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Book Review: *Mni Wiconi / Water is Life: Honoring the Water Protectors at Standing Rock and Everywhere in the Ongoing Struggle for Indigenous Sovereignty*

By Peter d'Errico

[*Mni Wiconi / Water Is Life*](#) is a new book by photographer [John Willis](#). It is a powerful documentary of the 2016-2017 Water Protectors protest against construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline (DAPL) at Standing Rock. The photos show the whole gamut of events, from peaceful and joyous activity at Oceti Sakowin Camp to brutal attacks by police and private armed forces. The photos are interspersed with commentaries, poems, letters, ledger art, historic documents, and other contributions from Lakota and other participants at Standing Rock. A free, down-loadable CD, [Heart Beat of the Movement](#), accompanies the book online, with songs and drumming from, by, and about the Water Protectors.

Mni Wiconi is a book that will stand as one of the major sources of information about the massive gathering of indigenous nations and allies that captured the world's attention and continues to resonate throughout the sovereignty and environmental movements. The scope of the book is revealed in its subtitle: *Honoring the Water Protectors at Standing Rock and Everywhere in the Ongoing Struggle for Indigenous Sovereignty*.

Willis took the photographs over eight weeks when he lived in his car at the Camp during the period September to December 2016. [Mni Wiconi is available from the author](#), who is donating all proceeds to Lakota families and organizations. The book is hardcover, large format, with high-quality glossy paper providing an excellent medium for the stunning images and commentary. It opens with a foreword by [Terry Tempest Williams](#), environmental and social

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justice writer, and closes with an afterword by [Shaunna Oteka-McCovey](#) (Yurok / Karuk), environmental lawyer and poet.

John Willis is a retired professor of photography and founder of [The In-Sight Photography Project & Exposures Cross Cultural Youth Arts Program](#). He has received major grants and awards and his work is exhibited in museums internationally. *Mni Wiconi* is an Advocacy Award Finalist in the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Association's 2019 Best Book of the Year Awards.

Mni Wiconi is Willis' second major work on indigenous nations and people. An earlier book, [Views from the Reservation](#), focused on Pine Ridge. That book also includes an accompanying music CD. Willis began working with the Oglala Lakota in 1992, when he met Eugene Reddest, an elder who became a friend and encouraged Willis' work. Willis recounts his experience and his years of photography among the people, asking, "Is it appropriate for me to do this work?" He says, "I kept returning to the thought that...I have a responsibility to share these events as a witness and to speak about what I saw."

Shaunna Oteka-McCovey, in her Afterword, says, "I thank the Creator for books and for photography and for people who are moved to use these media to tell stories that are true and meaningful: heartwork born from responsibility, resilience, and reciprocity."

Peter d'Errico graduated from Yale Law School in 1968. He was Staff attorney in Dinébe'iiná Náhiilna be Agha'diit'ahii Navajo Legal Services, 1968-1970, in Shiprock. He taught Legal Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1970-2002. He is a consulting attorney on Indigenous issues.