



Apaches Question Actions of their Leadership

by David F. Briggs



As leaders of the San Carlos Apache Reservation journey to Washington, D. C. in the coming weeks to protest the Oak Flat Land Exchange that was approved by Congress and signed by President Obama in December 2014, there are many tribal members who question the wisdom of their actions and the manner in which they are being carried out.

At center of this debate is the Oak Flat Campground and surrounding area, which is located on the plateau approximately four miles east-northeast of Superior, Arizona. This site is where Resolution Copper has been evaluating the feasibility of developing an underground mining project that will lie at a depth of 5,000 to 7,000 feet beneath the surface. Since its discovery in

1995, more than \$1.1 billion has been spent examining this large copper resource. More than \$6 billion will be invested in this project before a single pound of copper is mined around 2025.

The Resolution Copper project is opposed by a number of special interest groups and citizens, who are concerned about potential negative impacts it may have on the area's environment, air, water, wildlife, economy, archeology, cultural and recreational sites. Among the most vocal opponents of the project are Terry Rambler, Tribal Chairman and Wendsler Nosie, Sr., Councilman of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, who claim the Resolution Copper project will destroy sacred religious sites at Oak Flat, Apache Leap and Devils Canyon.

In opposing the Oak Flat Land Exchange, the leaders of the San Carlos Apache Reservation have portrayed their tribe as being unanimous in support of their efforts. However, there are voices of dissent among many tribal members, who have both publicly or privately expressed serious concerns about the path their leaders have chosen to take.

In a letter to the editor of the Eastern Arizona Courier (July 1, 2015) titled: "[Return the Holy Ground Crosses from Oak Flat](#)," Karen Kitcheyan Jones, a member of the San Carlos Apache Reservation makes an eloquent and impassioned plea for the leaders of the tribal government to abandon a political agenda that has exploited their sacred ceremonies and "honor the voice of the people of the San Carlos Apache Tribe."

Quoting directly from her article, "Oak Flat has no sacred significance to our Apache people. Yes, acorn can be harvested there among many other areas on and off the reservation. Oak Flat does not influence nor determine the outcome to our ongoing battle against our social ills, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, unemployment, housing issues, crime issues and education issues. I support the quiet elder members who have said, "Oak Flat is not sacred. There are no sacred songs or sacred prayers that say Oak Flat is a Holy Place." These very elders also ask, "Why is there a Holy Ground over there, why? That is not good.""

It is ironic that leaders of the San Carlos Tribal Government have chosen the 4th of July weekend to begin their pilgrimage to Washington D. C. On this day, Americans commemorate the Declaration of Independence, the document that made the thirteen American colonies a new nation.

One of the primary reasons for the American Revolution was the British government was not responsive to the needs and desires of its citizens in the thirteen American colonies. Today, more than two centuries later, members of the San Carlos Apache Tribe appear to find themselves in a similar position.

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