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Lawsuit filed to halt Peaks desecration

By Brenda Norrell
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FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. - The Navajo Nation, Yavapai-Apache Nation and the White Mountain Apache Tribe joined environmentalists and filed a lawsuit in federal court in Phoenix, seeking an injunction to halt proposed snowmaking from wastewater on sacred San Francisco Peaks.

At the same time, in Paris, Navajo President Joe Shirley Jr. appealed to UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) for support in protecting the Navajos' sacred mountain, "Dook'o'osliid."

During a private meeting with Ahmed Sayyad, assistant director-general for external relations and cooperation for UNESCO, Shirley said the preservation of the Dine' language and the protection of Navajo sovereignty are of primary importance.

"The Navajo Nation, as a people and as a nation, ought to be recognized as sovereign," Shirley told Sayyad and his staff during a one-hour meeting at UNESCO headquarters.

"One of the ways of preserving our

way of life is to move UNESCO to declare the San Francisco Peaks as a World Heritage Site. At this point, we want to work with UNESCO to be recognized as a sovereign."

Sayyad told Shirley that UNESCO has already begun work to try to preserve 6,000 indigenous languages around the world in order to retain the holistic cultural and ecological diversity they represent.

"To the Navajo people, the San Francisco Peaks are as sacred as the Quran to Muslims, as sacred as the pages of the Bible to Christians," Shirley said. "Desecrating this mountain is like tearing out pages of the scriptures, wadding them up and throwing them away. When you desecrate the mountain, you're doing away with a way of life. It's not right. It's sacrilegious."

Meanwhile, the three Arizona Indian tribes and three organizations - the Sierra Club, Flagstaff Activist Network and the Center for Biological Diversity - filed the legal action to halt the U.S. Forest Service from allowing the Arizona Snowbowl ski area to expand its operations.

The lawsuit, filed in federal district court in Phoenix, charges the For-

est Service with violations of the National Environmental Policy Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and other land and cultural protection laws.

Robert Tohe, Navajo and Sierra Club environmental justice organizer in Flagstaff, said the mountain represents homes to the Holy People and is prominent in the culture of all Southwest tribes.

"Wastewater on the Peaks is like desecrating a cathedral," Tohe said.

Indian tribes are joined by scientists who are alarmed by the possible effect on the sensitive mountain terrain.

"People should be worried about the unforeseen environmental effects that may be caused by spraying wastewater on an ecologically sensitive and sacred mountain," Tohe said.

"There is mounting evidence of low levels of pharmaceuticals and personal care products in wastewater."

Paul Torrence, biochemist and member of the Sierra Club in Flagstaff,

said, "The water they would use meets standards for irrigating farmland, not for people to drink.

"There are chemicals in the water for which no safety standards have been set, and which may have harmful human impacts. Not only that, but delivering treated sewage water as snow to high elevation mountains changes the entire dynamic, causing potential harmful effects which neither the Forest Service nor the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality have considered."

The Sierra Club, which has 13,000 members in Arizona, is also concerned with potential soil erosion and loss of wildlife habitat from cutting thousands of aspen, ponderosa pine and spruce-fir trees to accommodate expanding the ski runs by 47 percent.

The Snowbowl proposal also calls for building two new buildings, a 10-million-gallon water tank for the treated wastewater near the top of a ski lift, and building 14 miles of pipeline to bring in the city's treated sewage water.

The Forest Service rejected American Indian tribes' administrative appeals and approved the Snowbowl proposal on June 8.

However, the Forest Service determined that the entire area around the San Francisco Peaks - 74,380 acres - is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. The Forest Service has identified 13 American Indian tribes which hold the Peaks sacred.