

Protecting Our Homelands: Why the Hollowbreast Decision Matters to the Northern Cheyenne

The Northern Cheyenne tribe, who call themselves Tsetsêhesêstâhase/So'taahe, live on their homelands in Montana with prairies, red hills, and open skies. This land is very important. We care for Mother Earth because she gives us water, plants, animals, and the ground beneath our feet. We know the land is sacred and must be cared for so many people can live well now and in the future.

Oo'exan/Hoh'oe: The Sacred Earth and Its Gifts

For the Northern Cheyenne, the land—called *Hoh'oe*—is more than ground beneath our feet. It is a living world filled with spirit and meaning. The environment is at the heart of our culture. The grasses, rivers, hills, buffalo, and minerals under the soil are all connected and sacred. They are part of the same creation, and we believe their spirits, like our own, come from Maheo', the creator-god. Plants, animals, and people are joined together through this spirit, making the earth our shared home.

Our ancestors taught us, through the guidance of Sweet Medicine (*Motse'oeve'*), how to live with respect for the earth. Sweet Medicine showed us how to hunt, plant, and harvest in ways that honor the gifts of nature. He taught us to organize our society so that all people and all living things are cared for. We are taught to walk gently, to use only what is needed, and to leave the world better for our children and their children.

Our minerals—like coal and precious rocks—are not just resources to take or sell. They belong to the land and to the people who care for it. The Northern Cheyenne Tribe's ownership of 100% of its subsurface interests and nearly 100% of its surface land is a rare and important achievement. Among all federally-recognized Indigenous territories, this is unique. This accomplishment reflects our history and values, and the sacred trust we hold to protect our homeland.

Protecting *Hoh'oe* means honoring our spiritual responsibility. We work together to keep the land whole and healthy, so it can continue to provide for generations to come. Our stewardship is not just about today—it is a promise to Maheo', to our ancestors, and to those who will follow us, that the earth will remain a good and living place for all.

What Is an Allotment?

An allotment is when a large piece of tribal land was divided into small pieces and given to individual people or families. This was not a choice made by the tribe; instead, the government created laws that forced tribes to break up their land and change how it was

shared. The goal was to push Native people to live more like settlers and weaken tribal unity. Some families received small pieces of land called allotments, but this new system brought confusion and problems. The law that created allotments also mentioned the minerals under the ground, but it was not always clear about who really owned those minerals—the family with the small piece of land or the tribe as a whole.

How the Problem Began

By the 1900s, people started to argue. Some said that the families who got allotments should also own the minerals under their land. Others said the minerals should stay for the whole Northern Cheyenne Tribe. If minerals belonged only to the families, then companies could come and dig up the land. That might hurt the ground, the water, and the way people live. The people of the Northern Cheyenne worried about the harm that could come from mining and how it might split the community.

The Tribe Speaks for the Many

The Northern Cheyenne people considered the good of the tribe and the homelands over the good of one person. This means the tribe thinks about what helps the community now and for children and grandchildren. Leaders and families talked together. The Tribal Council and other groups listened and decided to protect what belongs to the people together.

The Question Goes to Court

The disagreement about minerals became very important. It went all the way to the United States Supreme Court in 1976. The Supreme Court is a group of judges who decide hard questions about laws. The case is called Northern Cheyenne Tribe v. Hollowbreast. People waited to learn whether the minerals under allotments belonged to the individual families or remained reserved for the tribe.

What the Supreme Court Decided

The Supreme Court decided that the minerals under the land should stay with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. The Court read the older law and looked at what Congress meant when it made the rules. The judges agreed that Congress had intended to keep the mineral rights for the tribe's benefit. This decision said the minerals were reserved "in perpetuity," which means forever. So the minerals would belong to the tribe and be used for the good of many people—not only for a few individuals.

Why This Decision Was Important

- Protection of Mother Earth -called *ska'mane*:- The decision helped protect the land from harm that could come from large mining operations. When the tribe controls mineral rights, it can make choices that respect the earth, the water, and life on the land.
- Sharing for the Community: By keeping minerals for the tribe, the benefits from the land can help many people—schools, health care, and cultural programs—rather than only helping a small number of families.
- Tribal Sovereignty: The ruling affirmed that laws and decisions can be made to protect the tribe’s homelands and future. The tribe can care for the land in ways that match the Northern Cheyenne values.
- A Clear Rule for the Future: The decision made it clearer how similar laws should be read when questions come up about who has rights to natural resources.

How This Fits with Northern Cheyenne Beliefs

The Northern Cheyenne teach respect for Mother Earth. People are taught to think about the next seven generations: to make choices that keep the land healthy for children and grandchildren. The Hollowbreast decision supports this teaching because it keeps important parts of the land under tribal care. The tribe chose what was best for the many, not what would benefit only a few.

Words to Know

- Allotment: A small piece of land given to an individual or a family from tribal lands.
- Mineral Rights: The legal right to take minerals (like coal) from under the ground.
- In Perpetuity: Forever; lasting without an end.
- Tribe: A group of people who share culture, language, and laws—here, the Northern Cheyenne.
- Sovereignty: The right of a tribe to govern itself and make decisions for its people.

A Simple Timeline of Events

- Long ago: Northern Cheyenne lived and cared for their homelands.
- 1926: A law (the Allotment Act) talked about land and minerals but left questions.

- 1968: Congress changed the law to protect mineral rights for the tribe, but asked a court to decide if any individuals already had rights.
- 1976: The Supreme Court decided the minerals stayed with the tribe forever.
- After the decision: The Northern Cheyenne continued to protect the land and use resources for the tribe's benefit.

What This Means for the Future

The Hollowbreast decision helped the Northern Cheyenne keep control over important parts of their homelands. With mineral rights held by the tribe, leaders can make careful choices that match tribal values. Those choices aim to protect the earth and help many people. The decision is an example of how the tribe's voice and caring for Mother Earth can guide big legal decisions.

How Children Can Remember the Story

- Think of the land as a family garden that everyone shares.
- The minerals are like seeds saved for the whole family so everyone can eat and be healthy.
- When people care for the garden together, it stays healthy for children, their children, and many more after them.

The Hollowbreast story shows how the Northern Cheyenne worked together to protect the land. It is a story about respect for Mother Earth, about sharing, and about choosing what is best for many people instead of just one. The tribe's hope was and is that the land remains strong and sacred for all who live there now and in the future.

- References and sources used for this story appear in the uploaded document *Perpetual Reservation of Mineral Rights: Northern Cheyenne Tribe v. Hollowbreast* (May 20, 1976). For more details or to listen to the case, see the links in that document.
- This document was created with the assistance of Microsoft Word Copilot, an AI-powered writing tool integrated into Microsoft Word to help draft and edit text.

