May 22, 2024

Subject: Protect Izęę’ Bich’ilwozh (”Medicine Canyon,” also known as John Long Canyon)

Dear U.S. Forest Service and Other Interested Parties:

On Thursday May 2, 2024 the White Mountain Apache Tribe’s venerable cultural advisors—Larold Pinal, Berni Santa Maria, Orlando Carol, and Gregg Henry—convened at Fort Apache to advise me in my capacity as the Tribe’s Cultural Resources Director. The advisors informally adopted a position of supporting the protection and rehabilitation of the lands currently and formerly under Apache stewardship and aegis, including the riparian areas, farmlands, grasslands, and woodlands here at Fort Apache.

In addition, my advisors specifically considered the proposed formal petition under preparation by the Center for Biological Diversity and its allies to designate about 5500 acres of ecologically diverse and culturally significant lands in Tsé Yáhítsós (“Rocks Peaking,” Chiricahua Mountains) as a Zoological Botanical Area (ZBA). The proposed ZBA would focus on what U.S. maps refer to as “John Long Canyon.” My advisors understand that, after a brief and ineffective public comment period in 2023, the U.S. Forest Service Coronado National Forest approved the “Chiricahua Public Access Project” to facilitate motor vehicle use of Long John Canyon by hunters, woodcutters, relic hunters, and recreators. That decision appears to have been made without the level of consultation appropriate to the canyon and its immense and diverse values.

My advisors respectfully offer the following recommendations and requests:

1. The U.S. Forest Service Coronado National Forest should give the ZBA petition every favorable consideration and should initiate consultation regarding this culturally significant area with other potentially interested and affected Tribes, most notably the Fort Sill Apache Tribe, the Mescalero Apache Tribe, the San Carlos Apache Tribe, and the Tohono O’odham Nation.

2. Such consideration and consultation is warranted by the deep and ongoing history of Indigenous attachments to and respectful uses of the Western reaches of Tsé Yáhítsós. Tsé Yáhítsós and surrounding lands and associated waters were protected and set aside by the U.S. Government for the exclusive use and benefit of the Chiricahua Apache. Chiricahua descendants need and deserve concerted opportunities to reassert their knowledge and perspective in the management of their lands. Government agencies too often emphasize information provided by archaeologists and discount information provided by Indigenous landowner descendants. To illustrate the point that the U.S. Forest Service Coronado National Forest should invest in learning more from Indigenous rightsowners, we provide some Ndee biyát’j’ (”Apache language”) White
Mountain Apache placenames relating to this general area. These include Tú Sikąą (“Water Lying,” Apache Pass), Tł’ok’aa’ Bee Nıitsóósi (“Arrow Grass Protecting Water,” Near Apache Pass); Sáí Tú Bee Hilįį’ (“Water Flows Into Sand,” spring near Fort Bowie); Tsé Sijaa’ (“Pile of Rocks,” Turkey Creek); Tú Nteel Ch’inliļ’ (“Wide Stream Flowing Out,” Cave Creek); T’iis Sīkād (“A Cottonwood Tree Is Standing,” Near Cave Creek’); and Tú Díhił (“Black Water,” Douglas). Indigenous placenames provide a wealth of knowledge regarding the conditions and uses of land and water in preindustrial times.

3. Such consideration and consultation is further warranted because the proposed ZBA harbors an exceptional diversity of native flora, including numerous species of agave, grasses, forbs, shrubs, oaks, and other riparian plants, most of which are centrally important in Ndee Bii At’ę’hii (“Apache way of life,” including cultural, environmental, and medicinal knowledge).

4. In light of these placenames and the native animals and plants that make their home within the proposed ZBA and provide a healing resource base, and as we await results of meaningful consultations with the Fort Sill Apache Tribe, the Mescalero Apache Tribe, the San Carlos Apache Tribe, and the Tohono O’odham Nation landowners, the White Mountain Apache Tribe cultural advisors recommend provisional adoption of Iżęę’ Bich’ilwozh (“Medicine Canyon”) to replace the inappropriate and intrusive use of the “Long John Canyon” place name.

Respectfully submitted,

Ramon Riley, Cultural Resource Director/ NAGPRA Representative Nohwike’ Bagowah Culture Center White Mountain Apache Tribe