

# PROTECTING M

**M**ount Taylor, a 11,301 foot volcanic peak, commands the view across northwestern New Mexico and figures prominently in the cultural lives of the Native Americans indigenous to the region. It also commands the view across the Grants Uranium Belt, once the center of uranium production in the United States, and a target of a new wave of uranium development activities. Recently, Mount Taylor has also commanded media and political attention in response to a protection initiative by five Native American Tribes to have the mountain and its surrounding mesas (above 8000 feet in elevation) recognized as a Traditional Cultural Property (TCP) on the New Mexico List of Historic Places.

The Mount Taylor protection initiative began on February 14, 2008, when five Native American Tribes — Pueblo of Acoma, Pueblo of Laguna, Pueblo of Zuni, the Hopi Tribe and the Navajo Nation — jointly filed an Emergency Nominating Petition with New Mexico's State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) Katherine Slick, seeking to designate of Mount Taylor and the surrounding mesas located on Federal land as a Traditional Cultural Property through listing by the New Mexico Cultural Properties Review Committee (CPRC).

In the petition, the Tribes tell the State Historic Preservation Officer:

*This emergency listing is necessary to give the Nominating Tribes the ability to fulfill their sacred duty to protect the TCP, the Mountain and the people...*

*Based on prior experience during the previous mining boom era, the Nominating Tribes are quite knowledgeable about how this [mining activity] affects the Traditional Cultural Property and their existence. For the Nominating Tribes closest to the Traditional Cultural Property, this includes their literal existence.*

*Without a listing on the State of New Mexico Register, the Nominating Tribes do not get notice of proposed state and federal action in the TCP. Of particular concern are state issuance of permits by the State of New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division for exploratory mining and other activities. The New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division has a streamlined process in place that allows these activities without notice to anyone where the site is less than five acres and there is no listed property within the site. As a result of this stream-lined process, a permit was issued for exploratory mining at the exact location of a reburial done pursuant to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.*

Following receipt of the Emergency Petition, the New Mexico Cultural Properties Review Committee convened a hearing February 22, 2008 and agreed to an emergency listing of Mount Taylor on the New Mexico Registry of Cultural Properties requested in the Emergency Petition. In its news release regarding the listing the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Division (directed by the SHPO) said:

*The emergency listing affords protections to Mount Taylor for one year while the CPRC investigates the property to determine if it should be permanently listed in the State Register. During that time the tribes will more fully develop the nomination,*

*but must finalize it within 365 days or it will become ineligible to be listed for a period of five years.*

But instead of working toward the permanent listing of Mount Taylor and the surrounding mesas, the Nominating Tribes find they are being forced to submit the Emergency Petition for a second hearing.

Following the Emergency Listing, voices articulating the importance of Mount Taylor to Native communities in the area, and voices of area interests who argue they were left out of the review process, were heard loudly in the region. A major concern by some area residents was that they would not be allowed access to the land. But the TCP allows for access to homeowners, campers, hikers, hunters, other recreational users, and fuel and nut gatherers. The primary impact will be on the forest service and other agencies in evaluating the impact of development, such as roads, communication towers, exploratory drilling, and mining on the mountain.

New Mexico State Senator David Ulibarri (see *Voices from the Earth*, Spring 2008) filed a complaint to New Mexico Attorney General (NMAG) Gary King about lack of notice. In response, the NMAG's office issued a letter to the Historic Preservation Division on May 6, 2008, requiring the Committee to rehear the petition in order to validate the CPRC decision of February 22, 2008 listing of Mount Taylor as TCP.

The Attorney General's letter asserted that this action is necessary because the Historic Preservation Division, while meeting two out of three public notification criteria, did not "...provide notice to property owners and others with a demonstrated interest. A demonstrated interest is a 'legally recognized interest.' [and] Landowners whose property is in or near the TCP and lessees of such land have a demonstrated interest..." While the Emergency Petition was written to exclude private property owners, so as to only affect Federal lands, the Attorney General's office felt that: "...the exclusion did not preclude these private property interests from being 'similarly affected' by virtue of their proximity to the TCP."

As a result, the Cultural Properties Review Committee of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs Historic Preservation Division notified and published an announcement of the Emergency Petition, and held a meeting at the Cibola County Convention Center on June 14, 2008 to reconsider the Listing. At that meeting, the Emergency Petition was again approved.

## BACKGROUND

The Five Nominating Tribes submitted a lengthy and eloquent compilation of the depth and intensity of the cultural value of the Mount Taylor area to their people. The full citations for the excerpts below can be found in the Emergency Petition and its attachments. In describing the TCP and their concern for its protection, the Petition of the Five Nominating Tribes stated:

*The Mount Taylor Traditional Cultural Property is a very large area. With the notable exception of the uranium mining boom in the 1960s-80s, there has been relatively few alterations to the area for the past sixty years. While certain activities of the Nominating Tribes have been cut short due to fencing in the area (at least one sacred trail for Zuni Pueblo has been blocked by*

*fencing, making pilgrimages quite difficult, if not impossible) many activities are still being performed just as they have been since before recorded history. However, the extensive presence of the Nominating Tribes in the Traditional Cultural Property is now threatened with another mining boom, with all the associated development in and around the TCP. Based on prior experience during the previous mining boom era, the Nominating Tribes are quite knowledgeable about how this affects the Traditional Cultural Property and their existence. For the Nominating Tribes closest to the Traditional Cultural Property, this includes their literal existence.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF HANAU WATER OFFICE



*The last mining boom brought disastrous consequences to the Pueblos of Acoma and Laguna. Several tribal members worked in the mines; some members have died as a result of this work, as well as family members who also came into contact with uranium brought into their homes by the miners. Other former workers have major health problems. These problems led to federal legislation to attempt to provide some, if inadequate, compensation to the miners. However, some of the most affected were the wives who washed the clothes of the miners and they are not eligible for compensation. A secondary consequence of the uranium boom was the result of the population boom in the area. Acoma and Laguna suffered the contamination of their farmlands in the Rio San Jose Valley due to inadequate infrastructure in the city of Grants. Raw sewage contaminated the land and*

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the major water storage facility on the river for Acoma and Laguna, Acomita Lake. It took a major lawsuit and several years of work to make the river, its associated aquatic resources, lands and reservoir usable again. Another secondary effect was the contamination of all but one of the fresh water aquifers in the region. This aquifer is now under extreme stress, taking the brunt all most water use for industrial and other municipal uses in the region, including the TCP. Efforts to clean up other aquifers that are contaminated as a direct result of the last mining boom are still on-going forty years later. The Navajo Nation also suffered similar consequences as a result of the last mining boom.



Also in the Emergency Petition are historical, traditional, and cultural background information by four of the Nominating Tribes to support the listing of Mount Taylor as a Traditional Cultural Property.

## Hopi Tribe

Mount Taylor and its surrounding landscape, including Horace and Bibo Mesas, have great cultural significance to the Hopi Tribe. Hopi oral traditions associate many Hopi deities and religious personages with Mount Taylor through their epic deeds, and because the mountain is their home. Research conducted for this project has identified 28 Hopi deities and religious personages associated with Mount Taylor, and additional

research will probably identify more. Through these deities and religious personages, Mount Taylor has an importance in many Hopi religious ceremonies and religious societies, especially the *katsina* belief system. Twenty-six Hopi clans are associated with Mount Taylor, because of their ancient migrations through the Mount Taylor area, and because of their participation in historic population movements that brought them by Mount Taylor. In addition, 10 present day First Mesa Tewa clans have close cultural connections with Mount Taylor.

## Navajo Tribe

*Tsoodzil*, Mount Taylor, is one of six sacred mountains for the Diné (Navajo). The Diné believe the mountains are alive and attribute “human qualities and personalities” with these sacred entities. Symbiosis between the Diné and the mountains is achieved through people conducting prayers and offerings to the sacred mountains, and in turn the sacred mountains provide life forms such as plants, animals, and water springs. A disruption of the existing harmony between humans and the mountains will result in catastrophic events. According to the Diné, “If insulted, the mountains will no longer respond to the ceremonial requests of the Diné and wreak havoc upon the earth.”

*Tsoodzil*, is a female mountain. She is a “bringer of life” as well as a “taker of life.” She is known to have rebelled previously by cutting off her turquoise dress and shaving one side of her head to show her rebellious nature. This type of rebellion by *Tsoodzil* translates to the loss of natural resources provided by the sacred mountain, which are necessary to sustain life, both human and non-human. To extract minerals from her is to disturb her and the deity, *Tl’iish Tsoh*, Big Snake, who guards her. Continued ground disturbing activities cause her to rebel and destroy all in her path.

## Zuni Pueblo

Mount Taylor is *Dewankwi Kyabachu Yalanne*, which translates to “in the east snow-capped mountain.” Zuni regards *Dewankwi Kyabachu Yalanne*, the entire large mountain, which covers approximately 25 miles (40 km) in diameter, as sacred. *Dewankwi Kyabachu Yalanne* is one of the places mentioned in Zuni oral history, and serves as one of many symbolic markers in Zuni migration legends. Zuni or *A:Shiwi* people emerged from the fourth underworld and embarked on a perilous journey to find the middle place. ...[T]he migration accounts “create a symbolic bond between the Zuni people and their environment and provide an ‘historical’ context for their tribal customs and organization.”

Zuni categories of TCPs include a wide range of cultural sites including, but not limited to, archaeological sites (including pictograph and petroglyph sites), collection areas for plants, water and minerals, natural landmarks, specific mountains, shrines, sacred sites, and pilgrimage trails. The Zuni have made regular visits to *Dewankwi Kyabachu Yalanne* to collect water, plants (mahogany, aspen, and medicinal herbs), feathers (blue jay, woodpecker, red-shafted flicker, robin, oriole, hawk, and sparrow), and minerals (obsidian), and to conduct religious activities.

## Acoma Pueblo

Mount Taylor’s significance as both a physical property and a cultural landscape important to Acoma Pueblo dates back to the beginning of time itself. Named *Kaweshtima* (“a place of snow”), the Mountain was created by two sisters, *Nautsiti* and *Iatiku*. The sisters were given baskets with seeds and small carved animals and told that these items would help them complete the world. A supernatural being taught the sisters what they needed to know to live in the world. She taught them how to pray, to grow and prepare corn for food, to use salt as a seasoning and about the interdependence of the earth, the plants, animals and humans.

The sisters’ next task was to shape the earth. The first mountain that the sisters created was *Kaweshtima*, Mountain of the North, followed by the Mountain of the West, then the Mountain of the South and finally the Mountain of the East. Each mountain consisted of not just rocky slopes and peaks; each had mesas and canyons. The sisters then populated the mountain with plants and animals using the seeds and carved items in their baskets while giving blessings. According to the Laguna, a western Keres pueblo adjacent to Acoma Pueblo and with many similarities to Acoma, the Mother showed the people how to breathe life into objects, such as the small carvings in the baskets.\* Specific plants and animals were placed on each mountain beginning again in the north at *Kaweshtima*. After the mountains, the sisters placed plants and animals in all other parts of the world. The sisters received husbands and produced children.

Acoma Pueblo’s traditional narratives of its history of affiliation and interaction with *Kaweshtima* throughout time immemorial provide compelling explanations of how the people, their homeland, *Haaku*, came to be who and what they are today.

These accounts also introduce major elements of the sacred obligation that the Pueblo’s people accept as stewards of this landscape in exchange for their inheritance. These understandings, in turn, inform and guide how the Pueblo has historically viewed, talked about, and acted upon its relationship with *Kaweshtima*.

Citizens interested in the Mount Taylor Nominating Petition should contact the Cultural Properties Review Committee at the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division and the leadership of the five Nominating Tribes. 🦋

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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P.O. Box 123, Kykotsmovi, AZ 86039 • (928) 734-3000

PUEBLO OF LAGUNA / Governor John Antonio, Sr.  
P.O. Box 192, Laguna, New Mexico 87026 • (505) 552-6941

NAVAJO NATION / President Joe Shirley, Jr.  
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\*It is quite possible that the Acoma origin story would include a similar practice due to the similarity between the two origin stories according to Ellis (1974: 26). As discussed, “breath” is an important concept in defining Pueblo cultural landscapes.