

Request for Intervention Submitted to the
UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, New York, May 2002
by (a representative) of the Seventh Generation Fund
on the issue of Environment
Protection of Sacred Sites

Thank you Mr. Chairman and congratulations on your election to the important post you have assumed. My name is Tia Oros and I am from the Zuni Pueblo, Turkey Clan. I am speaking today on behalf of the 7th Generation Fund which works to preserve the traditional cultures of Native nations. We are grateful to all of the Indigenous peoples who have envisioned and worked for decades to create this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Among the efforts of the communities that the 7th Generation Fund supports are the ongoing struggles to protect the health of the environment and most significantly, the integrity of sacred sites which are the cultural signposts in the environment of our respective peoples. Sacred sites hold the songs and stories, wild foods and abundant gifts which Indigenous peoples have depended on for many millennia, and continue to rely on for cultural vitality and spiritual sustenance. We are rich with knowledge learned from our respectful relationship and interaction with these precious places and we recognize our inherent responsibility to sacred landscapes, not only for our survival but for the survival and vitality of the diverse ecosystems of life to which we are all related, are mutually dependent and culturally responsible.

These are dynamic places of immeasurable wealth, holding critical aspects of Indigenous cosmo-visions and religious expression. We recognize a depth of wealth in our communities in relationship to the landscape which provides us a unique richness in cultural assets and the ingredients for our continued survival. But our homeland environments continue to be targeted for resource exploitation and corporate invasion in the name of progress, fed by the insatiable hunger of globalization. From Mt. Graham and Zuni Salt Lake, to Little Medicine Mountain and the Black Hills, Native sacred sites are under assault.

Gold is extracted by cyanide heap leach methods, which in turn, contaminates our water systems and left a pile of rubble where a sacred mountain once stood. Coal is mined by siphoning water from a sacred salt lake, where a spiritual deity lives. Trees are ripped from the ground, leaving a swath of devastation for miles, and causing erosion, the loss of precious topsoil and native plant and animal species. At this very moment, sacred places of prayer, healing, burial, and history that resonate with the consciousness and identities of our peoples are threatened with imminent destruction.

We are vulnerable. Without financial assets and less political clout, our communities have been targeted. Indigenous peoples are left to defend the last corners of our universe, the most critical ground for cultural survival, and even those sacred sites are being exploited in a time when there is so little respect for the sacred and even

less understanding of Indigenous peoples' desperate need and spiritual mandate to protect sacred places.

All current existing laws and policies fail to protect sacred places. In a world driven by multinational corporations, the very nature of the oppression of Indigenous peoples has rendered us voiceless and powerless. Today, we are hopeful that the establishment of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues will direct attention to issues and remedies that are critical to Indigenous survival. We need the voice of the Indigenous peoples whose very existence absolutely depends on the environment to be restored.

We would strongly urge the Permanent Forum to develop a mechanism by which Native communities impacted or targeted by resource exploitation are visited by United Nations specialized agencies to receive testimony and build a platform for advocacy for the protection of sacred places and the environment on which Indigenous communities rely. The testimony should be directed from the communities to the Permanent Forum in developing its recommendations to ECOSOC under the mandate given.

As Indigenous peoples we carry an inherent responsibility to the land and the health of the environment and those sacred sites that represent and nurture that responsibility are facing incredible, overwhelming and unrelenting threats. Our cultural survival is bonded to the land. Our very existence and hope for survival as distinct cultures is deeply rooted in the land and the health and integrity of sacred places.

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