2021). This includes activities such as farming, recreation, hygiene, and arts and crafts. The reduction of these activities is significant as it also signals a decline in opportunities to pass down traditions. Since the water was contaminated residents of the Navajo Nation could not grow crops used in ceremonial practices. As reflected by one individual, giving up farming in areas affected by the spill meant the traditions and life lessons taught by agriculture couldn’t be passed down to his children or grandchildren (Clausen 2023). This spill also raised concerns of historical trauma in the Navajo Nation. The Church Rock incident is an ongoing issue that the people in the Navajo Nation still struggle with. Decades after the mining incident the spilt uranium still poses many health issues to indigenous people, lung cancer for example, is thought to be a side effect of uranium exposure (Arnold 2014). During a study, one participant had this to say regarding historical trauma: “We’re still dealing with the uranium. I can identify so many in my own family that got cancer. Some were lucky to survive but others didn’t. So now that causes my anxiety [about Gold King], I’m not going to farm anymore.” (Clausen 2023).

Conclusion

For the Navajo Nation, the Gold King Mine spill was not a one-time disaster. It was a disturbance that interrupted the cultural and spiritual practices of the people who lived there. The Navajo people have lost trust in the neighboring communities as their livelihood is often overlooked in favor for the white community around affected areas. It is important that going forward future environmental regulations acknowledge the social and cultural impacts of disasters.

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