



Tsoodzil traditional cultural property designation unites tribes, pueblos



The Mount Taylor traditional cultural property designation with the New Mexico Register of Cultural Properties was a seven-year effort with the collaboration between the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and Pueblos of Acoma, Laguna and Zuni. The New Mexico Supreme Court affirmed the designation on Feb. 6, 2014. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

ALBUQUERQUE — Sometimes, the strength of a unified collective has to power to defeat the machinations of industry and development.

Such was the case with the traditional cultural property (TCP) designation of Mount Taylor in New Mexico.

Since time immemorial, Mount Taylor has been known as Tsoodzil to the Navajo people and has been revered as the southern mountain of the Four Sacred Mountains.

The traditional homeland of the Navajo people is located between the Four Sacred Mountains of Sinaajini (Mount Blanca) to the east, Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor) to the south, Dook'o'sliid (San

Francisco Peaks) to the west and Dibé Nitsaa (Mount Hesperus) to the north.

On March 18, 2014, Navajo Nation Vice President Rex Lee Jim provided the welcome address at Casa Esencia Hotel to celebrate of the designation of Mount Taylor as a TCP. The event was hosted by the Society for Applied Anthropology and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

“Within Navajo, Tsoodzil means ‘strong tongue.’ So we speak with the power of Tsoodzil,” Vice President Jim said. “We are taught that the sacred begins at the tip of our tongue.

“So when we speak of

Tsoodzil, we speak of our ability to articulate, to express ourselves in ways that convinces others,” he added.

Vice President Jim said Mount Taylor allowed Navajos, pueblos and tribes to speak what’s on their mind and in their heart and that it will always be the cultural property of native people.

“Some of us have been fighting on the international level through the United Nations, creating the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, so that all people, wherever they live, where they have sacred sites, that they will be protected,” he said.

The effort to protect Mount Taylor from uranium mining and other industrial development

coalesced in 2007, when the Pueblo of Acoma began coordinating the effort for the TCP designation.

The TCP Workgroup was created as a partnership of five tribes – the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and Pueblos of Acoma, Laguna and Zuni – to nominate Mount Taylor as a TCP with the New Mexico Register of Cultural Properties.

Tribal cultural advisors, elders and traditional practitioners provided narratives on the cultural significance of the mountain and worked in tandem with GIS professionals, hydrologists, environmental specialists and archaeologists to document tribal relationships

to the mountain.

Theresa Pasqual, director of the Pueblo of Acoma Historic Preservation Office, took the lead role in the effort, after being inundated with mail from tribal members opposing the uranium mining.

The spark that ignited the effort to protect the mountain came Pasqual's phone call to the Hopi Tribe and Pueblo of Zuni.

"I wanted to know if they were seeing the same things

undermine the cultural property laws in the State of New Mexico.

The case navigated through the state courts for five years and on Feb. 6, 2014, the New Mexico Supreme Court affirmed the TCP designation.

The high court's decision to uphold the designation of 400,000 acres and assign it TCP status was unprecedented and profound, according to Dr. Jeffery Pappas, N.M. State Historic Preservation Officer and

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that I was seeing at my office: the enormous amount of letters regarding the proposed development happening on Mount Taylor,” she recalled.

A series of meetings titled “Protecting the Sacred” convened after that phone call and over the past seven years, the tribes worked together to map the mountain and reach out to national organizations to bring attention to preserving the mountain.

The Navajo Nation Land Department and Historic Preservation Department provided the maps and GIS data used for the technical aspects of the TCP designation.

“What came out of the effort was truly a partnership and that’s what we’re celebrating,” Pasqual said.

In 2009, the state provided the original TCP designation, which resulted in a mountain of opposing legislation and lawsuits from private landowners, Spanish land grant members and uranium mining companies.

Pasqual said the slew of legislation was meant to

director of the N.M. Historic Preservation Division.

“It’s an immensely important recognition of a very important traditional and cultural property that is unprecedented throughout the American southwest,” Pappas said.

While the mood at Casa Esencia was celebratory, all agreed that the TCP designation of Mount Taylor was only the beginning and tribes and pueblos must continue working together for the protection of sacred sites and tribal sovereignty.

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Navajo Nation Vice President Rex Lee Jim provided the welcome address for the celebration of the Mt. Taylor traditional cultural property designation at Casa Esencia Hotel in Albuquerque on March 18, 2014. He said Tsoodzil means ‘strong tongue’ in Navajo. Tsoodzil is the traditional Navajo name for Mt. Taylor, which is one of the Four Sacred Mountains. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Dr. Jeffery Pappas is the New Mexico Historic Preservation Officer and director of the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division. He said the TCP designation was profound and set precedence for future cases in the American southwest. He noted that TCP designation for over 400,000 acres was unheard of for tribal nations in the country. (Photo by Rick Abasta)