

APACHE STRONGHOLD

POB 766 SAN CARLOS, AZ 85550



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 surrounding 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.

Though the Apache Stronghold and the San Carlos Apache Tribe have both filed federal lawsuits against the transfer of Oak Flat to Resolution Copper, 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 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."

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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, because 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?

More information at: <http://apache-stronghold.com/about-us.html>

Instagram: @protectoakflat



Oak Flat, preparing for a sunrise dance. Photo @Molly Peters



Sunrise Dance: Painting ceremony (San Carlos Style) with crown dancers. Photo @Molly Peters.