Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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One thousand prized eagle feathers - highly important to ceremonial costumes of several Southwest Indian tribes - are en route to Indian reservations through the courtesy of the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service to help alleviate a critical shortage of the adornments, the Department reported today.

The feathers were collected at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland and were sent to the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife Regional office in Albuquerque, N. Mex., for distribution among the tribes.

The feathers are from eagles found dead in various parts of the country. When a dead eagle is found and can be preserved, it is packed in "dry ice" and flown to the Research Center. At the center, scientists check for diseases, abnormalities, or pesticide residues. When injured or sick birds are found they are nursed back to health, if possible, and are released. Eagles unable to fly are loaned to public zoos.

About six months ago, Larry Merovka, supervisor of Management and Enforcement in the Bureau's Albuquerque office, suggested that the eagle feathers be saved and presented to Indian tribes. Virtually every American Indian tribe holds the eagle in high regard and many of them have songs and dances based on the symbolism of the eagle. The eagle, above nearly all other birds, has a special kinship to Indian history and religion.

Daniel H. Janzen, Director of the Bureau, said Mr. Merovka's suggestion concerning the feathers is a practical conservation measure resulting from the Department's employee suggestion program. The procedure helps meet the needs of the Indians for eagle feathers and helps conserve the eagle population by discouraging illegal taking of the birds.

Since adopting the suggestion by Mr. Merovka, the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center has salvaged feathers from about twenty eagles, primarily from North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri.

Both varieties of eagles--the golden and the bald--are represented in the feather collection. Golden eagle feathers are brown, with a golden tinge on head and shoulder feathers. The smaller bald eagle, darker with white head and shoulder feathers, is the majestic bird which is the American national emblem, whose image is imprinted on coins. Both are masters of the air currents and soar on motionless wings that have a span up to 7 ½ feet.

At the Wildlife Research Center only the larger, undamaged wing and tail feathers are recovered for use by the Indians. Since the supply is limited, only the most pressing needs of the Indians can be met at this time.

Federal laws safeguard eagles, their feathers, nests, and eggs. None of these may be possessed without a permit from the Secretary of the Interior unless acquired before protective laws were passed. The

bald eagle has been protected by Federal law since 1940, and an amendment in October 1962 covered the golden eagle. The Secretary of the Interior can issue possession permits to public museums, scientific associations, and zoological parks for scientific or exhibition purposes only, or to individual Indians for religious purposes.

No eagles or their feathers, nests, or eggs can be transferred to another person except by permit, but Indians may hand them down from generation to generation by tribal or religious custom.

Feathers obtained from the Fish and Wildlife Service under the present arrangement cannot be employed in manufacturing articles for sale, nor can the feathers themselves be sold.
