News
EarthBeat



The sun sets over Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans located 70 miles east of Phoenix, on June 3, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. Oak Flat, or Chi’chil Bildagoteel, is a consecrated place used for prayer and ritual by many Native Americans in the region. Elders say the land was blessed by Usen, their Creator, and inhabited by Ga’an, the mountain spirits or angels who provide spiritual succor and guidance to seekers. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

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OAK FLAT, Arizona — July 6, 2023
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Azee Romero climbed barefoot on the wrinkled trunk of the massive Emory oak tree at the center of the Oak Flat Campground.

The 5-year-old in his black dinosaur t-shirt with hair tied under a backwards baseball cap scaled higher and higher until he found the perfect seat. There, cradled by the sturdy trunk, the boy flashed a gap-toothed smile and rested comfortably as if he'd just climbed onto the lap of a grandparent.

In fact, that centuries-old oak tree and the ground below it — the sacred, ancestral flats that stretch for miles east of Phoenix — are like kin to Azee's family.

"My little guy, his umbilical cord is buried here," said Azee's mother, Lian Bighorse. She said the connection to Oak Flat is physical as well as spiritual.

The family is Chiricahua Apache and Oak Flat, or Chi'chil Bildagoteel, is a consecrated place used for prayer and ritual by them and many other Native Americans in the region. Elders say the land was blessed by Usen, their Creator, and inhabited by Ga'an, the mountain spirits or angels who provide spiritual succor and guidance to seekers.

But they fear for its future, seeing plans to carve a huge copper mine into the heart of Oak Flat as if it were a threat to their own flesh and blood — an obliteration of a piece of their spiritual heritage.

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The 6.7-square-mile (17.3 square-kilometer) Oak Flat is a verdant oasis in an arid landscape dotted with towering saguaro cacti, majestic rock spires and sweeping canyons.

Here, sage and other plants used for medicinal and ritual purposes sprout along streams and wetlands that provide sanctuary for birds and other animals. It's where Native people gather acorns that drop from the oak trees before crushing them into an edible powder, and pick red sumac berries for a refreshing, scarlet drink that Bighorse described as "Native Kool-Aid."

It is also here that Resolution Copper Mining, a joint subsidiary of British and Australian mining giants, Rio Tinto and BHP, wants to remove layers of rock to extract copper from deep underground. The in-demand metal is used for electric vehicle and cell phone manufacturing. In the works for nearly a decade, the project has stalled amid a legal fight between U.S. agencies and those trying to protect Oak Flat on religious grounds.

Resolution Copper President Vicky Peacey said the mine will be a "massive investment in rural Arizona" — creating 3,700 jobs over the course of the project and boosting state and local tax revenues by $88 million to $113 million a year. The company continues to "seek dialogue, to come to a collaboration and partnership," said Tyson Nansel, a company spokesperson.



Apache religious symbols are posted at Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans located 70 miles east of Phoenix, on June 3, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. Oak Flat is a site for coming-of-age rituals for Apache women, healing sweat lodge ceremonies, and other big and small moments in the lives of Natives. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

"We need the copper. The town and the tribe need jobs," Nansel said.

But removing the ore from underground would eventually cause the ground surface to collapse into a 1.8-mile (2.9-kilometer) crater. Resolution says that other parts of the Oak Flat parcel would remain intact, including Devil's Canyon and Queen Creek. Apache Leap, where local legend says a group of Apaches leapt to their death rather than surrender to the U.S. cavalry, has been placed under permanent protection.

That is little consolation for Native people who believe the mine will desecrate Oak Flat, a site for coming-of-age rituals for Apache women, healing sweat lodge ceremonies, and other big and small moments in the lives of Natives.

Bighorse's 12-year-old daughter, Soleil Davignon, is preparing for her upcoming Sunrise Dance. The four-day ritual occurs within a year of a woman's first menstrual period and Soleil's ceremony is set for October. When the time comes, Soleil will don dresses and jewelry gifted by family members and perform more than 100 dances, using a curved staff to keep time with the music.



Soleil Davignon picks berries for her coming of age ceremony on Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans located 70 miles east of Phoenix, on June 3, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. When the time comes, Soleil will don dresses and jewelry gifted by family members and perform more than 100 dances, using a curved staff to keep time with the music. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

"I've always wanted my dance," said Soleil on a recent day at Oak Flat as she picked sumac berries in a flowing skirt and sweatshirt. "I've been waiting for this. I'm ready."

She practices the dances daily but worries mining could block her future access to a place where she can connect to something greater.

"This is a really sacred place," Soleil said softly. "I love being here."

Oak Flat sits on the edge of the Tonto National Forest property, where Resolution is proposing the project. The corporation began the permitting process nearly a decade ago, but the project has been stalled by legal and political wrangling between U.S. agencies and the nonprofit Apache Stronghold. The group is challenging a planned land swap that would allow the project to move forward. The full U.S. 9th District Court of Appeals is considering Apache Stronghold's request to permanently halt the project, and the only thing stopping that now is the lack of a new environmental impact statement.



Wendsler Nosie Sr., leader of the Apache Stronghold, stands for a portrait on the Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans, on June 2, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

Apache Stronghold's position is that the mine would endanger Oak Flat and hold back Native Americans from their spiritual practice, said Wendsler Nosie Sr., the

longtime activist who leads the group. He lives on Oak Flat as an act of rebellion.

The former San Carlos Apache tribal chairman argues the land swap effectively declared that "the water, the air, the environment here in Oak Flat, they are all dead. … What we've done is given life back to it. It's getting CPR right now through the religion."

His tribe's current top leadership supports Nosie's efforts, but some members would rather have the mine and the possible job opportunities that could come with it given the area's widespread unemployment.

They include Karen Kitcheyan-Jones, 64, the widow of a miner who never knew Oak Flat as a religious place. She had her coming-of-age celebration on the San Carlos Apache reservation — about 67 miles east of Oak Flat — where she still lives. Brenda Astor, Resolution's Native affairs adviser, said Oak Flat is where her family gathered acorns for traditional Apache dishes.

Faith traditions differ on how they define sacredness, said Dan Dalton, a Detroit-based attorney who represents religious institutions in land use and zoning cases.

In the Oak Flat case, he said the law appears to favor the Native American community since "courts have deferred to the local religious entity to determine when land becomes sacred." The only exception, he said, would be fraud, when someone is attempting to use religion to serve an ulterior motive.

Oak Flat has spiritual significance to many Native people and there are spots "where even a casual observer can experience a sense of the divine," said John R. Welch, professor of archeology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia who has worked extensively with Apache tribes. Evidence of its sacredness can be found in petroglyphs or rock paintings and Apache burial grounds.



Morgun Frejo checks on rocks being heated in a fire for a sweat lodge on Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans located 70 miles east of Phoenix, on June 3, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

"These places of transcendent holiness are not specifically attached to any one culture or territory," he said. "They are recognized as being so important that no one should own them or restrict access to them."

Stephanie Barclay, professor of law and director of the Religious Liberty Initiative at the University of Notre Dame, depicted the attitude of government officials toward Native sacred sites as shockingly callous.

"We would never tell a Christian that a church is just a place with bricks and mortar that you can get anywhere. Some things will have religious significance to some and not to others," said Barclay, who learned about Oak Flat when she worked with Becket, the public-interest law firm that represents the Apache Stronghold.

For many, Oak Flat has been a place to reconnect with prayer and ceremonial traditions that can often get lost in urban areas. That includes Native American students from Brophy College Preparatory, the only Jesuit Catholic high school in Arizona.

The movement to save Oak Flat has allowed students in Brophy's Native American Club to engage "more deeply in the work of understanding their own identity," said Drew Rau, director of Brophy's Office of Faith and Justice. For the past three years, the students have participated in an annual prayer run that culminates in Oak Flat. Students have also attended sunrise ceremonies and participated in sweat rituals.



A sweat lodge is constructed on Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans located 70 miles east of Phoenix, on June 3, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

A religiously diverse coalition — Christian, Muslim, Sikh and other Native American groups — has backed the Apache Stronghold by filing amicus briefs.

One brief filed by the Jewish Coalition for Religious Liberty and Protect the First Foundation, argues that "a destroyed Oak Flat would devastate the Western Apache much like an obliterated Vatican for Catholics, a demolished Kaaba (in Mecca) for Muslims, or a dismantled temple for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Religious allies have shown up in person, too. On a day in June, the Rev. Tracy Hughes, lead minister at Mountain View United Church in Aurora, Colorado, camped at Oak Flat with Nosie and his group in a show of unity. She is a member of Community Peacemaker Teams, an international organization that sends peace workers to conflict areas.

As a gentle breeze rustled the oaks and chaparral, Hughes said she felt the sanctity of Oak Flat in every breath: "That spiritual divine breath. It's just here. It pulsates here."

On a recent morning, Nosie sat on a lawn chair watching young Stronghold men stoke a fire to heat the rocks that would be used later in a sweat lodge ceremony at Oak Flat. For Apache men, sitting through the ceremony's four rounds of sweating is like returning to the mother's womb and a reminder of women's significance, he said.

"It's about cleansing inside and out," Nosie said.



Men work to build a sweat lodge on Oak Flat Campground, a sacred site for Native Americans located 70 miles east of Phoenix, on June 3, 2023, in Miami, Ariz. Resolution Copper Mining, a joint subsidiary of British and Australian mining giants, Rio Tinto and BHP, has proposed a massive copper mine on the flats, which could threaten spiritual practices and heritage. (AP Photo/Ty O'Neil)

Kooper Curley, who is Diné from Chichiltah on the Navajo Nation, planned to partake in the ritual, and called Oak Flat a "place of healing." After falling into a life of drugs, gangs and violence, Kurley said re-connecting with his spiritual roots saved him.

These sacred sites have existed since the beginning of time to facilitate healing and renewal, which diminished as Native people were sent to reservations, Nosie said. He recalled that his mother would bring him and his siblings to Oak Flat when they were little. His mother and in many ways, he, grew up in an era where they were afraid to leave the reservation or to set foot on Oak Flat, even though it was public land and they had a right to be there, Nosie said.

"She'd park here and ask us to take a little air out of the tires so she could pretend like she had a flat tire, just in case someone stopped her," he said. "We'd run out, say our prayers and grab what we can and come back. Then, we'd pump up the tires and leave."

When he was in the San Carlos Apache reservation, Nosie felt like a prisoner. When he was out in the world, he felt he had lost his Apache identity.

"Here in Oak Flat," he said, "this is home."

Nosie credits his late mother for teaching him about his spiritual roots. He thinks about her as he walks around Oak Flat, picking up leaves and watching Native families have picnics under that ancient oak tree. He chokes up.

"Now, kids are running up and down the place, and they're not scared," he said. "We've come back to our spiritual home."

Related: Oak Flat timeline: Native American vs. pro-mining interests