

*Request for Intervention Submitted to the Second Session of the
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
By the Seventh Generation Fund on May 15, 2003
Agenda item #4 A the issue of ENVIRONMENT
Environmental Justice and the Protection of Sacred Sites*

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Introduction:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the other members of the Forum, for the opportunity to address this Forum. My name is Tia Oros. I am of the Zuni people. The Seventh Generation Fund for Indian Development respectfully submits this intervention, with the Pueblo of Zuni-Zuni Tribal Council, the American Indian Law Alliance, the Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council, the Tonatierra Community Development Institute, the Mo'ō Guk Amjedkam, and the SAGE Council.

Last year our organization addressed the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues under the area of Environment and the protection of sacred sites, and it is an honor to do so again. I am here today to reiterate the critical significance of protecting sacred lands because the situation of environmental injustice and the assaults on sacred places has worsened at an alarming rate. These places of prayer, vision quest, song, and ceremony are vital for the continuation of an Indigenous Earth-based paradigm, a worldview that affirms life everlasting.

Many sacred places possess vast natural gifts - - resources that are targeted for exploitation by nation state agencies, regional and multi-national corporate entities. Considering that environmental injustice is the perpetration of environmental destruction upon communities that do not have the economic or political power to resist such attacks, Indigenous territories are particularly vulnerable for this type of devastation.

Recommendations:

We strongly urge the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to request the immediate appointment of a United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Protection of Sacred Places to gather testimony directly from Indigenous communities targeted for or impacted by resource exploitation and environmental injustice. The testimony can then inform the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues as it develops its recommendations to ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council of the UN) under the mandate given.

Mr. Chairman, we thank you and the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for providing the Tlahtokan Aztlan Plan of Action to Assure the Sacred Birthright of Indigenous Children and Youth as a conference room paper for this year's Forum. Echoing item 17 of that document, we underscore the recommendation to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to request that UNESCO organize a workshop on protecting sacred places and ceremonial sites of Indigenous peoples, with a view to identifying protective mechanisms and addressing restoration and reparation of our lands.

Finally, we strongly encourage the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to recommend the ratification of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a minimum standard providing for the well being of Indigenous peoples' spiritual and cultural lives, particularly in regard to the preservation of our traditional homelands, control of our own resources, and the protection of and respect for sacred places.

Narrative:

Like doorways to the spiritual realm, sacred places are tangible points of metaphysical transcendence, holding concentrations of power and divine understanding for us, as they did for our ancestors. Taking shape in mountains, waterfalls, and wetlands; in volcanoes, canyons and lakes, sacred places link together the vital strands of Indigenous existence.

Through an infinite web of stories, songs, memories, and revelations, Indigenous peoples' worldviews -- our unique consciousness -- weaves together with the Earth and our ongoing relationships with sacred places. This creates a template, a pattern for our cultural vitality and holds the seeds of our continuing life as distinct peoples, and for the well being of all our relations. Such is the promise, the sacred birthright, of the seventh generation to come.

And yet at this very moment, Indigenous peoples across the Americas are engaged on the frontlines of a mismatched battle for environmental justice. Our lands are being plundered and our resources exploited -- for profit, with impunity. Examples in the southwest desert region of the United States illuminate this ongoing struggle.

Zuni Salt Lake is a treasured sacred place and the dwelling place of our cherished Salt Mother. The Salt River Project, a regionally based electric power company has targeted the site and intends to mine over 80 million tons of coal near Zuni Salt Lake. For countless centuries, members of the Zuni, Acoma, Laguna, Hopi, and many other Indigenous communities have journeyed to the sacred lake through the surrounding Sanctuary Zone, a place of peace between neighboring tribes, to gather salt for ceremonial and domestic purposes.

The Salt River Project plans to center its coalmine in the Sanctuary Zone. Like a great vampire, the mining operation will siphon water from this fragile desert ecosystem by pumping 85 gallons per minute of groundwater from the same aquifer that feeds the lake. This will absolutely damage ancient pilgrimage trails, desecrate hundreds of burial places, and ruin cultural sites. Already some of our ancestors' remains have been wrongfully removed from their resting places to prepare for mining. Sadness lays hard on our lands.

Baboquivari Mountain, Home of the Creator, the elder brother of the Tohono O'Odham and Pima Nations, is targeted for desecration by outside tourism interests. In the family of sacred mountains, springs, and traditional alters of the Sonoran desert, the Baboquivari Mountain is an essential member.

A line has been drawn in the sand for the Petroglyph National Monument where the ancestors have etched sacred messages to inform and guide spiritual leaders for generations to come. The

Petroglyphs constitute a sacred site and shrine for all Pueblos, and contain shrines of the Pueblo Indian Tribes. Some etchings date over 10,000 years, and the site continues to be used today. The city of Albuquerque proposes two commuter highways that would dissect the Petroglyph National Monument and would be a desecration of this religious place.

These are just a few instances of where we hold on by our fingertips to the crevices of existence, defending the last strands of our homeland environments and vulnerable sacred sites. There are hundreds more places beyond the desert regions, in communities throughout the Americas, where Indigenous peoples live shrouded in the smoke of dioxin fumes, and drink water from cyanide filled streams. Others have homelands infected with uranium tailings, and their ceremonial sites bulldozed for a shopping mall.

With every sacred mountain that has been leveled for gold mining, for each oil well violating the tundra where new life emerges, the world begins to unravel. Our children, those generations yet to be born, and all of our relations, are the ultimate casualties of this conflict.

Thank you for your kind attention. E:lah:kwa