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**Protecting the Sacred:  
The Value of Avi Kwa Ame for Indigenous Communities**

**Overview:**

The newly-designated Avi Kwa Ame (Ah-VEE kwa-meh) National Monument in Southern Nevada contains some of the most beautiful, biologically diverse, and culturally significant lands in the Mojave Desert. The entire area is considered sacred by ten Yuman speaking tribes, including the Hopi, Chemehuevi, and Paiute. It is designated a Traditional Cultural Property on the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its religious and cultural importance. The designation protects a natural landscape that is vital to indigenous creation stories, and at the heart of tribal ceremonies and people.

As a member of the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, for me, Avi Kwa Ame has always always been a living thing, not just folklore. Some of my earliest experiences at “Spirit Mountain” were memories embedded into our family story; memories which began at the intersection of understanding my indigenous identity and finding meaning in our community and people.

Accompanied by my grandmother, I remember visiting with multiple tribes at our gatherings in Nevada, Arizona, and California during my youth. I remember sharing sacred stories about Spirit Mountain, bonding on its significance, and sharing language and song. Avi Kwa Ame is where everything started for me; the landscape and water are connected to Avi Kwa Ame, from Fort Mojave to the Gulf of Mexico. Avi Kwa Ame is not only where we were created but a reminder for all generations of our connection and responsibility to our land and waters. This is why I have always been committed to protecting the Mountain, because by protecting Avi Kwa Ame, I was ensuring the survival and protection of our people and their legacy.

“Where the spirit comes from”, is one of many meanings for Avi Kwa Ame. The land is sacred because of its importance to the tribes, but additionally, Spirit Mountain is the site for tribal ceremonies still occurring to this day. It’s the history of who we are and how we engage. For many, these sacred lands have become a source of empowerment, especially as some of the last remaining spaces where indigenous and native folks like myself can practice our traditions in the same landscape and ways as our Ancestors. Due to this, the destruction of the land and its precious nature would’ve signaled a complete break of trust for the community. Thankfully, the national monument designation will hopefully rebuild trust for our communities, and can be a step towards addressing climate change by taking into consideration the responsibility we have to the landscape that indigenous ecological knowledge teaches us, and commit a shift to a sustainable approach in protecting our future.



However, the fight for sustainability has not been easy. Our lands and people have been a consistent target of extractive capitalism and the industries that drive it. The Mojave Desert in southern Clark County, like various areas with large lots of federal public land across the West, are facing increased pressure from developers who see extraction instead of reverence. However, as it has been said by our communities living in this area, “development would destroy these valuable lands, and negatively impact habitats and people that are reliant on its existence and conservation.” Nature is not a player in a political game of development and business. For more than two years, multiple stakeholders, leaders of Native American tribes, local environmentalists and Nevada lawmakers called on the Biden administration to protect the 450,000 acres of land as a national monument because we believed this Administration had the unique opportunity to show that America could achieve responsible sustainability that is Tribally supported and locally-driven.

Honoring his commitment at the Tribal Nations Summit, President Biden has helped Spirit Mountain welcome relief to Tribal communities, like mine and others, who feared the loss of our histories for short term gains by a small few at the expense of Tribal homelands. Echoing the sentiments of tribal leaders, I fully believe that encroachment has been one of the biggest threats to our tribal sovereignty—but what’s different is we’ve proven that there is a different path: a multi-dimensional effort of protection. Unlike developers, our tribes had been at *Avi Kwa Ame* for generations, which is why the pressure from individuals looking for profit had become reminiscent of “land grab” experiences, or the robbery of indigenous lands, and eventual removal and confinement of our people into smaller parcels of land.

We are hopeful the designation will help lift the burden of caring about sacred space from the tribes and can now be shared amongst all who believe in responsible sustainability. I am not alone in this narrative, and as we continue to celebrate this huge victory, I want to emphasize one thing about this accomplishment. We have always been inherently Mojave. The desert was named after us and we must continue safeguarding our people and the landscape we’ve protected for generations.

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Across the country, groups and coalitions, like [Monumental SHIFT](#), are helping lead this work alongside communities like mine. Sharing why racially and ethnically diverse leadership, conception, funding, and stewardship of national monuments in the United States is necessary if we are to better represent and honor lands and places sacred to our communities.