



NAVAJO NATION PRESIDENT JOE SHIRLEY, JR. ON THE SANCTITY OF THE SAN FRANCISCO PEAKS

SEPT. 2, 2010

From time immemorial, *Dook'o'osliid*, the mountain known to the foreigners as the San Francisco Peaks, has been sacred to *Diné* – the Navajo People – and to all the indigenous people of northern Arizona.

When the first two foreigners to visit Navajoland, Friars Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante, arrived 234 years ago, surely one of the first things they learned from the Navajos they met, however rudimentary the communication may have been, is that *Diné* hold the mountain that always glitters on top as sacred and highly venerated.

Four great mountains hundreds of miles apart mark the external boundary of our aboriginal homeland. These were placed on Mother Earth by the Holy People who made them repositories of the herbs, plants, stones and soil that go into the medicine bundles still used to heal our people and to restore their lives to harmony. Everywhere across Navajoland on any day of the week, even in this modern world, songs and ceremonies that bring balance to our people's lives invoke the name of this holy place, *Dook'o'osliid*.

To *Diné*, the sacred mountain of the West represents life itself. Our sacred deity, Changing Woman, placed this mountain here for us and bound it to the Earth with a sunbeam when the world was made for the five-fingered, intelligent, Earth dwellers called homo sapiens. Ever since that time, and centuries before the multitude of foreigners first saw it, *Diné* journeyed to this sacred mountain to collect herbs and to make their offerings and prayers. The reverence for which *Diné* hold *Dook'o'osliid* has never ceased, never waned.

After centuries of attempts to subdue and vanquish North America's native people, as Navajo people we are trying to do everything we can to save self, to preserve our identity, and to live by the teachings our ancestors gave to us. *Dook'o'osliid* is one of our strengths. It is our essence. It is *us*. When the foreigners decide to desecrate it to make artificial snow for economic interests alone, that does not help my way of life. That does not help my people's survival. That does not help when I talk to my children and grandchildren about the importance of the Navajo way, and the pride that is to be taken to be Navajo despite all that tells them they and their beliefs are somehow less than others'.

In 2008, the Navajo people were deeply disappointed when the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals' reversed its earlier decision to prevent the desecration of *Dook'o'osliid*. In 2009, we were disappointed again when the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear our case. Tonight I fear we may be disappointed again should the Flagstaff City Council fail to hear the plea of my people, my government and me, and allow any snowmaking to proceed and *Dook'o'osliid* to be further desecrated. For so long, matters like this of great cultural importance to us have fallen on deaf ears, and my people, my elderly and my children are left to suffer what comes from it.

To us who hold this mountain Divine and deserving of that respect, there can be no compromises to saving self. We have always believed that the essence of *Diné* and of our future cannot be compromised. Navajos persevered through adversity, embraced many of the wonderful things of the dominant culture, and are educating their children to succeed in the world. The foundation of that perseverance has always been our teachings, and from the beginning of time as a people the core of our teachings has been our sacred mountains, including *Dook'o'osliid*. Only when these teachings are eroded through the absence of the sacred, when our language and ceremonies fade away, then there will be no cause for compromises to be made.

Each day, unfortunately, we witness that erosion, that chipping away of our way of life and our culture. Over the past eight years, we've seen the U.S. Forest Service, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, the U.S. Supreme Court, and now our neighbors in the City of Flagstaff miss opportunities to help us to perpetuate our ancient way of life for the enjoyment of skiers and the benefit of one developer instead. It is irrefutable that these decisions hurt indigenous people in ways unseen and unfelt by our neighbors as Navajos watch that which they've always known to be holy, immutable and consecrated sacrificed for money, with little empathy shown to us or to our beliefs.

The Navajo are a prayerful people, a resilient and strong people. But we know we can't save self alone. We need help and we must reach out. We have repeatedly objected to the outrageous and profane violation of the sanctity of this holy place, *Dook'o'osliid*. We will continue to pray that this sacred mountain is spared. Our prayers will continue to go up to the Creator. We will pray for our sacred places, for our sacred way of life, and for the preservation of our culture despite the challenges that come in the guise of federal and local decisions.

Navajos are united in their opposition to the use of any water source to make artificial snow for the purpose of skiing. You may count me first among them. Should the Flagstaff City Council vote tonight to allow continued desecration to occur, it will be one more decision by foreigners that chip away at Native American cultures and ways of life.

From the deepest memories of every Navajo person to the core of their being, from the countless songs of innumerable ceremonies, *Diné* know this mountain, *Dook'o'osliid*, to be holy, to be sacred. I ask that you hear my plea and respond so that the spiritual life of my people can continue unmolested 50 years, 100 years, 500 years into the future as it has for the past millennium.



Dr. Joe Shirley, Jr., President
THE NAVAJO NATION