

off the wall



Oak Flat, a sacred Apache site and climbing landmark, faces irreversible destruction as a foreign-owned mining project nears federal approval

Story by **Ryleigh Norgrove**

Oak Flat, known to the Western Apache as *Chi'chil Bildagoteel*, sits within Arizona's Tonto National Forest, just outside the rugged, sun-bleached town of Superior. For generations of climbers, it has been a proving ground.

In the early 1990s, it was the backdrop of the Phoenix Bouldering Competition—then the largest outdoor bouldering event in the world. It was here that 14-year-old Chris Sharma made history, marking his explosive entry into the climbing world. And it was here that American bouldering took root.

A mesa of volcanic tuff and desert oak, the area holds hundreds of established climbing routes and bouldering problems. Classic lines like Power of Silence Vio, Black Dahlia V12, and The Coffin 5.12 bookmark its place in the history of American climbing.

As Tommy Caldwell told the American Alpine Club last year, Oak Flat isn't just a climbing destination—it was the epicenter of a cultural moment:

"Climbers slipped on tattered Gramicci pants and duct-taped down jackets, unzipped themselves from tents or crawled out of the back of pickup trucks. Like cattle coming in for their morning feed, everyone wandered down to the start line. It was 1994, and this ragtag crew represented America's cutting edge."

But for the Western Apache, it is far more: a sacred gathering place where worship is inseparable from the land.

Today, with no great ritual, Oak Flat lies silent. Not with peace, but pause—like something held in the throat of the desert before it's hollowed. The land is slated for transfer to Resolution Copper, a mining company jointly owned by foreign multinationals Rio Tinto and BHP—firms that see no story, no sacred—just ore.

With the Supreme Court's recent refusal to intervene, the land transfer could happen at any time. The U.S. Forest Service had

already issued a 60-day notice of its intent to publish the final Environmental Impact Statement earlier this year—a procedural trigger for the handoff.

If the project moves forward, it would leave a two-mile-wide crater in a place still used for prayer. The land transfer would mark the largest loss of climbing access in U.S. history—and a far deeper erasure for the Apache.

"Oak Flat is our spiritual lifeblood—like Mount Sinai for Jews or Mecca for Muslims—the sacred place where generations of Apache have connected with our Creator," said Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr., founder of Apache Stronghold.

This land has long been contested, but today, it stands at the heart of a national battle over religious freedom, Indigenous sovereignty and the future of public lands.

The handoff, originally authorized by a rider in the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act, would give Resolution Copper more than 2,000 acres of public land—including Oak Flat—to develop one of the largest underground copper mines in the world.

In response, Apache Stronghold, a coalition of San Carlos Apache and allies, filed a lawsuit under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, arguing that the land transfer would effectively erase their ability to practice their religion.

"The U.S. government is rushing to give away our spiritual home before the courts can even rule—just like it rushed to erase Native people for generations," Nosie said.

Over the past four years, the Apache Stronghold case has made its way through the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, where it was narrowly rejected in a 6–5 decision in March. On June 14, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case—effectively allowing the land transfer to proceed. In a rare dissent, Justice Neil Gorsuch,

Photo Courtesy Access Fund

joined by Justice Clarence Thomas, called the Court's refusal "a grievous mistake... with consequences that threaten to reverberate for generations."

"They view this case as an existential crisis for their religious tradition," said Joe Davis, an attorney for Apache Stronghold. "They haven't given up any rights or been imprisoned, yet they're being treated worse than prisoners who receive religious accommodations."

Still, federal agencies are moving ahead.

Both Resolution Copper parent companies, BHP and Rio Tinto, have long track records in global mining—extracting copper, iron ore, coal and other minerals—and have faced criticism for their environmental records and the social consequences of their operations.

In 2020, Rio Tinto drew international condemnation after it leveled 46,000-year-old Aboriginal rock shelters at Juukan Gorge, Australia. In 2015, BHP came under fire after the collapse of the Samarco dam in Brazil, which killed 19 people and released a torrent of iron ore tailings—mining waste laced with heavy metals—across hundreds of kilometres of river valley.

While Resolution Copper is headquartered in the U.S., its ownership and global ties have raised additional concerns. Rio Tinto, the majority stakeholder on the project, counts China's state-owned Chinalco as its largest shareholder, and both Rio Tinto and BHP generate a significant share of their revenue from Chinese markets. Though the company has promoted the project as a way to support U.S. demand for copper, it has not committed to processing or refining the ore domestically. Critics worry that copper extracted from Oak Flat could ultimately be exported to supply foreign industries—benefiting global markets at the expense of sacred land.

The legacy of these companies hangs heavily over Oak Flat, where similar concerns about cultural destruction, environmental harm and corporate accountability have galvanized opposition from tribes, climbers and conservation groups.

In recent years, the Access Fund has moved beyond access-based advocacy to stand in broader solidarity with movements for tribal sovereignty and land protection. For the last two decades, it has filed legal challenges, lobbied lawmakers and worked alongside tribal partners to protect the site.

"This fight challenges us to reckon with how our community shows up for Indigenous sovereignty, and the preservation of sacred and public lands," said Erik Murdock, deputy director of the Access Fund. "If we fail to protect Oak Flat, it sets a dangerous precedent for how foreign entities can permanently destroy both climbing resources and cultural landscapes."

If the land transfer moves forward, the consequences will reach far beyond Arizona. The 9th Circuit's ruling—that there is no religious freedom violation when the government gives away sacred land—sets a dangerous precedent.

"Even if the land transfer goes through, the Access Fund isn't going anywhere," Murdock said. "We will continue to support legal



Top: Oak Flat cragging

Above: Oak Flat boulders

challenges, press for legislative solutions, and work alongside our tribal and conservation partners to resist mining activities that will destroy climbing access and sacred land."

For now, Oak Flat lies silent. The drills haven't arrived. But erosion tells the story here—of bootprints and tire tracks, of sudden heat and endless rain, of histories both etched and erased. And its silence is not safe—it is a breath held, a balance waiting to break.

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Photos: James Micheal, Nicole Anderson