



UNITED NATIONS  
WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS  
*Geneva 19 to 23 July 2004*

Thank you Mr. Chairperson,

My name is Rosalba Nattero. I am a representative of the Apache Survival Coalition and I am here to speak on behalf of its Chair, Ola Cassadore.

This year I have to appeal once again against the violation of a sacred site and the religious rights of a Population. I refer to Mt. Graham, the Apache sacred mountain that is threatened by the construction of an international astronomical observatory by the University of Arizona, in partnership with the Vatican and the Arcetri Observatory, which is funded by the Italian Government.

Two telescopes have already been built and a third one, the Large Binocular Telescope, designed to be one of the best and biggest of its kind in the world, is due to be inaugurated soon. The only telescope operating at the moment is that of the Vatican.

Since time beyond memory, Mt. Graham has played an important role in the life of the Apache community, being considered their most important sacred site. For the Apaches, the mountain is a place of spirituality and healing and therefore fulfils a fundamental role at the heart of their cultural and spiritual activities.

The project was for the construction of seven telescopes on this sacred mountain.

This completely illegal development has been fiercely contested by the Apaches since they came to hear of the project, almost fourteen years ago. The San Carlos Apache Tribal Council has passed several official resolutions against the project and anti-observatory demonstrations were organised even before work started.

There is a large number of Tribes and Indian movements lined up beside the San Carlos Apaches, including the International Indian Treaty Council, the National Congress of American Indians, the American Indian Religious Freedom Coalition, the White Mountain Apache Tribe, the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, the White Mountain Apache Heritage Program, the Navajo Nation, the Tohono

O' Odham, the National Council of Churches and numerous other national and international organisations.

The leading opposition movement is the Apache Survival Coalition, founded by Ola Cassadore Davis and supported by the San Carlos Apache Tribal Council.

The project has gone ahead, despite all the opposition and despite the laws for the preservation of sacred sites, by having recourse to exemptions previously passed through Congress and by burying other important legislation.

Italy is involved in the project through the Arcetri Observatory of Florence, which continues to ignore the repeated appeals of Ola Cassadore and her supporters.

Over the past fourteen years, several Apache delegations have visited Italy to plead with the Government to stop funding the Mt. Graham Project, but these appeals have all gone unheard. Draft laws have been put before Parliament to cut off funds for the Observatory, but until now none of them has been passed.

Many of the project's sponsors have pulled out, in the face of international protests. The second telescope was built by the Max Planck Institute of Germany, but they abandoned it in 2002 because of poor visibility at the site. Nevertheless, the project has not been stopped.

In the last two years the Apache Survival Coalition has fought to dissuade two other universities, the University of Minnesota and the University of Virginia, from becoming partners in the project. Although all the Tribes of Minnesota and the Social Concerns Committee of the Faculty were against it, the University management decided to take part in the project. The University of Virginia has also joined the project, but requested that the University of Arizona should consult the Apaches and provide them with assistance in the areas of education and health. Education and health are regarded as highly important for a population, but the Apaches see this move as an attempt at bribery.

Over the last few days an enormous forest fire is inflicting yet more violence on the sacred mountain, destroying plants that have been growing there for hundreds of years and the endangered species of animals that make their homes there. This unexpected calamity will cause damage to the Observatory requiring further enormous sums of money for repairs. Apaches say fire threat to Arizona observatory on their sacred mountain is a "warning from God".

The project must be stopped, in any case. Let's help the Apaches defend their right to protect their most important sacred site.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples says that "every population has the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, and to maintain, protect and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites".

This right has been denied to the Apache People for fourteen years and a long time has passed since they had access to their sacred site and freedom to carry out their spiritual rituals. This poses a threat to the survival of their cultural traditions and a serious risk to the unity of their community.

We strongly request this Commission to take into consideration the problem of the San Carlos Apaches and help us to defend their cultural and religious rights.

Thank you Mr. Chairperson.

Rosalba Nattero  
*Representative Apache Survival Coalition*  
*Vice Chairperson Ecospirituality Foundation*