
Press Release: The Hopi Tribe

Initial Date of Release: June 29, 1999

Hopi Denied Access to Religious Sites by Wupatki National Monument Officials

Flagstaff, Arizona-- In an unprecedented event, Hopi religious practitioners were prevented from completing their annual pilgrimage within the Wupatki National Monument located on the outskirts of Flagstaff, AZ. A practice exercised for as long as the Hopi can remember.

"The Hopi people have been coming to Wupatki for centuries to perform their religious obligations. This is the first time we have been physically prevented from doing so," said Hershel Talashoma, Jr., member of the Third Mesa Greasewood Clan and the pilgrimage leader for the group. What transpired at the park has left Hopi religious leaders baffled and disturbed.

On May 27th, in what is normally an organized and peaceful pilgrimage for the Hopi practitioners, turned out to be a major misunderstanding and cause for a review of the Park's relationship with the Hopi people.

According to the Hopi practitioners, Talashoma requested for permission from Chief ranger Bill Hudson to access certain portions of the park to visit and pay homage at Hopi shrines located throughout the park, including live eagle nests. The group was immediately denied. Wupatki Park Officials cited a "lack of authority" to grant permission to the group to access active eagle nests.

"It was not just the denial to access our ancient sacred sites that disappointed us, it was the way we were mistreated by park officials," said Talashoma.

To make certain the group did not proceed into the park, Ranger Hudson placed the group under immediate surveillance where they were generally confined to the parking lot of the Park.

Talashoma continues. "We had young boys with us on this pilgrimage. I am sad to say that they witnessed the verbal threats of park officials to issue citations to the group if we continued our pilgrimage. Many of us feared that we would be arrested when the Park called on additional law enforcement units to watch every move we made. We are religious people, not criminals."

At the heart of the controversy is the ancient Hopi practices of gathering live eagles for ceremonial purposes. Every year, Hopi religious practitioners engage in visits to ancestral clan lands including Wupatki, a Hopi migration site, to pay homage to ancestors and places long gone, to eagle shrines, and other religious sites.

"I am extremely disturbed by the reports I have received from the group visiting Wupatki National Monument. In all the years of Hopi relationships with our national parks, we have never experienced a situation where Hopi religious practitioners were so mistreated by park officials. What is disappointing

in this situation is the well known fact that Hopi pilgrimages have been made on an on-going basis to Wupatki. Our Hopi people notified park officials of their purpose and were well within their right to access traditional Hopi sacred sites. The Hopi Tribe intends to pursue all avenues to protect Hopi religious practices," stated Chairman Wayne Taylor of the Hopi Tribe.

According to the Hopi Tribe, the decision of Wupatki's park officials is hard to accept in light of the fact that other federal agencies including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have acknowledged Hopi eagle gathering as a bonafide religious practice by granting federal permits. In fact, the Hopi maintain that the loss of ancestral lands surrounding the current Hopi Reservation does not and should not translate into a loss of their freedom to exercise their religion.

The Hopi Tribe has appealed Superintendent Henderson's decision to Secretary Bruce Babbitt. This action followed John Cook's decision to uphold Henderson's decision to deny Talashoma access to clan shrines. Cook is the Regional Director for the Denver National Park Office.

Leigh J. Kuwanwisiwma, Director of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office, directly challenges Henderson on the Park's commitment to the Hopi people.

"On one hand, they eloquently preach about their relationships and partnership with the Hopi Tribe and on the other hand, they systematically interfere with and prevent practice of Hopi religion. We question their ability to be good caretakers of our ancestral villages. Their mistreatment of Hopi people will not be tolerated. We consider the First Amendment an important right for Hopis. If Hudson, Henderson, Tom Metzger and Kim Watson, all employees of the park, have their religious rights protected, why can't the Hopi ?" asked Kuwanwisiwma.

While some people may not understand Hopi ways, Talashoma expressed his frustration and his hopes for changed conditions.

"We came back to our families disappointed and heartbroken. Our good thoughts, prayers for everyone and humble intentions were taken away. Our clan members have lived at Wupatki and used the area for eagle collecting pilgrimages since time immemorial. I don't understand how a federal agency who manages an ancestral Hopi village can deny my right and that of our children to be at Wupatki Hopi is a living culture. I want my children and their children to be able to enter Wupatki National Monument to practice their religion without fear and intimidation," concluded Talashoma.

For more information about this Press Release, please contact:

The Hopi Tribe

The Cultural Preservation Office

(520) 734-3753

| [More Press Releases](#) |



| [Return to our Home Page](#) |