



Utah Diné Bikéyah

- a non-profit supporting Native Tribes working together to **Protect Bears Ears** -

www.utahdinebikeyah.org

info@utahdinebikeyah.org

(385) 202-4954

FB @UtahDineBikeyah | Twitter @UtahDineBikeyah | Instagram @ProtectBearsEars

Indigenous Religious Freedoms Under Siege at Petroglyph National Monument

Utah Diné Bikéyah Call to Action

For Immediate Release: December 28, 2020

Contact – Woody Lee: (928) 349-6452

Ahjani Yepa: (505) 415-0968

(ALBUQUERQUE, NM) – Indigenous religious freedom and civil rights fell under attack yesterday at the Petroglyph National Monument located on the ancestral land of the Pueblo peoples, now known as Albuquerque, NM. Darrell House (Diné/Oneida) left the National Park Service’s designated path on Sunday to pray and was subsequently tasered and injured. As a citizen of Navajo Nation, House’s rights may have been violated under the [American Indian Religious Freedom Act \(AIRFA\)](#), which states that American Indians have an inherent right of freedom to exercise their traditional religions, including access to sacred sites. The detention and tasing of House by a National Park Service ranger, also calls into question possible violations of House’s civil rights.

[Footage of the incident went viral](#) on social media, with many calling for justice and bringing forward an important discussion about the harassment of Indigenous Peoples engaging in their spiritual practices at sacred places. “I was tased for being off trail at the Petroglyphs. I come here to pray and speak to my Pueblo Ancestor relatives. Even though I’m Navajo and Oneida, I honor this land,” House stated.

Utah Diné Bikéyah’s Executive Director, Woody Lee (Diné) calls the incident “a violation of religious, cultural, and human rights.” Lee goes on to state, “How can we heal and grow as neighbors when there is no respect for our religion? We can grow together through teaching and learning, which results in understanding. We can grow beyond this type of disrespectful behavior.”

Petroglyph National Monument is the location of sacred lands with a long history of Indigenous Peoples fighting for religious freedom. Decades ago, the Pueblos and national Indigenous organizations opposed the construction of the North Road through Petroglyph National Monument. In 1993, during an Oversight Hearing on potential American Indian Religious Freedom Act amendments, before the Subcommittee on Native American Affairs of the

Committee on Natural Resources (U.S. House of Representatives), the Honorable Governor Walter Dasher from Santa Clara Pueblo stated that “[e]ven though the Federal Government ceased in 1934 to deem it a criminal act for Indians to practice our traditional religions, we are still not even accorded the rights of accused criminals. An individual accused of a crime is innocent until proven guilty; but we, who have committed no crime but to abide by the way of life of our forefathers are considered to be liars until we prove that we are telling the truth when we state that a traditional religious area or water is being threatened. This is wrong. The Indian Pueblos, Nations, and Tribes should not be forced to violate our culture in order to protect them.” The North Road was ultimately built through the sacred Petroglyph National Monument.

Twenty-seven years later, Indigenous Peoples still face these same threats to their religious and cultural freedoms, whether it is development and destruction of sacred places, reduction of National Monuments, or threats to individual Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices. In House’s case, while many people are known to leave their identification at home or in the car when visiting trails and parks, he was singled out, racially profiled, detained, and prevented from exercising his Indigenous religious and cultural rights.

Ahjani Yepa Utah Dine Bikeyah’s New Mexico Community Outreach Coordinator (Jemez Pueblo/Anishinaabe) states that “enforcement continues a legacy of violently removing Indigenous people from sacred lands. Generations of our people have fought on the battlefield and in the courtroom for our rights as Indigenous people to pray, hunt, fish, and maintain our relationship with the land. Protections for religious freedoms and National Monument designations mean nothing when we cannot practice our ways without fear of being persecuted.”

The Petroglyph National Monument holds a special connection to Bears Ears National Monument for House, Yepa, and Lee, as many sacred places are not merely a small and limited site identified by 19th century archaeologists, but rather interconnected sacred landscapes of Indigenous religious and cultural practice. Both Petroglyph National Monument and Bears Ears are sacred places to the Pueblos and Diné Peoples, as well as many other tribes from the southwest.

Utah Diné Bikéyah, as an Indigenous, grassroots organization, holds that it is time that federal agencies, the new Biden-Harris Administration, and Congress do more to take action to protect the cultural and religious freedoms of Indigenous Peoples, and protect sacred places in the United States.

Honor Keeler (Cherokee Nation), Utah Diné Bikéyah’s Director of Legal and Programs, says that “while today we would normally celebrate the anniversary of the protection of Bears Ears National Monument on December 28th, we do so now by standing in solidarity with other Indigenous Peoples across the United States who are under attack for practicing their inherent, traditional, religious, cultural, and constitutional rights like Darrell House. We are sending out a call to end this cycle of brutality against our Indigenous religious and cultural freedoms, and ask others to join with us. Substantive laws must be passed to protect both our sacred places and our Indigenous rights to exercise our cultural ways of life.”

###