

# the National Aviary and the National Eagle Repository: Partnering to **Preserve Native American Culture**

special to Bird Calls by **Jason Whalen** and **Dana Haakensen**, students at the University of Pittsburgh

**M**any Native Americans believe eagles serve as messengers for the Great Spirit, carrying their prayers from the natural to the spiritual world. It's no wonder that Native Americans value eagle feathers and consider them sacred emblems. They use these feathers to honor their Creator and help facilitate contact with the spiritual world. They also use eagle feathers in healing, marriage and naming ceremonies, and give them as gifts to honor remarkable qualities such as leadership and bravery.

For most Native Americans, however, eagle feathers are very difficult to obtain. Despite being a national and Native American symbol, the Bald Eagle's existence has been threatened by deforestation, pollution and poaching. To help support a rapidly decreasing eagle population, Congress passed the Bald Eagle Protection Act in 1940. This Act makes it illegal to hunt, own, sell or even collect eagle feathers without a federal permit. Despite Congress' efforts, eagle feathers became extremely scarce due to the declining eagle numbers, and Native Americans quickly lost access to one of their most important religious symbols.

Recognizing the importance of eagles to Native American culture, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established the National Eagle Repository (NER) in the early 1970s. The NER's primary purpose is to provide Native Americans with found or donated eagle feathers. As it steadily accomplishes this goal, the NER continually faces a pressing concern — the growing demand for eagle feathers numbers in the thousands, and many Native Americans wait years to receive even one.

Since the NER's supply of eagle feathers is extremely limited, they rely on other organizations, such as the National

Aviary, to help Native Americans obtain these feathers. "The National Aviary is pleased to participate in this important program which provides a legal means for acquiring feathers for cultural and religious purposes," says Dayton Baker, executive director of the National Aviary. "This effort helps to protect wild populations of these magnificent birds while honoring the significance of these birds to Native Americans."

Each year, the National Aviary collects molted feathers from its Bald Eagles and donates them to the National Eagle Repository. From there, the NER distributes the feathers to the many Native Americans waiting to receive them. Perhaps these same Bald Eagle feathers will be passed down from generation to generation, helping preserve the sacred Native American heritage.



Bald Eagle feathers

**This story is also a partnership — between the National Aviary and Prof. Adam Roth's special topics course on "Communicating in Business, Professional and Workplace Environments" at the University of Pittsburgh.**



Linda Weisenmiller, Manager of Animal Programs, collects naturally molted feathers while two of the birds keep an "eagle eye" on her.

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