

Guarding the Gift of Creation

Deuteronomy 8:7-17

Colossians 1:15-17

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Well, it happened again, last month. Just like a few years ago. About an hour east of this very spot, at Oak Flat, just up the hill from Superior, visitors were shocked to discover that two crosses there had been ripped from the ground, while two others looked like they had been hacked by an axe. Ceremonial eagle feathers were scattered, and a vehicle left tire marks, desecrating an Apache prayer site. Dr. Wendsler Nosie, a councilman from the San Carlos Apache community, said, “People come to this sacred site to be healed from sickness and for their loved ones, asking for blessings. Throughout the year, this has been a site for families to gather and teach their children about the land.” And he added, “This site is like a church. If this attack had happened at a church, it would be considered a crime.”(1) News reports around the world carried the story. Outraged voices joined in chorus. Desecration of a holy site. Outrageous!

Look, what happened on the grounds of Oak Flat is terrible. But what may happen *under* that very turf is worse. Resolution Copper mining company is trying to open a mine for what has been called the richest copper ore deposit in North America, right there under Oak Flat. “[I]n December 2014, Arizona Sen. John McCain added a section to a defense spending bill that left Apache and other Native peoples reeling. That language, the Southeast Arizona Land Exchange and Conservation Act, authorized the transfer of 2,400 acres of Tonto National Forest land to Resolution Copper, a U.S. subsidiary of two British-Australian mining firms, in exchange for more than 5,400 acres of private land. . . . The process is now on hold, though, after the Forest Service withdrew the final environmental impact statement on March 1 [of last year], which delayed the land swap.”(2) So Oak Flat has a temporary reprieve – for now. But here is what might still happen: “From a depth of 7,000 feet, where the temperature runs up to 175 degrees Fahrenheit, a network of tunnels is to extend under the ore body like a giant ant farm. High-tech miners, aided by cooling stations, are to make funnel-like cracks in the earth above them and harvest ore in a gravity-induced system of controlled cave-ins. Once chunks of ore fall through these funnels, the miners below are to move it onto trucks, then on a mine railway through a tunnel to RCM property a few feet from Superior’s town limits.” But, “workers drilling RCM’s 7,000-foot shaft hit a large subterranean water source at 4,000 feet that consultants had missed in geological surveys.”(3) A reporter for the Arizona Daily Star, Ron Medvescek, described his trip down the shaft: “After about 15 minutes, the cage creeps to a stop at 6,820 feet below ground. . . . We’re at a water-pumping station built to keep the shaft clear of water that unexpectedly poured into the shaft during construction. A red light filters through the haze of steam. The door opens and we step into the hot cloud, boots splashing through pools of water. Here, the rock and the water dripping from it are 175 degrees, though a powerful air-cooling and ventilation system keeps the temperature in the 70s and 80s.... Two huge water pumps send water out of the cave. It’s treated at an on-site plant and then pumped 30 miles to an irrigation district for use by farmers.”(4) The method of extraction that the company is planning is called

“block-cave” mining. Block-cave excavates a huge amount of rock, as we just heard, and transports it to the surface. But this method also “‘leaves a mountain-sized void underground, making it more likely the surface will collapse,’ said Roy Chavez, a former miner, former mayor of Superior, and spokesman for the Concerned Citizens and Retired Miners Coalition, which opposes the mine.”(5) If you scoop out a quantity of rock the size of a mountain from underneath the surface, without replacing it, you run the strong risk of the surface collapsing into a crater. In this case, the crater could be a couple of miles wide, and a thousand feet deep.(6) And what about the residue, left over after the process of separating the copper from the other rock? The mining company’s “plans include spreading rubble over ‘brown-field’ sites (patches of Sonoran Desert that already have been disturbed by farming or other human activities) northeast of Queen Valley,” east of Apache Junction. Needless to say, “the Queen Valley Homeowner’s Association, who worry about toxins from the mine’s waste products contaminating Queen Creek, from which the community draws its water,” take a dim view on this plan.(7) And any winds of monsoon dust storms would carry the toxic dust for miles. Activities underground would have a profound impact on people who live on the surface. To say the least. But the discovery of the underground water also raises concerns that unseen water courses would be rerouted, affecting both the local water table, and springs for miles around. Maybe even rivers. The excavation would allow the heat from deep below more direct access to the surface. How would that increase in the area’s temperature affect plant life, humans, animals, even the atmosphere, for miles around? And how would removing that massive quantity of rock, and any subsidence that would result, affect the underground interactive web of tensions of the surrounding rock, opening up possibilities of earth tremors as things resettle? I’ll be quick to admit that the geological realities of such possibility are beyond me, but the question should be raised nevertheless. These are the facts about Oak Flat, as best I can find them. Resolution Copper Mining company’s plans to mine this huge deposit seem to be a disaster in the making. Thank God it is on hold – for now.

And how does faith respond? This congregation has a well-deserved reputation of caring deeply for the environment, for decades. Environmental justice is part of Community’s DNA. So we would join the voices that cry out, “We write as people of faith and moral conscience—Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Apache, and people of other faiths and not of faith—to condemn the immoral and unconstitutional hate crime committed against an Apache Nation sacred site in 2018 in Oak Flat, Arizona.”(8) But the desecration of the surface holy site only symbolizes a deeper desecration of God’s holy earth, planned for 7000 feet under that very site. *Both* are desecrations. We stand with our Apache Nation sisters and brothers, even as they stand with the rest of Creation, human and beyond, protesting actions of human greed that threaten untold damage to the land, people, waters, flora, and fauna. And so people of faith will support the identical bills introduced last year by Rep. Raul Grijalva, and Senator Bernie Sanders, the Save Oak Flat Act. These bills will repeal the Section 3003 land exchange of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act, and protect this 2400-acre site known as Chí’chil Bį́dagoteel (Oak Flat), holy to traditional Western Apache culture and religion.(9) People standing within the Judaic-Christian faith tradition cry out with the Psalmist, “The earth is the *LORD*’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it”— and we demand respect for this planet, as faithful stewards of it. This good earth is a *gift* from the hand of God,(10) as we heard clearly in this morning’s scripture from Deuteronomy. And whenever somebody gives you a gift, what do you say? Of course: “thank you.” As God, through Moses, warned: “Do not

say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’” And so we gratefully acknowledge this gift, and the Hand that bestows it every moment of every day. And part of our holy responsibility is to treat every square inch of planet earth with respect. And arm ourselves with the facts, to protest whenever it is endangered. We are not the owners. We are the stewards. Caretakers. Just as we take care to clean up a lawn mower after we have borrowed it from our neighbor, fill the tank, and hand it back better than we found it, so we guard the dignity of the gift of our earth, and its inhabitants. What do people of faith do? Just like a loving mother demands, “clean up that room!”, so we protest to any who would desecrate this planet: “Take care of it! Respect your mother!”

We mourn any desecration of holy places. We protest any desecration of people made in the image of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, Whose love embraces all human beings, Who is the image of the invisible God, we demand respect for the Creator’s earth. We will pray, we will walk, we will speak. And we will demand that the exploiters repent, prevent the damage, and turn to the Christ Whose love embraced even those who desecrated His body. We will say, “clean up *our* room, that all may breathe free!” Amen.

Notes

- (1) Attack in 2022: Letter from Wendsler Nosie Sr., to Chairman Terry Rambler, San Carlos Apache Tribe, 3/23/22; accessed online on 4/19/22 at https://users.neo.registeredsite.com/8/3/2/11897238/assets/03-22-2022_ApacheStronghold_to_Chairman.pdf; attack in 2018: “Apache Stronghold tribal group: Crosses vandalized at Arizona prayer site,” by Felicia Fonseca, Associated Press <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2018/03/21/apache-stronghold-tribal-group-crosses-vandalized-arizona-prayer-site/447952002/>; and “We Condemn The Desecration Of An Apache Nation Sacred Site,” petition by the Repairers of the Breach PPC: NCMR; accessed online on 4/18/18 at <https://action.groundswell-mvmt.org/petitions/we-condemn-the-desecration-of-an-apache-nation-sacred-site>
- (2) “Oak Flat: A place of prayer faces obliteration by a copper mine,” by Debra Utacia Krol, Arizona Republic, 8/20/21; accessed online on 4/19/22 at <https://www.azcentral.com/in-depth/news/local/arizona/2021/08/18/oak-flat-apache-sacred-resolution-copper-mine/7903887002/>
- (3) “A Copper Mine Near Superior and Oak Flat Campground Is Set to Destroy a Unique, Sacred Recreation Area — for Fleeting Benefits,” by Ray Stern, Phoenix New Times, 4/22/15; accessed online on 4/11/18.
- (4) “Resolution Copper Mine: Venturing 7,000 feet below Earth’s surface,” by Ron Medvescek, Arizona Daily Star, 6/4/16; accessed online on 4/11/18 at http://tucson.com/news/resolution-copper-mine-venturing-feet-below-earth-s-surface/article_44ca18f8-7a29-5562-9833-dd6611c968fc.html
- (5) “Massive mine proposed at Oak Flat, sacred tribal land,” by Emily Bregel, Arizona Daily Star, 9/8/13; accessed online on 4/11/18 at http://tucson.com/business/local/massive-mine-proposed-at-oak-flat-sacred-tribal-land/article_36556048-ba26-54ba-8445-0ff8b753e29b.html

- (6) Comment on “Resolution Copper – Setting the Record Straight about Oak Flat,” by David F. Briggs, Arizona Daily Independent online, 6/9/15; accessed online on 4/11/18 at <https://arizonadailyindependent.com/2015/06/09/resolution-copper-setting-the-record-straight-ab-out-oak-flat/>
- (7) Stern, “A Copper Mine Near Superior,” *ibid.*
- (8) “We Condemn The Desecration Of An Apache Nation Sacred Site,” *ibid.*
- (9) “Take Action! Ways to Help Protect Oak Flat”; accessed online on 4/19/22 at <http://apache-stronghold.com/take-action.html>; for an example of a letter in support of this bill, see the letter from Chuck Hoskin Jr., Cherokee Nation Principal Chief, to Representatives Tom Cole and Markwayne Mullins, 6/21/21; accessed online on 4/23/22 at <https://www.chairmanterryrambler.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Cherokee-Nation-Oak-Flat-Letter.pdf>
- (10) Walter Breuggemann, *The Land*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 50-51.