

Conservation Column, Bob Witzeman

Six Tribes Sign Resolution Opposing Oak Flat Land Exchange

In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks. John Muir (1838-1914)

On June 20th representatives of six Native American Tribes signed a historic resolution east of Superior, AZ at the USFS Oak Flat Campground. The document stated their opposition to the proposed Resolution Copper Company's (RCC) Congressional land swap legislation. Present that day under Oak Flat's massive and ancient Oaks were some 300 Native Americans. In addition, non-Indian opponents of the exchange were present to witness a historic signing.

The ceremony started with an Apache prayer session a mile from Oak Flat. It was conducted by a medicine man, drums and sacred songs. In the background, defiling the ceremony was an active RCC test drilling tower.

Signing the formal resolution were Tribal Chairpersons of the San Carlos Apache, White Mountain Apache, Hopi, Hualapai, Yavapai Apache, Camp Verde, and Tonto Apache Tribes. Speakers from each tribe stated their opposition to the mine.

Reading of the 1200-word, multi-tribe resolution by Vernelda Grant, San Carlos Historic Preservation Director was deeply moving (copies available on request). The drama intensified as Native American with digital cameras photographed their six tribal leaders. Those leaders seated at the table proceeded to sign the document and pass it from one to the other. The ceremony was photographed and covered in the East Valley Tribunes.

Excerpts from the resolution stated: *“The proposed mining operation will, among other things, result in the destruction, violation, and desecration of certain lands sacred to these Native Nations, including areas referred to by non-Indians as Oak Flat, Apache Leap and Devil's Canyon, and adversely impact our ability to continue important practices of our religion and culture.*

“In addition, the mining project proposed by Resolution Copper will wrongfully deplete or contaminate the water resources found in nearby watersheds and aquifers, leaving the neighboring Native Nations and nearby communities in Southeastern Arizona to deal with the permanent religious, cultural and environmental damages of this massive mining project – damages that will continue long after the parent companies of Resolution Copper, foreign mining interests Rio Tinto PC and BHP-Billiton, Ltd., have reaped the profits from the copper ore and water removed from these lands...

“The Tribal Coalition cannot, on any basis, support a legislative land exchange which would allow for the destruction of these culturally significant and environmentally important lands, especially where the devastating impacts from the mining activities to be conducted on, around

and underneath Oak Flat and Apache Leap will continue forever, leaving future generations to suffer from the legacy of damage left behind...

“Rio Tinto has a long history of serious environmental problems and is known throughout the world for its alleged human rights violations and mistreatment of indigenous cultures from the Americas, to Australia and Papua New Guinea...”

“Once the sacred lands and environment of Oak Flat, Apache Leap and Devil’s Canyon have been desecrated and destroyed by the mining operations of Resolution Copper, they can never be restored...”

Oak Flat and its adjacent Devil’s Canyon are ecologically unique and important bird habitats. As has been pointed out before in the *Cactus Wren-dition*, neither Audubon Arizona nor NAS have ever shown the courtesy of consulting with the geographically proximate Maricopa Audubon or Tucson Audubon Societies before embracing this NEPA-exempt, Endangered Species Act and National Historic Preservation Act-weakened land exchange.

Here is a location only an hour from metro Phoenix where chapter members have led Christmas Counts over the last seven consecutive years. Species-wise it is extraordinary. In recent years the area has documented: Rufous-backed Robin, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Slate-colored Dark-eyed Junco, Varied Thrush, Lewis’s Woodpecker, Harris’s Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Sooty and Slate-colored Fox Sparrows. That this biologic, botanic, and ecologic treasure is not part of the Boyce-Thompson IBA is beyond comprehension.

Tucson Audubon has noted the horrendous potential dewatering impact upon priceless Lower San Pedro’s endangered species riparian habitat by RCC’s partner, BHP-Billiton. BHP would dewater the exchange’s San Pedro River land swap property as well as endangered species mitigation properties of SRP, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Land Management, and Nature Conservancy properties located there. How our beloved National Audubon Society and Audubon Arizona could embrace this land swap legislation without prior consultation with their local chapters is difficult to understand.

Photo Caption: Seated from left: San Carlos Apache Tribal Chair Wendsler Nosie, Sr., Tonto Apache Tribal Chair, Hubert Nanty, Hopi Vice-Chair Todd Honyaoma Sr., White Mountain Apache Tribal Chair Ronnie Lupe, Camp Verde Apache Tribal Chair Jamie Fullmer and Hualapai Tribal Chair Charles Vaughn. Standing: San Carlos Apache tribal dignitaries. (Bob Witzeman photo)