TRANSCRIPT – LISTENING TO THE RIPPLES PODCAST

Episode 2: Creating Waves in Water Management with Kirin Vicenti-Lacapa

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tylee: Yá'át'ééh shik'éí – Hello, my relatives welcome back to Listening to the Ripples podcast, my name is tylee nez – your host. I'm coming to you from the high desert of the Hopi Zuni, Pueblo, and Navajo lands in so-called Northern Arizona. I'm here with our first guest and Indigenous matriarch Kirin Vicenti-Lacapa from the Jicarilla Apache Nation. The Jicarilla Apache Nation is within the Upper Basin of the Colorado River basin, located in so-called northern New Mexico. Kirin is a good friend of mine but also a very talented musician, artist, youth leader, matriarch, model, poet, writer, water protector, fly fisher, and so much more, thank you so much Kirin for joining us today. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Kirin: [speaking in Jicarilla Apache] Thank you for the warm introduction. My name is Kirin Vicenti-Lacapa and I'm so happy to be here on your podcast as the first guest.

tylee: Yay, thank you! To get the scene setting for us can you describe your favorite like water memory whether that's like at a stream or like raining or when it's snowing?

Kirin: Yeah, my favorite water memory, kind of, reinvigorates every year, month, week but a really fond memory that I can think of like recently is last summer. Me and my family, we got to go to the river altogether, and it was just so much fun we had all of us, and all of our little puppies and we got to go like inner tubing down the river and like eat some food and just really get to spend quality time on a really nice warm day and cool off in the river. That's something that I always love about like my water memories they're usually like with my relatives, and it's really nice to have like the river be so close to where we live. That we all just to congregate there, and yeah, I think that that's one of my fondest memories of water in recent times but as I said, it always kind of reinvigorates whenever we have like a really nice snow and I get to just like walk out or if it's like a giant rain comes, and it just trenches everything and it's the smell of the wet soil. It's just comforting to have all of these water memories.

tylee: For sure. I definitely love the smell of wet soil, too. So, you're also a water commissioner for your tribe. How did you get involved in that and why did you feel the need to? And also, if you can explain what a water commissioner does?

Kirin: When I was 21—well when I was 20—I saw on our PR page for the Jicarilla Nation that there was a vacancy for water commissioner, and the requirements were that you had to be 21, and have an interest in water, and write a letter of interest. And I was just about to turn 21 in like 3 or 4 days later, and I was like well I haven't really done anything to that level of like a water commissioner, and I didn't even really know what it was, but I did meet the requirements. I was about to turn 21. I had an interest in water and in my letter of interest, I just said like how much I deeply care about protecting our water resources for generations to come, and during the interview one of the things that I was — that I talked to about was that what I lacked, I make up for with the curiosity and a willingness to learn. And I think that was something that has carried me through my term as a Water Commissioner because I really did not know anything about like Colorado River water or like even much about our own water resources except for what I had experienced like first-hand like living in our homelands. So the role of water commissioner for the Jicarilla Apache Nation is to kind of protect our waters for future generations to make sure that they're used to the best of our ability and knowledge and also to take on a role within the Colorado River basin since our waters are part of it and to advocate for tribal water rights and I think that that was the most daunting part of becoming a water commissioner was learning all about the Colorado River basin because I didn't even know that we had our water running into the Colorado River and one of the first experiences that I had on the water Commission was going to the Law of the Colorado River conference and that was in Scottsdale super-hot, it was one of the a few times that I've been in like the Phoenix area in the summer.

tylee: Oh, that's brutal.

Kirin: It was very brutal, and I was this is like my first time in a sort of professional role in a very warm space and so, I didn't really have much to wear except for like, you know, my own clothes. And I think when I went there it kind of set me apart because I was dressed like super colorful, and like, of course, looking at me I look very young and I was very young comparatively to everybody else who was there, and I used the whole conference to just absorb knowledge and take it all in and, of course, there was like networking that happened after like the first day. That was the time that I first started to interact with people who worked in the Colorado River basin. They were like so, what are you doing here? Are you a student? And I was like well yes, I am a student but I'm also a water commissioner for the Jicarilla Apache Nation. And they're like wow you're so young. Like how did you get into this role? And I could just start this story all over again. But there's the advocacy part of the water commissioner and that's to like make sure that our voices, our tribal voices, are heard and the broader space of Colorado River, I think that's something that I've really taken a step up within the Water Commission. To like firmly plant our feet in because not only are there the sovereigns of the Colorado River basin, historically not been advocated for, or had an equal say or voice in these conversations. There also hasn't been like younger folk within like tribal nations who have had the chance to advocate for these issues. So, every time that I think about my role in it is to show up constantly and to just keep showing up, and encourage more folk to also show up for these issues

tylee: Since you've been in this role for like over three years now, is that correct?

Kirin: Yeah, three years.

tylee: You've absorbed all this knowledge and as someone that, you know, is like an advocate/representative for their tribe but also goes back to their tribal nation in their community to share the knowledge like what is kind of your rundown that you give to people, that don't really know about your tribes connection to the Colorado River or the importance of like the Colorado River?

Kirin: I think the first thing that I would say that I say to people about like our context within the Colorado River basin is talking about the upper basin and lower basin. There is an arbitrary line that's drawn at Lake Powell and all of the water that exists in the upper basin is above Lake Powell and lower basin is below Lake Powell. Then I talk about how way back when there were these the seven States [AZ, CA, CO, NV, NM, UT, WY] and Mexico who made this agreement, and it would say like this is how much water has to be delivered from upper basin and lower basin, respectively in the sum of however much water they had at the time and so, they were using their own metrics that they had for that exact time period and that was a really good hydrologic time period and they made these rules to say like how much water needs to be delivered. Those rules never expire. So, we continue to live with them till today and each state has to make their own contribution to downstream users and as I said, there were seven states but there were no tribes at the table when these were these agreements were made and that has continued. Even though that was over 100 years ago until today where tribes do not have -- not only equal say, they don't have really any say in how tribal water or how they can have their own say in any of this and that's really a problem because there are the four U's of tribal water: unused, unquantified, uncompensated, and undeveloped tribal water. So, for some tribes they may have unquantified water rights where they don't have – or they know that they have water rights like inherently, but they haven't had settled water rights yet, so they're not quantified. Undeveloped would be for a tribe that has settled water rights, but they don't have the ability to develop those waters because say they're in a reservoir 50 miles away or there's just not the infrastructure for it to be developed. Unused which would mean the same water and uncompensated say that that water gets released from that reservoir in order to fulfill compact compliance which means that the reservoirs in the state of Colorado, they can use that water in order to send it down to the next users to fulfill how much they said that they would send out every year but tribes won't get paid for that water even though their waters are making contributions to what the state needs to send down. All while this is happening still tribes aren't at the table to advocate for their own water rights and I'm pretty sure that when I am explaining some of these things to people it can get convoluted and there are a lot of questions that come up, and it's important to just like leave all of the jargon out of it because like when I was first going to law the

Colorado River conferences, I was overwhelmed with jargon and acronyms and things that I did not quite understand, yet and that was a barrier of entry for me to be able to have a conversation with somebody who has worked in the Colorado River basin for 20 plus years

tylee: Yeah, and it's like an intentionally done that way to have the engineering technical side of it be jargon heavy but also the policy and the law side of it to be really heavy. And so, I think that's a really powerful point that -- it is that you bring up to your community and also leaving out the jargon is really important because if you can't explain it to somebody you don't really understand it you know

Kirin: Hmmm, and one of the best ways to learn yourself is by teaching and that's something that I kind of try to do more often is to educate more people so that I also feel more capable of doing the same more often.

tylee: I know, I definitely have learned so much from you but also been able to pass that down to like my siblings and my sisters and just speaking it out for myself for me to understand it but then also making sure they understand it and not stay with me because that's what happens in these rooms is that the information is only circulated within these rooms and within these same people so I think that's so important. Okay. So, in like talking in these rooms and in these moments of like these bureaucracies and then technical parts like what do you feel is the common misperception -- misconception when you are in these rooms like, what is something that people tend to get confused about specifically the people making the decisions?

Kirin: I think the decision makers fail to see how every tribe has different needs and comes from a different place, basically. It's all about like knowing like place knowing and each -- since each tribe is different, we all may ask for something different or we all may have different needs to fit our communities and I think that there's a lack of effort. I think there's a lack of effort on their part in order to come to something that doesn't just neglect tribes and if you're just like trying to do a one size fits all solution for the entire basin; it's not going to work. And there is consultation but there's not collaboration and when you have consultation without action then you're just checking a box and saying that you did this thing where you're you listened to the tribes and their concerns but if you don't have the action that comes with it then it’s checking a box

tylee: Yeah, I feel like as I've been entering these water spaces more recently in the past like 2 years, I have seen more representation but that's it - like it's just representation of our faces and our voices. We're just here to check a box. It's frustrating to see that so, when you—when that happens

like how do you stay like hopeful in the moment and like hopeful that like one day this river can exist beyond these ideas and beyond this methodology?

Kirin: I stay hopeful by calling people out. And if they're like these decision makers are saying that they're doing something but they don't have anything to back it up then I will tell them that is what is happening and I feel a lot of support from, you know, even these decision makers they'll be like thank you so much for telling -- like speaking up and telling us this because I think it's really important that like that you're here but they can appreciate what I have to say, and what makes me more hopeful then like them saying that I'm doing a good job or whatever is like my peers or like my other water commissioners or our amazing water attorney, Jenny Dumas. She has been really supportive of me and my advocacy efforts throughout the entire time that I've been on the Water Commission and I think that when you have people who are there to support you then it makes it easier to keep going and like I'm so glad that I have such a good friend like you as well to also like get me through the tough times or we can vent to each other and be like you know what that was some that was something you know

tylee: That was something!

Kirin: And at some point, you just have to laugh and keep going.

tylee: Yeah, for sure! No, I think it's so important to have like also like the adults or people older that's been in the game longer and are professionals to like step up. You know and take accountability. You said in the beginning that your favorite water memory changes with every season and with every storm that comes in. I think that's a very powerful thing to remember and also for, you know, these decision makers to remember to be in tune to the cycles around us because they are telling us something they're showing us something I know for myself and also we've talked about this that the southwest is experiencing like a very dry winter more recently it's been its beginning a little bit more wet but back in November December January like there was barely any moisture and snow. The people that are -- that live on the land can really attest to that and I just hope that the decision makers also can attest to that not just by looking at the numbers or by looking at whatever model is showing them that but can feel it and have their livelihoods you know changed by it

Kirin: Yeah, one of the things that I do is whenever I'm like traveling somewhere and we cross over a bridge, and there's a river. I always make sure to like to say ‘hello San Juan’ or like anything like that. And it's kind of like just checking in on how things are doing if I don't have the time to stop. Then, I'm

still acknowledging it, and I can see like how it's changed from the last time I drove past there and whenever I'm going to a new place or like anywhere for a conference I try to make an effort to go to the water sources and check in. All it takes is checking in. To get a better understanding and that's only in one moment.

tylee: Yeah, and to like log it in your memory because like I've been with my grandma a lot and so I've been asking her about the winters. How it was for her growing up and she would talk about like ohh the snow used to be up to my knees and now it only snows to like maybe like the thickness of a dime like it's so little now. And it's like it's not also to be connected but also to log it in our memories to like to remember what it used to be like so we can share these stories and like be like a climate record of some sort but yeah, and so, when you you're also traveling for conferences but also concerts because you're a musician. Do you want to share a little bit more about that?

Kirin: Yeah. In college, I met my now husband and he is an incredible musician, and up until I met him, I had always done music stuff. I was in choir for many years, I played some guitar, and I just loved singing, and it kind of went on to the back burner because I just I had a feeling that like there was no way I could do this for a living and then, I met Sage, and he was just this incredible Apache musician who was just so good at music. That he encouraged me to also do music a little more and actually take more time to do the art that I love. And then, I knew that like it's possible for somebody like me to be a musician. And to like courageously call myself a musician and so our whole love story or back story and everything is just built around music, and kind of, engraving it into everything that we do and so I have this saying that **art changes culture, culture changes people, and people change the world.** And so, I knew that when I like first came about this that saying I knew that taking music as something more than just like a side thing or something that other people do and it's just to make music. I knew that like making art is so much more than just something simple it's -- like music is able to paint a moment and it can it's so present in everybody's lives like, if you get in the car you're probably listening to music, if you're going out to the store it's probably playing in the background, and when you're able to have an influence with your own music. And if you have a good message then you can find a lot of people who are willing to listen to that message, and not just listen, you can find people who are also willing to like accept the message. And kind of take it into like a part of their soul, and that's the beauty that I find in like calling myself a musician and to be able to go play music with my husband at all of these amazing places that we've gotten to play music at and for all the people that we have

I mainly play the singing saw. So, the singing saw is basically just any old hand saw that you'd find. It has to be able to bend and you use a violin bow to drag it across the not serrated edge of the saw and then it makes a theremin like sound and the way that you change the pitch is by bending the saw and you can only play it sitting down unless you're really talented, and if you have a different saw, then you can get different kinds like if you have a really long side you can get a really low pitch, I mean not really low it's still fairly ambient and the weirdest instrument, that I know so, of course I

wanted to play it and I also play the guitar, and right now I'm sitting here with a dulcimer next to me. So, I dabbled in other interesting instruments. I'm learning how to play the trumpet. I play the ukulele, a little bit of piano but I'm looking to expand always.

tylee: Oh, I love that. How do you feel like your musician side and like your water protector side kind of like complement each other because people I think would view that as like very opposite ends of like the spectrum being a water commissioner—a tribal water commissioner—and then, just a musician or singing saw musician

Kirin: I think that they are complementary to no end because one of the roles that I take on in the Water Commission is the public facing person. So, I do a lot of speeches and at first I was so scared to do any anything of the sort, and that was at the beginning of when we were first starting to do a do some concerts and so, at that point, I was still like not the most comfortable on stage but as you keep doing it you just get more used to it. And so, I think that like my stage presence and being comfortable on stage has really helped me with like my public speeches that I have to do -- not that I just have to do that I want to do because as I said, they're complementary. So, as a musician I'm also a writer and the way that I express myself through writing ,I can also express myself in the same way through public speaking and having that stage in order to do that in the water sphere is really helpful and impactful because I get to basically tell my story as if it were poetry and I think that it's able to reach more people because it has the sense of like vulnerability for me because I'm saying things that are deep and close to my heart but I can also try to save them in a very artful way, and I think that they just they play into each other, and they're not separate to me at all. Yeah, I think that's storytelling is so necessary in the Colorado River basin. And actually, one of the two years ago I applied to the Colorado River water leaders program, and they said that like write an essay and so I wrote like a paragraph and then I wrote a poem

tylee: Ohh wow.

Kirin: And at the end of my poem it was like I am not a suit, and I will never be one, and I think that my adding the poetry and like everything that I had to say into that application was good enough to get me a seat at the Colorado River symposium. Which is invite only in Santa Fe and two years ago, but it wasn't good enough to get me into the Water Leaders Program because at that point I had only had 1 1/2 years of experience, and you needed 2 yeah. And it's fun to just try new things like even if you think that you're not going to get it or like just put yourself out there and you never know what's going come of it like the way that I got onto the Water Commission. I had confidence that I might be able to get on and then it just so happened that I did and yeah, I'm here three years after and I am so proud of 20-year-old me the thinking of that

tylee: (27.46) it's nice to know that that you got into the water Commission wasn't from like knowing somebody because I feel like a lot of the times like people say like I knew this one person and they got me in but it's like no, I just happened to be scrolling Instagram and just see an opportunity as like OK, I'm gonna apply. So, it's always really nice so as you're you know this young face what advice do you have for like the next generation or even our generation that it's that wants to get more involved in water more involved in the Colorado River basin?

Kirin: I think this kind of builds off of the last topic that we were on about just putting yourself out there because I've been to these conferences and people are like 'Ohh, we want more youth involved' but it's hard to it's hard to get youth involved if you don't know how to get youth involved and sometimes it takes you yourself as the youth or like the next generation taking a leap of faith and saying that, you know -- I know that this organization does stuff with water or I know that my tribe has like some sort of water thing. May be I'll just send an e-mail and see how I can get involved because it does kind of suck that we have this burden on us to make the first move and there's not many on ramps into the water world but I think that things are changing, and I think that there will be more opportunities for youth to get involved with water world, but at the moment it does just take some courage to make the first move. And know that if you do you may be met with really great opportunities or you may be met with some people who may not see your ambition or your creativity for its worth, and I think that that can be disheartening, and discouraging but just know that even if they don't see that maybe it wasn't the best opportunity for you because they don't see your worth and your value. So, scope out the right opportunities for you because if you are passionate about something. I'd follow that first, and if there's something related to water then, kind of build off of your passions first and foremost because that's how you know that you won't burn out or burnout quickly because it can be scary to get into the water. It can be daunting but there are a lot of good people, and don't get too lost in the conferences, and meetings, and everything. Just to remember like why you want to show up for water and whether that's praying to the water that you come across or doing what feels right to you in the moment, that's still activism and advocacy, even though you're not affiliated with an organization and what you can do within your own bubble is sometimes so much more than any organization can do for the water as a whole and just love the water. That's the main thing for our generation and the next generation is to just to love it and appreciate it.

tylee: Yeah, one powerful thing about water is that it connects to everything and like every single person is reliant on water. I was reading this book recently and was talking about how we all have kind of like our first experiences with water is, you know, is in the womb from you know just being in there growing up in the womb and the amniotic fluid and to remember that our first environment was filled with water, and how like important and powerful, and how much it connects us to

everything and everyone. I think is that's like the beauty of water - it can connect communities and different people together.

Kirin: Yeah, definitely, you said that very eloquently.

tylee: I'm always-I'm always thinking about connection to water. I feel like lately just because I've been wanting to get more people involved, and not even like youth but like, you know, even our elders and our like adults like to get them involved and about to care more about like the water cycle and everything, especially here in the desert, in the southwest area the water is like if you want to understand the history of water it's like it's not a pretty history you know it's there's a lot of violence and dispossession of indigenous communities. And yeah so, I've just been kind of thinking more about how to get people interested in water and also to like get them interested in in the correct way instead of this like colonizer way where it's like we brought water to the to the desert and I'm like no you didn't you stole the water. OK, so moving on to our next question about the Colorado River, are there any updates about the Colorado River or anything you want to share?

Kirin: Yeah so, the seven basin states were to have made their decision on Valentine's Day. And what tribes have been advocating for mostly is -- for upper basin tribes is for a savings pool at Lake Powell so, that our uncompensated and unused water can go into the savings pool and so, that tribes can be compensated for it but to also make sure that there is water in Lake Powell to send down to the lower basin. And I think we're also advocating for more flexibility because as we know the hydrology, the water, is not known. Like what will happen tomorrow or in the next year or in the next 20 years so when we're planning for them what will happen to the water and how it will be adjudicated then it's hard to say like OK right now we're going to make this rule that in 20 years or for the next 20 years. This is how much water has to be sent down and that's it I think that having more flexibility is what's most important and in the Colorado River basin currently because it's just very uncertain

tylee: There's definitely a lot of uncertainty with like the hydrology and the cycle itself. Like all the stuff that we have done to divert the water away from the ecosystems and away from like the natural lakes and the natural springs, like there's definitely a lot of uncertainty because this is this wasn't supposed to happen the water wasn't supposed to be handled or managed this way.

Kirin: Yeah, it's still does like sadden me to see dams

tylee: Yeah, it hurts to see dams and to see like reservoirs. I know a lot of people have happy memories at reservoirs, but I just know too much about the dam, and what it does and how it

destroys the nutrients for the downstream ecosystems, and how the fish can't, you know, complete their cycle. It's really sad.

Kirin: One of the things is like there's a plan for the water in the reservoir, but there's not a plan for the sediment.

tylee: Yeah, that is another a big piece but on to my next question why do you think Indigenous matriarchs should be included in the water world and in the work of water?

Kirin: I think that our matriarchs are-- thinking about my own family, our matriarchs are so important for the caring of not only like their children and grandchildren but the family, and the home, and the place. And I think that that's not just something that is limited to the home or the family unit, I think that this this feeling and this sense of responsibility but not so much responsibility that comes from like 'ohh I just have to do this.' It comes out of like respect and a love for place for people, and for relations, as well, because I know that like our matriarchs are the ones who keep the relations like keep the knowledge of like the relations not only within like the family but like these are where our families are from and this is what we've done and this is how we've like tended to the land or this is how we've this existed. And I think that that knowledge, and that respect, doesn't just go away, and it doesn't just stay stagnant in our bodies. It comes through as resilience and with action behind it yeah and so, I think that's why Indigenous matriarchs really have a deserved space in advocacy for the Colorado River and the respect and love that we have for place is -- it's not something to be disregarded or just something that is inherent and we should be there we got to be there and not that we should, we are there. We're showing up

tylee: Yes, we are. I think there's something so – I feel like so caring, you know, just to have, to be the caretakers. Is what I think and believe is like they're the caretakers of our land and our -- and our rivers and yeah, everything you said have the care and respect to learn and listen to other people's viewpoints and experience because in isolation like no individual or isolated community will have like the knowledge needed to come up with whatever solution or build whatever system or network. It's about making it – making the knowledge I feel like intercommunal. I guess, I don't know if that's the right word but well that's really all the questions I have for you. Thank you so much for joining and sharing your thoughts, and stories, and is there anything else that you want to add or anything that you're thinking about that you just want to say

Kirin: I think one of the things that I—the questions that I keep thinking about like what would you say to somebody who is trying to get into water or like how do you stay active when there's so much

bureaucracy. I think a lot of it is like resilience but one thing that I'm thinking of is like water; it takes time. The Grand Canyon wasn't carved in a day, wasn't carved in a week, it wasn't also carved with a drop. it rushing it was rushing waters, as long as, there is resistance there will also be an alter resistance like there's the sedimentary rock and there's -- the rushing water the water can carve through it with enough time, with enough pressure, and just sending that off to the listeners of this podcast. That your efforts are not for nothing they're not lost in the crazy space. They still have an impact no matter how small of a drop you think you're dropping into the river or if you feel like you are pouring your whole body, and your whole heart, and soul into this work, it's not lost. I applaud you for fighting the good fight, and I applaud you, tylee, for everything that you do. [Thank you in Jicarilla Apache] thank you for inviting me as the first guest on this podcast. I'm so excited for what you have to say and continue to spread your light and love. Thank you

tylee: Thank you, that's so beautifully said I really appreciate that. Thank you so much, Kirin. Thank you everybody for listening to this podcast. To stay up to date with Kirin as a musician but also as a water protector [check out] the show notes and if you ever are entering in the water spaces and you see Kirin or me like for sure come up. Thank you everybody, thank you my relatives and take care.