

TNB: Climbing, Copper, and Campaign Finance in Arizona -- and why you should care

By Michaela Webb

Before I moved to Arizona a little over a year ago for college, the only thing that the word “Phoenix” or “Arizona” made me think of was “hot as hell!” As I flew in, I saw a sprawling metropolis, windows and fake waterways filled with Colorado River water reflecting blindingly harsh light. It looked impossible to escape, and surrounded by desert wasteland. I felt sick.

Little did I know that less than an hour’s drive from the massive city there’s a beautiful climbing and bouldering oasis called Oak Flat (also known as Queen Creek Canyon). The area is a network of shallow canyons carved into bomber volcanic tuff. The walls of the canyons are home to sport and trad lines on pinnacles, and the valley floors are dotted with almost infinite egg shaped boulders. It’s a pocket-lover’s paradise.



Oak Flat is home to the oldest outdoor bouldering competition in Arizona. It’s also an important ecosystem and a vital watershed area, and home to enough migrating bird species to make it a birding destination. It’s a place to escape from the bustling insanity of Phoenix.

But Oak Flat is in grave danger: One of the largest copper deposits ever discovered in Arizona lies directly underneath the climbing area and

campground. Resolution copper, a subsidiary of the foreign Rio Tinto mining company, has been given rights to the land.

What's more, the rights to the land were given away in a sleazy way. Arizona senators John McCain and Jeff Flake added a small section on page 1,103 of a must-pass 1,648-page military spending bill that gave more than 2,400 acres of the previously protected Tonto National Forest in and around Oak Flat to Resolution Copper for mining.

I did a little bit of digging on Open Secrets, a website that makes campaign finance information readily available to the public, and found that John McCain is the top receptor of campaign contributions by Rio Tinto mining company.

The combination of the underhanded tactics used to give the land away and the possibility of ulterior motives involved in the land swap seem to me to be enough to discount McCain's claims that he made this move in the best interest of the people of Arizona. The destruction of Oak Flat will be a tremendous loss not only to Arizonans who value it as a climbing and hiking area, but also to the native peoples of Arizona who have historical, cultural, and spiritual ties to the land.

More than a quarter of Arizona is tribal land, and the state has a rich Native American history. The San Carlos Apache are a group that has historically lived off the land of Southern Arizona. Their culture and religious beliefs are intimately connected with the landscape and wilderness of the area, and certain places are sacred to them. Oak Flat is one of these places.

San Carlos Apache sacred sites have a long history of being destroyed in the interest of development and profit by third parties with no meaningful



connections to the land. In 1993 the University of Arizona and the Vatican began construction on an observatory on top of Mount Graham despite the fact that it is one of the most important sacred places for the San Carlos Apache people. It is a burial site for their elders, and a portal to communicate with their gods. In 1873 the US government removed the area from the Apache reservation and re-purposed it as public lands (controlled by the US Forest Service), [despite the knowledge that it was a sacred area](#). Unfortunately the University of Arizona and the Vatican identified Mt. Graham as a prime spot to build an astronomy observatory, and in 1991 they began construction despite opposition from the Apache tribe.

If Oak Flat is mined, as is currently planned, so much will be lost. The San Carlos will see one of the last remaining places of spiritual significance to them destroyed. They will no longer be able to use it as a place to gather food and medicinal plants, host dances and healing ceremonies, or perform traditional coming of age ceremonies for their young women. The climbing community of Arizona will lose access to many of the beautiful routes and boulders that call them back weekend after weekend. Some of these boulders will be excavated and destroyed with heavy equipment while some of them will no longer be accessible to the public once the mine goes in. The hikers and birders will lose access to trails and pristine views. Wildlife in the area will be driven into smaller and smaller chunks of wild land as Phoenix consumes the surrounding desert, and wilderness is replaced with piles of toxic waste to feed our insatiable appetite for money and growth.

If we let places like Oak Flat be destroyed, we give up some integral part of ourselves. You know as well as I that there is something special and irreplaceable about wilderness. It is where our species evolved, and we are not whole without it.

These are the reasons that we need to stand together and act to protect Oak Flat. Currently the main group fighting the issue are the San Carlos Apache, while the climbing community is underrepresented. In order to win this battle, all groups need to be actively engaged. The San Carlos, the climbing community, the birders, hikers, and weekend campers, and the environmentalists and ecologists will all need to bond together.

Although fights against huge corporations and monetary interests can sometimes seem futile, passionate public protest by people who care can ultimately be the deciding factor in the fate of an area slated for mining. You may have heard that earlier this year, [Turkey's largest crag was threatened by mining](#), but was saved through public protest. The climbing community came together to demand that the area be protected, and that's the only reason that it wasn't destroyed.

I believe that there are enough people and groups who value Oak Flat as a rock climbing area, a sacred site, a wilderness area, and an ecosystem, to keep it from becoming a big hole in the ground and a pile of toxic mine tailings. I propose that the climbing, hiking, and birding communities join together with the San Carlos Apache to protect Oak Flat. If this happens, the movement will gain a whole lot of power.

[Here](#) is a link to the primary San Carlos Apache website aimed at protecting Oak Flat. Sign a petition, write a letter to congress, and stay updated on the situation. The San Carlos have already been mounting a powerful campaign against the mine, so all that we need to do is join them. Now is the time to take action to protect this area.