

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/ej-montini/2021/03/03/oak-flat-native-american-holy-site-we-have-unholy-view/6906882002/>

We've got an unholy view of Native American holy sites like Oak Flat

Opinion: Would we take the same view of a copper mining proposal like Oak Flat if it was under a Christian site?

[EJ Montini](#)

Arizona Republic

Published 12:16 p.m. MT Mar. 3, 2021

The federal government by way of the U.S. Forest Service has [delayed the land swap at Oak Flat](#), an area about 70 miles east of Phoenix considered sacred by Apaches and other Southwestern tribes.

The fight over a plan to greatly expand the copper mining operation at the property has been going on for years.

Gov. Doug Ducey believes it should be over, that the project should move forward.

He said in a statement, “I am extremely disappointed in the administration’s decision to cease progress on Arizona’s Resolution Copper project, which is set to grow jobs and is estimated to create a direct and indirect economic impact of more than \$1 billion to Arizona’s economy every year.”

What if we found ore under an LDS temple?

The Oak Flat project would be run by Resolution Copper, which is owned by British-Australian mining firms Rio Tinto and BHP.

The process is called block cave mining, a massive underground digging operation. Experts say that, eventually, the land above would sink, creating a crater nearly 2 miles in diameter and about 800 to 1,000 feet deep.

The first time I wrote about Oak Flat, in 2015, I quoted an essay from The New York Times by Lydia Millet, which said in part: “If Oak Flat were a Christian holy site, or for that matter Jewish or Muslim, no senator who wished to remain in office would dare to sneak a backdoor deal for its destruction into a spending bill – no matter what mining-company profits or jobs might result.

But this is Indian religion. Clearly the Arizona congressional delegation isn't afraid of a couple of million conquered natives."

To bring that argument closer to home, imagine if an enormous copper deposit was found deep underground beneath the Mission San Xavier del Bac south of Tucson, or beneath the Chapel of the Holy Cross in the buttes of Sedona, or the Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mesa.

Would there be a chance in hell that it would go forward?

Or that we'd even be having an argument?

The fact is, we have an unholy view of Native American holy sites. We don't buy them. We don't believe them.

An age-old conflict between faith and money

This isn't the first time the owners of Resolution Copper have found themselves in a situation like this.

Not too long ago the chairman of Rio Tinto resigned following the outcry in Australia when [the company destroyed a 46,000-year-old sacred indigenous site](#).

The company blew up the Juukan Gorge caves in Western Australia to expand an iron ore mine.

Aboriginal people had been fighting for years to protect the caves, which had enormous archeological and cultural value.

In the end, money trumped the beliefs of native people.

It's been that way for a long time.

Arizona Democratic Rep. Raúl Grijalva, who has been fighting against the Oak Flat deal for years, said in 2015, "Congress shouldn't be in the business of helping big corporations at others' expense, and it certainly shouldn't break faith with Native American communities."

In the end, the conflict in Oak Flat is between faith and money.

Between that which some consider holy.

And the unholy way we look at them.

Reach Montini at ed.montini@arizonarepublic.com.