

Threats to our sacred lands and cultural patrimony

A letter to Senator Martin Heinrich, D-N.M.

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Thank you for taking the time to meet with us.

As you know, Pueblos in New Mexico are faced with increased threats to our sacred lands that are no longer part of our reservations. This is exemplified by the concern of the Pueblos with proposed fracking near Chaco Canyon that is to be addressed in the 2017 Resource Management Plan Amendment by the Bureau of Land Management.

The New Mexico House of Representatives underscored the need for our communities to have tribal input in discussions about the protection of Chaco Canyon as outlined in House Memorial 70, introduced by Rep. Derrick Lente from the Sandia and Isleta pueblos in the most recent legislative session.

We are taught by our parents and grandparents the way of life that honors and respects everyone and everything. Our ancestors sacrificed a tremendous amount to make sure our lands, cultural patrimony-heritage, and other essential elements critical to maintain our way of life, culture and language are sustained and fulfilled, to be passed on to future generations. As youth we are faced with the threat of not having these essential elements to pass on, when access or damage to sacred lands becomes a challenge and cultural patrimony leaves our communities and appears on auction blocks. These disruptions have a huge impact on our ability to fulfill our sacred trust to maintain a way of life as gifted to us by our Creator. This threatens our existence as a people.

Therefore, legislation such as the STOP Act, introduced by Sen. Heinrich, is a critical step to protect our sacred items. The PROTECT Patrimony resolution carried by Rep.

Steve Pearce was an important first step in condemning the harmful impact of the loss of our sacred items.

The public conversation regarding the protection of our cultural resources needs to go to a deeper level to convey that we have a life-or-death connection to what we are fighting for. In particular, our cultural patrimony and sacred items have great meaning to us and we must take the extra step to express what we have been taught and help defend our ancestors' sacrifices. The use of our knowledge and way of thinking reflecting our core values may give others the perspective to recognize that there is a tremendous amount of meaning and reason behind our fight.

The creation of our life started out as a circle of gifts coming from our Creator.

Since the beginning of time we were blessed with many gifts such as life, land and these sacred items to be used in ceremony. Each item, land and life connects us to our identity and core values. Core values such as love, respect and culture were gifted to us by our Creator

and passed on to us from one generation to another since time immemorial. These values help define what is expected of us as family and community members.

Without our cultural patrimony and sacred items, we risk the disruption of our ties to our Creator and the loss of our core values. An increasing amount of historic tribal lands and sacred sites are now part of state monuments, state parks, national parks, national forests and designated wilderness areas. These places are our footprints, tying us to our Creator. Unfortunately, there are now restrictions that limit our access to these areas that we have long used for ceremony and pilgrimages. We want to be able to teach our younger generations our traditional way of life and how to use and respect the land.

Our sacred items are gifts and tools to sustain a way of life through ceremonies. We use these items to educate ourselves with the values that our ancestors gave us.

Our generation is faced with growing challenges unseen by previous generations. Language and culture are very fragile and are directly threatened by limited access to traditional sites, disruptions to ceremonies and sacred items “missing” or stolen. Failing to protect our sacred objects and maintain access to our lands could end the circle of life. Without both, future generations and those yet to be born are robbed of the right to a way of life. The knowledge and means for our generations to fulfill their sacred trust to future generations is destroyed.

We ask for your support of the STOP Act and continued efforts to return sacred items.

We also ask your support to provide the opportunity for Pueblos to have adequate consultation in dealing with development and be able to comment on the potential impacts to sacred sites such as Chaco Canyon.

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