

Why Oak Flat is a sacred place for the Apache

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This article appears in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue.



Wendsler Nosie Sr., leader of Apache Stronghold, addresses supporters of Oak Flat in a protest run on February 27. (RNS photo by Alejandra Molina)

Waya Brown, barefoot and clad in a flicker-feather headdress and red-tailed hawk cape, waved a handful of feathers toward the ground.

Brown, who is Apache and Pomo, twirled in a circle as he blew a double cane whistle.

His father rattled a bamboo stick and sang in the Pomo language, while his aunt pounded on a deerskin drum. His sister and cousins danced in place as they all blessed the ground and those surrounding the circle.

This was the scene on February 27 at Chi'chil Biłdagoteel, known widely as Oak Flat, as the Brown family offered a prayer from the Pomo tradition to bless the Apache sacred site, which is at risk of being turned over to Resolution Copper, an Australian mining venture.

People from a number of Native American nations had come to support the Apache people in their fight to save Oak Flat: Pomo from Northern California; Navajo, Akimel O'odham, Tohono O'odham, and Piipaash people from Arizona; and other Indigenous tribes.

Wendsler Nosie Sr., former chairman of the San Carlos Apache Tribe and leader of Apache Stronghold, a grassroots group opposing the land transfer, said it was important for the public to realize the significance of what was happening that day. The fact that different Native groups were gathering this way was a reminder of how in the past, "all the tribes came together in prayer and in song."

"That's when we were so strong against the person named Lucifer, because the Indian people were together. We prayed together," Nosie told the crowd of supporters.

In this case, Nosie said, the evil is the capitalism embodied by the Resolution Copper project.

But the fight to protect Oak Flat isn't just an economic, political, or legal battle. Nosie has referred to it as a "holy war" in defense of the land, a 6.7-square-mile stretch within Tonto National Forest. The area is east of Phoenix and close to several reservations, including the San Carlos Apache Reservation.

The Apache believe Oak Flat is a "blessed place" where ga'an—guardians or messengers between the people and Usen, the creator—dwell, according to an emergency legal motion to stop the transfer, filed by Apache Stronghold.

"Only there can their prayers directly go to [the] creator," it reads.

The motion, which was denied on March 5 by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, details how the Apache have lived on, worshiped on, and cared for the land since "before recorded history." They continue to gather medicinal plants and hold a number of important ceremonies there, it said.

The transfer of the land to Resolution Copper was approved by Congress in 2014 as part of the National Defense Authorization Act in exchange for 6,000 acres elsewhere. And Resolution Copper says on its website it is “committed to preserving Native American cultural heritage while developing partnerships and bringing lasting benefits to the entire region.”

It continues, “We know and appreciate that the Oak Flat campground holds great significance to some members of the Native American community, including the San Carlos, Apache, Hopi, and Gila River Indian Community. If we proceed with developing the project, the Oak Flat Campground will remain open for as long as it is safe, which is expected to be at least for the next few decades.”

But the campground is a small part of the site that’s considered sacred. And mining ultimately would collapse and destroy Oak Flat, according to the project’s opponents.

The land transfer was delayed on March 1 when the US Forest Service withdrew its final environmental impact statement for the site, which would have allowed the transfer as early as March 11. The agency said it needs more time to understand the concerns raised by the Apache and other Native peoples.

Nosie Sr. said the fight over Oak Flat underscores how Indigenous religious places are “under attack.” He also argued that if this transfer goes through, there will be negative repercussions impacting Christians and other religious groups.

“How can they perform and do their religious beliefs, when the oldest religion of this part of the world is being killed?” he asked.

Morgun Frejo, who is Navajo, sees the looming transfer as being no different than the fire at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. He said it’s not just about fighting for Oak Flat, “but for the Apache way of life, their religion.”

“I don’t see how the US government can separate an Indigenous religion compared to Catholic or Mormon or Islam. We all pray to a higher being,” he said.

To Vanessa Nosie, “Oak Flat is alive.” The daughter of Nosie Sr., she said the place “has a living spirit and that’s what we’re trying to protect.”

She said losing Oak Flat as a place of worship would be as if somebody murdered her and tried to replace her with someone else.

“They say there is no immediate harm, but you are harming something that is alive. You’re killing and murdering a living thing that God has created, so when that spirit is gone, it’s gone forever.” —Religion News Service