

Oak Flat: Trump's Final Middle Finger to the Environment

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As Trump's term comes to a dramatic close, the administration's last minute effort to rush through multiple mining projects that pose a grave environmental risk is lost in the headlines

Buried deep in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2015, [section 3003](#) calls for the expeditious facilitation of a land exchange agreement between Resolution Copper Mining, LLC and the United States government to create one of the [largest and deepest](#) copper mines in the country, spanning nearly 11,000 square miles of national forest terrain and penetrating 7,000 miles into beneath the surface of the earth.

The land swap specifically targets approximately 2,500 acres that are not already owned by the mining concern and which rest inside Apache hallowed ground known as Oak Flat in the Tonto National Forest in central Arizona. Considered sacred by the Apache and other First Nation peoples who still use the land they call *Chich'il Bildagoteel* for important ceremonies, food, and a vital link to their heritage, Oak Flat has been at the center of a [decades-long battle](#) between the San Carlos Apache Tribe and Resolution Copper, comprised of extraction industry behemoths Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton.

Closed to mining activities by President Eisenhower in 1955, Oak Flat has since flourished as a significant habitat for wildlife, including several endangered species of fish, snakes, and birds, as well as a popular campground and world-renowned rock climbing destination. Reaffirmed in the early '70s the protective regulations have nevertheless been incessantly targeted by UK-based Rio Tinto, whose lobbying efforts to obtain burrowing rights to the land have been rebuffed 13 times since.

In 2014, John McCain – the [largest recipient](#) of Rio Tinto political contributions in Congress that year – inserted the aforementioned rider in the 2015 NDAA, effectively reversing 66 years of environmental protection law and betraying his own history of advocating for indigenous rights as a [ranking member](#) of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs in 1989, when he led a Republican minority in the fight for the religious freedom of First Nations and the protection of sacred lands.

More than 30 years later, as President Trump leaves office, his administration looks to finish this act of duplicity initiated by his biggest political enemy in yet another demonstration of the hypocrisy that runs through the American political system and pervasive history of broken treaties and disenfranchisement of Native peoples.

Rushing into destruction

The U.S. Forest Service will release the final version of the environmental analysis for the Resolution Copper Project and Land Exchange in three days' time and a full year ahead of schedule as a result of pressure from the Trump administration, [according](#) to local officials.

Members of the San Carlos Apache Nation have been camping out at Oak Flat since January 2020 as part of their continued effort to halt the mining project. Tribal member Wendler Nosie Sr, [interviewed](#) by *The Guardian* in November described the urgency of their plight as the "fourth quarter with two minutes left in the game," adding that Trump's move to push the approval process forward by a year meant they now only "have one minute left."

Oak Flat is just one of several large-scale mining and energy projects the outgoing administration is looking to approve before the proper assessments and consultations with affected populations are made. Other projects include a [lithium mine](#) in Nevada; a helium extraction [project](#) in Utah and an oil and gas drilling [venture](#) in Alaska, among others.

Virtually every one of these projects is facing opposition from Native tribes, whose very survival is threatened by the relentless advance of the extraction industry. That industry not only represents a catastrophic menace to their sources of clean water and food but also poses a direct risk to their safety as the proliferation of so-called "man-camps" or the temporary labor sites, plays a central role in the ongoing tragedy of missing and murdered indigenous women.

In the case of Oak Flat, Native communities have found an [unlikely ally](#) in their fight against Rio Tinto and BHP. A British government pension fund group with a stake in both companies has requested more information from their subsidiary, Resolution Copper, as to the potential impacts the proposed mine would have on Native American cultural and religious sites.

Ally or cover?

Local Authority Pension Fund Forum (LAPFF) Chairman, Doug McMurdo, has voiced his opposition to the mining method Resolution Copper is expected to use in Oak Flat, should the project move forward. The head of the £300 Billion pension investment fund echoes the concerns of the indigenous communities who oppose the "[block caving](#)" method planned, which consists of blasting beneath the surface to extract the copper ore through tunnels and inevitably cause the collapse of the rock above, taking ancient burial grounds, petroglyphs, and medicinal plants with it.

LAPFF has advocated for communities affected by Rio Tinto's irresponsible mining practices in other parts of the world as well. Last year, Rio Tinto faced an official inquiry from the Australian government after the company [blew up](#) 46,000-year old caves in Western Australia that were part of the country's Aboriginal heritage. McMurdo [participated in](#) the parliamentary inquiry that found Rio Tinto culpable of knowingly destroying the Aboriginal cultural heritage site. The LAPFF Chair [pointed](#) to the conclusions as the reason why the fund "has increased its call for companies to engage meaningfully with affected communities. The fact that Rio Tinto's senior management had not reviewed a critical report about the site itself calls into question the company's governance and oversight processes."

But, at the end of the day, the question arises whether such remonstrations are enough to curtail the irreparable damage the extraction industries have done and continue to do to the

environment and to the indigenous communities who are not only fighting for their own survival but the survival of the entire planet.

The legend of Oak Flat

One of the most significant areas of Oak Flat threatened by Resolution Copper's project is a place called Apache Leap. The 400 foot-high cliff is the site of a historic incident of Native American resistance, from which 75 Apache warriors leaped to their death rather than be captured by the U.S. troops that surrounded them after a sneak attack that took the lives of 50 Apache warriors within minutes.

The Legend of Apache Tears is an [enduring account](#) of defiance against an enemy that keeps coming. When the wives and children discovered the bodies of their brave men at the bottom of the precipice, the legend states that their tears turned the white earth at their feet into black stones (obsidian) and, henceforth, anyone who acquired any such stones would never have to cry again since so many tears had already been shed by the Apache women on that tragic occasion.

If we stand with our Native American brothers and sisters against the destruction of their sacred sites, we might realize that they are sacred to us as well and then we might be able to arm ourselves with obsidian to begin the hard road back to living in harmony with nature and avert the creation of the Legend of Oak Flat.

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