



United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc.

Nashville, TN Office:

711 Stewarts Ferry Pike, Suite 100
Nashville, TN 37214
Phone: (615) 872-7900
Fax: (615) 872-7417

Washington, DC Office:

400 North Capitol Street, Suite 585
Washington, D.C., 20001
Phone: (202) 624-3550
Fax: (202) 393-5218

**Written Remarks of President Brian Patterson, United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc.
House Natural Resources Committee forum,
“Save Oak Flat: The Fight to Protect Sacred Apache Land”
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Ranking Members Grijalva and Ruiz, members of the House Natural Resources Committee, thank you for allowing me to be here today. I would also like to thank my good friend, San Carlos Apache Chairman Terry Rambler, for allowing me to stand beside him in unity in the fight to protect Oak Flat and by extension, all sacred sites. My name is Brian Patterson. I serve as President of United South and Eastern Tribes, as well as Bear Clan representative to the Oneida Nation Men’s Council.

While time limitations do not afford me the ability to recite my traditional Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, I offer you the spirit and intent of the address. It is our central prayer and invocation that reflects our relationship of giving thanks for life and the world around us. It is our ancient message of peace and appreciation of Mother Earth and her inhabitants. The Thanksgiving Address teaches mutual respect, conservation, love, generosity, and the responsibility to understand that what is done to one part of the Web of Life, we do to ourselves. As we engage and dialogue on this most critical and sacred issue, it is important that we do so from a place of respect, peace, and protection of those who are no longer here to speak for themselves.

USET is an inter-tribal organization representing 26 federally recognized Tribes from Texas across to Florida and up to Maine. The USET Tribal Nations are within the Eastern Region of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Southern Plains Region of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Nashville Area of the Indian Health Service (IHS), covering a large expanse of land compared to other regions. Due to this large geographic area, the USET Tribes have great diversity in cultural traditions, land holdings, and resources.

While the practice of spiritual and ceremonial traditions and beliefs varies significantly among USET Tribes and the 567 Tribal Nations of the United States, our spirituality is overwhelmingly place-based. From the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians’ Nanih Waiyah mounds to the ceremonial stone landscapes of New England, each USET Tribe has specific places and locations that we consider sacred. These places are often the sites of our origin stories, our places of creation. As such, we believe that we have been in these places since time immemorial. Through these sites, we are inextricably linked to our spirituality, the practice of our religions, and to the foundations of our cultural beliefs and values. Our sacred sites are of greatest importance as they hold the bones and spirit of our ancestors and we must ensure their protection, as that is our sacred duty.

As one of its core principles and building blocks, this nation was built upon the premise of religious freedom. As our federal partner in this unique government-to-government relationship, the United States possesses a trust responsibility and moral obligation of the highest order to us as the original and free sovereign nations that

predate it by thousands of years; this includes protection of our sacred sites. In fact, there are numerous laws, executive orders, and court cases that confirm our right as Native peoples to practice our beliefs and traditions in our holy places. According to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, this includes, “access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites.” In addition, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was endorsed by the U.S. in 2010, contains numerous articles affirming our rights to, “maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to...religious and cultural sites.” However, in the case of Oak Flat and other religious sites, our nation is failing to live up to its duty.

For more than ten years, Congress considered and rightly rejected legislation titled the “Southeast Arizona Land Exchange and Conservation Act.” As this legislation was introduced time and again, USET joined hundreds of Tribal Nations and Organizations across the country in passing resolutions and advocacy against the injustice of the proposal. USET’s slogan and governing principle is, “strength in unity.” In the face of the prospect of a giveaway and subsequent desecration of a site sacred to the San Carlos Apache and Yavapai-Apache people, Indian Country was united in strong opposition.

Yet, in spite of this clear message of disapproval, Congressional supporters of the Land Exchange, each with a trust responsibility and obligation to Tribal Nations, forced a closed-door deal to attach it to a must-pass piece of legislation at the very end of the 113th Congress, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Section 3003 of the NDAA provides for a mandatory transfer of Oak Flat, lands that contain Apache holy beings, ancient settlements, and burial sites, to foreign corporations that will profit from its destruction. In addition to causing irreparable harm to the Apache people, the conveyance of these lands sets a dangerous precedent for all of Indian Country.

I am here before you today standing in unity with the Apache people, and to take a stand against the destruction and denigration of our sacred places through the actions (or inaction) of the U.S. government. I ask each Member of Congress present here today, as well as each Member of the House Committee on Natural Resources, to consider their own religious traditions and their own places of worship. Would any of you accept the desecration of your holy ground? Would any of you sit idly by as the bones and spirit of your ancestors were disturbed and destroyed in the name of metal extraction and corporate profit?

This June, Ranking Members Grijalva and Ruiz, along with the Co-Chairs of the House Native American Caucus, and a number of members of Congress present here today, introduced H.R. 2811, the Save Oak Flat Act, legislation that would see to it that this unconscionable land exchange never happens. On behalf of USET’s 26 member Tribal Nations, I wish to extend my strong and unqualified support to this legislation, which provides for immediate repeal of Section 3003 of the NDAA. I urge the House Natural Resources Committee to immediately take up H.R. 2811, and the full U.S. Congress to ensure its swift passage. Indian Country will not stand by as the very foundation of our cultures is demolished in the interest of greed and profit. Once again, I thank Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, as well as the Apache people, for allowing me to speak on this issue of critical importance. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

“Because there is strength in Unity”