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Janet Butler Munch
CUNY Lehman College

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Mount Graham

Mount Graham is one of the SACRED SITES OF THE San Carlos APACHE of Southern Arizona. The mountain's summit is today the location of the world-renowned astronomical facility built by the University of Arizona and its partners, despite protracted resistance and litigation by Indian groups and environmentalists.

Mount Graham, or Dzil Nchaa Si An (Apache: "big seated mountain"), is part of the Pinaleno Mountain range in the Coronado National Forest in southeastern Arizona. Named for the army topographical engineer Lt. Col. James Duncan Graham (1799—1865), Mount Graham has an elevation of 10,720 feet. Apache consider Mount Graham a sacred site, central to their lives and inhabited by spiritual beings called guahn, or mountain spirit dancers. Featured in Apache songs, Mount Graham has long been a site for tribal pilgrimages and rituals such as the SUN DANCE—a ceremony believed to endow women with spiritual guidance, wisdom, and health. Known for its life-giving waters, Mount Graham has also been a burial ground for Apache MEDICINE people. Its six different ecosystems support unique animals, including the endangered Mount Graham red squirrel, and botanicals used by the Apache in healing.

Because of its ideal height and generally clear evening skies, Mount Graham was a location attractive to astronomical research observatories seeking remoteness from brightly lit locales. In the early 1980s, astronomers of the University of Arizona, the Smithsonian, the Vatican Observatory, and other national and international research centers, began to explore and seek approval for construction of the Mount Graham International Observatory.

Groups such as the Apache Survival Coalition filed lawsuits and went on the offensive to stop construction on Mount Graham. The Apache considered the placement of telescopes on the mountain an eyesore and a desecration of a site sacred to them spiritually, culturally, and historically. The tribe disputed the University of Arizona's claim to the land for the observatory, and Apache were arrested for trespassing. That they were required to obtain permits, in advance, to pray on Mount Graham further affronted traditional Apache and their cultural values.

In 1988, Congress authorized that delayed construction of the observatory should proceed. In all, some 40 lawsuits were filed to

stop construction of the Mount Graham International Observatory. Eight of these suits went to federal appeals court. In the end, the University of Arizona prevailed over all challenges. In addition to the lawsuits, the telescope and observatory survived two major forest fires during this period. In 2005, the world's most powerful optical telescope was finally dedicated Mount Graham. Just three years later, in March 2008, the long-awaited Large Binocular Telescope on Graham captured pictures of outer space at a distance of some 100 million light-years from the Earth.

Further reading: David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, *American Sacred Spaces* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Winona LaDuke, *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2005); John R. Welch, "White Eyes' Lies and the Battle for Dzil Nchaa Si' An," *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter, 1997): 75-109.

—Janet Butler Munch

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