

Upward Initiative Success Story

Twenty minutes southwest of Farmington, New Mexico, lie the vast lands of the Navajo people. Between the arid, rolling hills and red rock formations sits a grassy pasture where Mato “Edgar” Nez raises about 45 cattle and 70 sheep.

Edgar continues the ancestral tradition of respecting nature on the 250-acre Nez site he shares with his family.

Edgar was herding his cattle between the east and west pastures when he saw something unusual lying in the grass: a dehydrated, orphaned elk calf.

“I tried giving it water, but it would not take it. I brought the calf home to the barn for the night,” Edgar said. “By morning, it had passed. I knew then that I could do more.”

Edgar began making small changes, like using battery-powered tools instead of gas-powered, to help the environment. He wondered if he could do more to expand his environmental stewardship. Edgar asked his son, a double major in business and environmental studies at the University of California Santa Cruz, for suggestions.

Dasan told Edgar about a nonprofit, the Upward Initiative, that he read about in a news release. He saw that the Upward Initiative helps people like his father, who need more resources to expand their existing conservation efforts.

“My father has been looking to put his ideas into action for quite some time,” Dasan said. “I’m glad I found you guys.”

Edgar contacted the Upward Initiative team. The team connected Edgar with the First Nations Development Institute, one of the nonprofits of the Upward Initiative has partnered with to serve more clients. Edgar told the nonprofit about his desire to expand his conservation efforts on the Nez site.

The First Nations Development Institute deemed Edgar as a promising candidate for receiving its help. The Upward Initiative team sent Ricky Vallin, Bobby Lockhart and Greta van Fleet to the Nez land to put Edgar’s vision into action.

Edgar laid out his primary goal of ensuring that no wildlife would have the fate of the baby elk he had tried to save. He also hoped to find an energy-efficient way of decontaminating a pond near the barn so his family could use the water for irrigation.

Bobby said the team worked on a plan of action for reaching Edgar’s goals.

“Applying our three-stage approach was effortless,” Bobby said. “We’d make suggestions to Edgar and run him through our reasons. He’d reflect and tell us oral stories of his people that upheld the science.”

The team suggested planting trees between the east and west pastures to create a wildlife corridor where Edgar had found the elk calf. Edgar supported this idea, and together, they planned to plant 50 new native trees with established bulbs and 50 new saplings.

Edgar and the team struggled to lug the digging equipment to the planting site, but with help from members of the extended Nez family, they worked together to plant the trees successfully. Edgar built a fence to protect the corridor and a gate connecting the east and west pastures. Edgar's wife, Bly, barbequed steaks for everyone to celebrate their hard work and success.

The team then moved on to cleaning a pond near Edgar's homestead and main barn, which had been contaminated by animal waste. Edgar helped the team install a solar-powered water filtration system to improve the pond's water quality. Bly planted native flora around it to prevent animals from entering.

The newly filtered water source provides the Nez family with irrigation for growing crops and as a reserve for summer droughts. Bly plans to keep a stockpile of vegetables for the winter.

“When we have that pond cleared and clean, I'm thinking we're going to grow some corn, beans, garlic, tomatoes, potatoes, and squash,” Bly said. “We're going to preserve what we grow for the winter months, reducing our need to travel. Less trips to the store, less emissions. Bit by bit.”

Between the Nez site in the Navajo Nation and another site in the Hopi Nation, the Upward Initiative team has helped indigenous peoples advance environmental stewardship while respecting tradition.

“At the two locations, we improved energy efficiency, planted native species, removed invasive species, improved the quality of resources already there, and added a significant wildlife corridor,” Greta said. “And this was all possible because of strong communication, hard work, and trust.”

The Upward Initiative team estimates that their work on Edgar's land has cut carbon emissions by 17% and has increased carbon capture by at least 20%. Carbon capture at the site will double as the saplings mature, and the pond acts as a carbon sink. The Upward Initiative's services on First Nations sites have increased carbon capture by about 40%.

But the team doesn't take all the credit for the success at the piloting sites. Without Edgar's knowledge of the land, the collaborative efforts wouldn't have been possible.

“Working with Edgar and Bly has been more than we could have hoped for,” Bobby said. We have learned so much from them. It's been amazing to see how they know the land and value it.”

Dasan's knowledge of the environment helped him build a relationship with the team and secured him an internship with the nonprofit.

When Edgar herds his cattle between the pastures, he no longer worries about encountering suffering animals. Day by day, as he watches the saplings and plants grow, he knows his ancestors' pride grows along with them.