

# Will Apache Religion be ignored by Congress? Will Oak Flat be protected in U.S. Budget Reconciliation Bill?

September 17, 2021

This weekend, a Sunrise Ceremony is underway at sacred Oak Flat, during which an Apache girl will spiritually transform into a woman in the same way her female ancestors did before her, since time immemorial. The Sunrise Ceremony traditionally occurs in the spring or summer following a girl's first menstrual cycle, and the ceremony this weekend is the last one planned to take place at Oak Flat for this season.

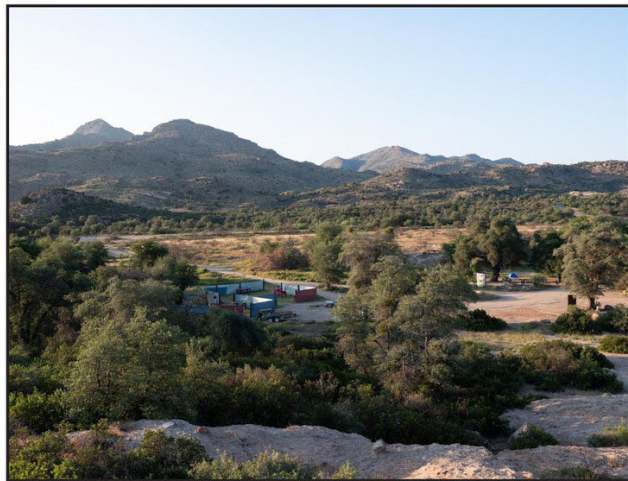


Simultaneously, the future of Oak Flat, which is inextricable from the protection of the freedom of religion in the United States as a whole, hangs in the balance as the House of Representatives considers whether to move forward with the annual budget reconciliation bill, which currently includes the Save Oak Flat Act. If Congressional leaders decline to move forward in protecting Oak Flat, and it is given to Resolution Copper for guaranteed destruction in

favor of corporate greed, the oldest religion in the country will be destroyed. Without action from Congress, there may never be another Sunrise Ceremony at Oak Flat after this weekend.

The Save Oak Flat Act would reverse the law that promised this sacred land to the multinational mining corporation Resolution Copper (owned by BHP/Rio Tinto), bypassing federal environmental law and granting them free reign to destroy the land and surround-

ing environment irreparably, through their plans to mine the copper ore underground. It was recently added to the annual budget reconciliation bill in the House. Now it is up to the elected leaders to move forward in support of religious freedom for all their constituents, regardless of their denomination. The Save Oak Flat Act must be passed by Congress if the United States truly protects the freedom of religion; if they decide not to, then no religion in America is safe.



Photos by Molly Peters

Though the Apache Stronghold and the San Carlos Apache Tribe have both filed federal lawsuits against the transfer of Oak Flat to Resolution Cop-

per, it is not just the Apache people fighting the land transfer. Opposition to this mining project is widespread throughout Indian Country, as well as among religious people of

all backgrounds in the United States. Support for the Apache Stronghold includes a long list

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# Traditionally Speaking

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visions were made for federal support for the education of the native children in the public schools.

Between 1949 and 1953, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) closed down its community schools in Bylas and San Carlos and since few white people were living in Globe and Fort Thomas, they requested for Apache students to be enrolled in their school systems and there were federal subsidies provided for their teaching of native children. Monies were provided through the Johnson O'Malley Act of 1936 which was used to help the public schools offset their increased expenses by the sudden rise of enrollment particularly native children.

The school eventually became a public school and is now called the San Carlos Unified School District.

There is so much history to share but I cannot do this in one article. But these factors lead me to what has continued to happen to our Apache people.

How do you respond to a White Man whose name is Paul Gosar, an Arizona Congressman who said about our Apache people, "You're still wards of the federal government."

And then he continues and says, "One of the federal government's dirty little secrets is that Native American tribes are not fully sovereign nations in today's society."

He continues that his, "comments made at the roundtable (Dec. 19, 2018) were about his reality and current laws that govern the relationship between tribes and the federal government."

He could easily be labeled the "Christopher Columbus" of this century just like other racists we have in Arizona. We live in a racist state.

How much more can these White Men who don't give a crap about our Apache People continue to ridicule us? How much longer can we take this? These are the robots of Resolution Copper Company doing business under the Rio Tinto mining giant along with their bought Arizona Congresswoman, Ann Kirkpatrick.

Exactly how much did they pay their token "Apaches" to write letters to the Senate and Congress and tell them it's okay to build the mine at Oak Flat? How many Apaches in total? How could our own Apaches betray our own people's beliefs? How could they sell us out so easy?

What will happen to our San Carlos Apaches? Little by little, we have been robbed of our lands, our natural resources and even our culture. By trying to instill the white man's way of life within us. We can never be white people. We are Apaches!

What happens to our holy site at Chi'Chil'Bagoteef? What about our acorn and medicinal plants there? What about the traditional ceremonies planned in the future?

The major concern that we should have is about our water. Where will this mining giant get the water from? They need over 50,000,000 (50 million) gallons of water to operate that each year. Where will it come from? Will they go after the

legislatures to get that water from us? They will be only 12 miles away from the Gilson Wash District boundary line of our reservation. Then what?

Cancer! Our water will be infested and our people will continue to die from cancer.

Why doesn't anyone think about that? Especially those "few Apaches" who sold us out! Do you think for one minute that the people wouldn't find out how you betrayed your own Apache people? For what? So you could side with a foreign mining company from Australia? And yet you claim to be a San Carlos Apache?

There are ways that these things leak out and have a tendency to be shared with others.

There's a bigger battle that we need to fight and that is to protect our sovereignty. Here, Congressman Gosar is basically making fun of us and at one time he was our Representative from our District. Now, we have a Democrat (so-called) Arizona Congresswoman Kirkpatrick who isn't any better and sold us out, too. And why does she wear camdresses at the Apache parades? Who gave them to her when she doesn't even respect the Apache ways and she has no right to be wearing our traditional wear. She's a disgrace to us because she doesn't truly represent us or our interest.

This is the time that we need to unite as Apaches as one people. It's not this district against that district or that candidate against that other candidate, it's about the whole and entire San Carlos Apache Tribe that we have to defend. If we don't, who will help us? Absolutely no one and these White People will continue to make fun of us and ridicule us which is downright sickening. And don't forget the donations that Resolution Copper makes through other charitable organizations who then brings tokens to our Apache lands. We know about that, too.

Remember, the more educated you are, the more you are a threat to the white man. Knowledge is power. But the teaching of our Apache way of life begins at home and that starts with our Apache language being spoken at home. It is our responsibility to teach this to every member of our family.

Please keep the members of our San Carlos Apache Tribal Council in prayer that they will all stand together as one and not be easily swayed or bought out. That they will be true to their constituents and vote as one body in prayer and keeping all of the San Carlos Apaches in their best interests. I applaud former Chairman, Wendsler Nosie, Sr., and our current reelected Chairman, Terry Rambler and newly elected Vice-Chairman, Tao Etpison, for all working together in unity to protect the interests of our San Carlos Apaches.

I was brought up to be a proud Apache and proud of my heritage and where I come from. I'm sure many of you were taught those ways, too. By no means, will I shun away my fellow Apaches in their fight to stand up what rightfully belongs to us. This was Apacheland first! Before any

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of religious denominations, as well as the prominent Teamsters union. In 2011, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) passed a resolution opposing the proposed Resolution Copper mine at Oak Flat, demonstrating that all the indigenous tribes in America are united in support of the Apache fight to protect their religion. This resolution was reaffirmed last year. This is not just an Apache issue, or even only an indigenous one; there are ramifications for the survival and the rights of all people.

Now, Resolution Copper is putting pressure on Congress, citing the money they've already invested in this proposed mine. In response, Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr., former Chairman of the San Carlos Apache Tribe and spiritual leader of the Apache Stronghold, said, "It's always been a deception, since (Resolution Copper) went after exemptions from environmental laws and religion, but now they've been caught in the deception. Regardless of how much money they spent, that's their

own fault; that's not anybody else's concern. They did this... Nobody should feel sorry for them. They want to use that as leverage. Any business spending money takes a risk. We're calling on Congress, because this decision affects everybody. If they make the wrong choice, it will be devastating for those alive now and those yet to be born. It's time that the American people stand up and hold our leaders accountable to do the right thing."

Vanessa Nosie, Dr. Nosie's daughter, adds, "It is time for our leaders to make moral decisions for the survival of our environment, for Mother Earth, and for our future generations. My father has devoted his life and sacrificed so many things. He has resided at Oak Flat for two years because he's trying to protect all people, trying to protect the environment, trying to protect humanity, trying to protect our religion, our way of life that has been always oppressed. When is the indigenous peoples' way of life going to be recognized? Leaders have to start making moral decisions and not decisions of greed, be-

cause there's not going to be anything left, and there will be no survival for anybody. If my religion is at stake, so is everybody else's. It's time for America to change for the better."

With the future of Oak Flat and the Apache religion in peril, those who are in ceremony at Oak Flat this weekend will be praying not only for the girl as she becomes a woman, but they are also praying for the right of generations to come to have that same freedom. Lian BigHorse, who was selected as the godmother for this ceremony, says, "This weekend, I'm going to pray for all these living things, and pray for those people that are destroying it, those people that are clouded by greed. I hope that they can make good decisions, because at the end of the day we have to answer for ourselves and make our own decisions based on what's best for our family and our people."

Lian's partner, Duke Romero, added, "How do I explain to my daughter that, if this is the last dance, she doesn't have a choice to hold hers in

a place where she has talked about having it?... It's hard, because I know my daughter could possibly have her (ceremony) in a prisoner of war camp. What other religion in the United States has to tell their child that their coming of age ceremony, or their religion, has to be conducted in a prisoner of war camp?... I think about it like, 150 years ago, our ancestors fought with a bow and arrow. We're still fighting 150 years later; now we're fighting the corporations. 150 years ago it was the government with an endless supply of bullets, and now we're fighting corporations with an endless supply of cash to pay lawyers... We're still fighting, just to be free."

Morgun Frejo, a member of the Apache Stronghold, raised the question: "Is this ceremony our Last Supper?" Or will the Congressional leaders betray the foundational principle of America, which supposedly protects the religious freedom of all its citizens, and instead cave to pressure from a corporation, proving once and for all that they value money over all else?



White Man ever walked on this land! That's what they fail to remember. The White Man has failed us, over and over again through their greedy and selfish actions. This is another hard rock that has been thrown at us while we are standing. Congressman Gosar can call us, "wards of the government," all he wants. We are still human beings that don't want no part of the British Parliament or the Roman Empire.

The words of our ancestors still hold true today, "You are born an Apache! You will die as an Apache! Don't ever act like the White Man—the enemy!"

These same words were said to us often

by our dearly and beloved late grandmother and the spirit of the Apache is alive today as we are challenged to stand up to protect what is rightfully ours—our Apache way of life that no one, not even the White Man can ever take away from us. And no one can take away my feelings and opinion as an Apache!

Thank you to all of you who are continuing our traditions and having coming of age ceremonies for your daughters and granddaughters and nieces. Ahi'yihe! Gozho'nas'gllii'doleel.

