

Vatican Denies Sacred Ancestry of Mt. Graham: U of Arizona Defends Exemption From All Environmental and Cultural Protection Laws

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Abstract

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Even the role of Italy's Arcetri Observatory, the sole remaining partner of the UA's MGIO's ill fated "Columbus Project", is being questioned. The City Council of Florence, Italy has invited San Carlos Apache Elders to visit Florence and present their position on the MGIO. Less than thrilled by the prospect of such a meeting UA officials made attempts to subvert the meeting that is scheduled for May. Florence city council officials remain adamant and are critical of the University's attempts to cancel the meeting. "Native American people have been told what to do by Whites for the last five hundred years. The least we can do is to invite them over to tell us what they would like in regard to Arcetri Observatory's participation in the MGIO. If you (UA) are not hiding anything, then you have nothing to fear by us meeting with the San Carlos Tribal Elders."

Full Text

Vatican Denies Sacred Ancestry of Mt. Graham: U of Arizona Defends. Exemption From All Environmental and Cultural Protection Laws

The Vatican, one of the University of Arizona's (UA) three remaining partners in its colossal plan to build the Mt. Graham International Observatory (MGIO) on a site considered sacred to the Apaches, has issued a formal statement denying Apache elders' claim that Mt. Graham is an ancient sacred site and place of continued spiritual practice.

In the project proponent's most recent ploy George Coyne, S.J., the Vatican's Observatory Director, cited the Apaches' lack of title, written records, seasonal dwellings, burial grounds, shrines or religious ritual as evidence that Emerald Peak (site of telescope construction already underway) lacks religious legitimacy. This land, Coyne said, "is a gift from God to be used with reason and to be respected. We believe (our) responsible and legitimate use of (this) land enhances its spiritual character."

Responding to criticism that has accused the Vatican of religious arrogance Coyne lambasted "outsiders" and "ideologs" who he maintains have exploited the situation by manipulating the Endangered Species Act and now seek to do the same with American Indians. Convinced that Apaches don't support their lawsuit, which threatens to halt the project, Coyne concluded the Vatican's position statement with a final dig against environmentalists; "No mountain is as sacred as a human being and there is no desecration more despicable than the use of a human person for self-serving purposes."

Patrica Cummings, attorney representing the San Carlos Apaches in their law suit, said that Coyne's mistrust of the alliance between environmentalists and Indians is unfounded. Cummings takes issue with Coyne's entire statement characterizing it as, "...a classic

example of European inability to understand Native American religion." Dr. Elizabeth Brandt, an anthropologist who has studied sacred sites in Arizona for more than 20 years and prepared a study of Mt. Graham disagrees with the Vatican. "I've never seen so much evidence detailing a sacred site. No competent scholar could have missed these materials."

While the Vatican position remains intransigent, protests at home and abroad have sent UA officials scurrying to Europe to assure their remaining partners that all is still well. The German Social Democratic party is making presentations to the German Parliament that question their government's role in the project. The Max Planck Institute for Radioastronomy continues to receive a steady blitz of calls and faxes protesting their participation in the MGIO.

In Brussels protesters drove a bulldozer to the basilica of Scherpenheuvel with banners proclaiming "Mother Earth is our Cathedral" and "The Earth is Sacred" to dramatize the situation faced by Apaches in their struggle to preserve their spiritual homeland. When confronted by a church official D'Huyvettar, a spokesperson for the action, is reported as having said "Just like you don't want us to occupy your grounds and tear down your church, the Indian people don't want their sacred ground destroyed and expropriated." D'Huyvettar along with 130 Belgian people plan on walking across the United States.

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The UA's MGIO project's history has been characterized by astronomers, University officials and congresspersons ignoring claims of harm by Native Americans. The UA's total disregard for Native American spirituality is evidenced in their continual denial of the testimony of Apache elders and three unanimous resolutions of the Apache Tribal Council concerning the mountains sacredness, testimony backed by extensive documentation. Moreover the UA in its eagerness to build the MGIO, has already destroyed one religious site. According to UA officials the bulldozing of a Native American religious site on top of High Peak (highest peak on Mt. Graham) while erecting a temporary radio tower was done "accidentally."

The UA has successfully pressured federal agencies to accept hasty and flawed biological studies. UA has lobbied Congress and litigated in the courts to obtain exemption from all environmental law including the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered

Species Act. In doing this they have circumvented full public disclosure of the project's cultural and environmental impact and curtailed full judicial review processes.

The UA is now trying to legitimize the project's exemption from all environmental law through a report by Booz, Allen and Hamilton, a "consultant firm." This \$40,000 report, paid for with public funds, is being used by UA to cover up and whitewash the U's total disregard for the constitutional rights of Native people and environmental law.

The portions of the report released to the public make no mention of cultural and environmental issues that brought lawsuits by the Apache Survival Coalition and the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. Nor does the report mention the irreparable damage to the Mt. Graham ecosystem. Site preparation for just the Vatican and Max Planck telescope foundations required the clear cutting of 200 trees in an old-growth forest.

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In the final analysis MGIO is more about UA's desire for prestige and glory at the expense of Apache religious beliefs and U.S. environmental law than anything else.

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