FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Council Delegates advocate on behalf of the Navajo Nation to strengthen UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights

Photo: Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (left) speaking at the U.N. consultation meeting in New York, along with Delegates Alton Joe Shepherd (middle) and Jonathan Hale (right).

NEW YORK, N.Y. – On July 16, Navajo Nation Council Delegates Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill), Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichii, Steamboat), and Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) attended the United Nations World Conference on Indigenous People’s - High-Level Consultation Meeting, regarding the proposed Zero Draft of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Zero Draft is a document that the U.N. developed to address global human rights issues of Indigenous people, and is scheduled to be adopted by the United Nations on September 22 at the upcoming World Conference on Indigenous People’s in New York, N.Y.
The delegates provided input and consultation to the Zero Draft to recommend strengthened language and implementation of the declaration, along with other Indigenous nations from across the world.

At the opening of the U.N. consultation meeting, Delegate Shepherd presented a general statement regarding the Zero Draft document on behalf of the Navajo Nation.

“The Navajo Nation supports four concrete recommendations from the Alta, Norway document: 1) the protection of indigenous women and children from violence; 2) meaningful implementation on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; 3) participation of indigenous peoples in the United Nations system; and 4) protection of sacred sites and places,” stated Delegate Shepherd.

In addition to the general statement, Delegate Witherspoon provided specific recommendations to the Zero Draft, stating that the document needed stronger language regarding the protection of sacred sites and objects.

“In representing the Navajo Nation and Navajo people, we offer changes to paragraphs 12 and 26 in the Zero-Draft outcome document,” said Delegate Witherspoon, who issued the following recommended language in paragraphs 12 and 26:

12. Commit to develop fair, transparent and effective mechanisms, in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned, to ensure access to and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains.

26. Commit to affirm and recognize the right to the protection, preservation and restitution of sacred places, sites and cultural landscapes, and will cooperate with indigenous peoples to establish procedures and mechanisms that effectively promote the implementation of these rights.

Delegate Witherspoon reminded U.N. members that Navajo elected officials are responsible to the Navajo people and are answerable to them for the protection of their lands, territories, resources, and self-determination policies.

In conjunction with the visit to the U.N., Delegate Hale visited with the France Mission to discuss the auction of ancient Navajo ceremonial masks by a private company in Paris, France.

According to Delegate Hale, he said that although the meeting was disappointing, the France Mission recommended that the Navajo Nation meet with the French Embassy in Washington, D.C., who would be able to assist in possibly repatriating the sacred objects.

“The discussion we would need to have with the French government is the development of a policy for a process in verifying the authenticity of the [sacred indigenous] artifacts, as well as consultation with the rightful tribe that it may belong to,” said Delegate Hale.
On July 29, the Naabik’íyáti’ Committee’s Subcommittee on Sacred Sites held a meeting to provide an update report to its members, and invited various Navajo medicine men to provide input regarding the U.N. declaration language and Navajo ceremonial masks.

Speaker Pro Tem LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) suggested that a Navajo medicine man join the Navajo Delegation to provide consultation on the cultural significance of the ceremonial masks, and will accompany the Delegates at the upcoming WCIP consultation meeting on August 18-19.

“It is important that our traditional Navajo medicinal people have an active role in repatriating the sacred ceremonial items and a voice at the U.N., because they are the most knowledgeable when it comes to these types of issues,” said Pro Tem Bates, following the meeting.

In addition to consulting, Pro Tem Bates also recommended that the Navajo medicine men submit a statement to be read before the U.N. General Assembly to advocate for strengthened language in the Zero Draft document on behalf of the Navajo Nation, and possibly to attend the World Conference on Indigenous People in September.


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