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SACRED SITES DESTROYED BY DHS VITAL TO NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WILL TESTIFY TO CONGRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C., February 25, 2020, 2:00 p.m. (E.S.T.) – Association on American Indian Affairs Executive Director and Attorney Shannon Keller O’Loughlin will testify to Congress Wednesday that recent U.S. government destruction of Native American sacred sites for the construction of a border wall violates the government-to-government relationship with Indian Tribes.

The House Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States will hear Ms. O’Loughlin’s testimony as part of an oversight hearing entitled, “*Destroying Sacred Sites and Erasing Tribal Culture: The Trump Administration’s Construction of the Border Wall.*” Ms. O’Loughlin will join Ned Norris, Jr., Chairman, the Tohono O’odham Nation, in testifying against desecration of sacred sites on the southern border. The hearing is Wednesday, Feb. 26, at 2 p.m. in Room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.

Ms. O’Loughlin will testify to the **vital importance of sacred sites** to the continued practice of diverse Native American cultures and religions and how the Department of Homeland Security’s blasting of sites sacred for the Tohono O’odham Nation reflects the current Administration’s attempt to more easily and recklessly desecrate sacred land by refusing to consult with Tribes.

While Tribal cultural and sacred sites serve the same purposes as those western institutions, Tribal sacred sites have never enjoyed the same protections as non-Indian cemeteries, war memorials, churches and other institutions. Historically, Federal Indian policy incorporated Indian separation from religious and cultural sites, thereby destroying diverse Indigenous religious practices. Under regulations like the Indian Religious Crimes Code and the Rules for Indian Courts, punishment for visiting a sacred site or practicing one’s traditional religion ranged from imprisonment to death. Moreover, the U.S. allowed its officials and others to enter Tribal lands to desecrate burial and ceremonial places, steal Ancestral remains and their burial belongings, and take important cultural patrimony and sacred objects.

Despite a long history of religious persecution, Tribal Nations continue ceremonial life at sacred sites today. Since 1978, the federal government has recognized its legal responsibilities to protect sacred sites and American Indian religious freedoms. Recent desecrations fly in the face of these important obligations. ***Federal desecration of Native American sacred sites must cease immediately.***

Formed in 1922 to change the destructive path of federal policy from assimilation, termination and allotment, to sovereignty, self-determination and self-sufficiency, the Association on American Indian Affairs has provided legal and other advocacy assistance to protect sacred sites since its founding. The Association fully supports Congress in its effort to investigate Indigenous sacred site destruction and religious freedom violations with respect to the construction of the border wall, as well as the protection of other sites threatened by the lack of proper federal decision-making.

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