

## Fund of the Seventh Generation

Commission on Human Rights  
Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights  
Working Group on Indigenous Populations, 19th Session, 23-27 July 2001  
Intervention by Sammy Toineeta (Lakota Nation)  
Item 5

Greetings Mme. Chairperson and Distinguished Members of the Working Group:

We would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your re-election as Chairperson of the Working Group. We share the comments expressed by other Indigenous Peoples present during this 19th Session and would also like to express our dismay upon the prospect of losing your insightful and sympathetic leadership and your profound affection for Indigenous Peoples. Your presence will be truly missed. I would like to share some information with the Working Group and the Indigenous Caucus about Sacred Sites.

Sacred Sites, in the United States, as well as other parts of the globe, are under attack more today than ever before. Since there is no clear definition of what a sacred site is to the non-Indigenous people, there is not an adequate understanding of the term, particularly when it comes to commercial development of land and natural resources.

At the grass roots level, in the U.S. alone, there are more than a dozen long term demonstrations taking place in an attempt to preserve sites, many on reserved lands that were negotiated, nation to nation, through a treaty process. Other lands are being legislated out of our control. One of the latest infractions in the U.S. was an 8 1/2 mile tract of ancient petroglyphs which were under federal protection but were instead given over to the state of New Mexico to make way for a new highway project. And today, as we sit here, the Valley of Chiefs, a national shrine, also presumably under federal protection, is on a short list for energy exploration to satisfy the unending search for additional consumable energy.

Because of such legislation, in today's world, many traditional leaders do not have free and total access to their sacred grounds to offer tobacco or search for medicinal plants for healing. In many cases, payment is necessary and even when payment is not required, we compete with construction, tourists, rock climbers and other leisure activities for space.

In an historical context, difficulties over religious freedom in the U.S. have been recorded since as early as 1882 when the Secretary of the Interior banned all 'heathenish dances' and just two years later, a 30 day prison sentence was imposed.

Recently, during negotiations regarding construction on Mt. Graham, a site sacred to the San Carlos Apache as well as other Apache Bands, Fr. Coyne, a Vatican official, stated 'Apache beliefs represent a kind of religiosity to which I cannot subscribe and which must be suppressed with all the force we can muster.' Fr. Coyne made his statement in the mid 1980s. We, Indigenous Peoples and citizens of sovereign nations, must be entitled to the right to define what is sacred to us rather than being dictated to by governments, tourists and land developers.

That Indigenous Peoples share a unique relationship with the land is now empirical knowledge but what is not always understood is that sacred sites are places where reverence for the land is celebrated -- the spirits of the land are acknowledged, not a ski slope.

Policy makers frequently hold Christian assumptions about how spiritual practices should be conducted. They hold that all religion is belief centered and defined by doctrinal principle. However, Indigenous spirituality is a way of life, not a once a week or twice a year practice. The natural world was not created for our benefit but for our careful use. Our traditions tend to emphasize the inner-connectedness between humans and the land and all of creation.

Legislative struggles which began to institutionalize policies against Native Spiritualities began with the early military regime and continue through today. One of our inherent rights must include the ability to preserve and protect our sacred sites and grounds from the destruction of industry, commercialism and tourism to the Seventh Generation.

Thank you, Madam Chairperson.

Attachment 15

17