



Navajo Nation Advocates for Cultural Respect and Inclusion in Space Exploration



Photo Source: Navajo Nation OPVP

WASHINGTON, D.C. – In a meeting at NASA headquarters, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren, accompanied by Speaker Crystalyne Curley of the 25th Navajo Nation Council, Deputy Chief of Staff Jared Touchin, and Executive Director Justin Ahasteen of the Navajo Nation Washington Office, advocated for the safeguarding of sacred celestial sites and the meaningful inclusion of Native Americans in STEM fields. The hour-long dialogue with NASA Administrator Bill Nelson underscored the Navajo Nation's endorsement of space exploration while vehemently opposing actions that desecrate sacred grounds, notably the Moon, which holds profound cultural significance for the Navajo and other Indigenous communities.

The discourse arose from concerns surrounding the Peregrine Lander mission, managed by Astrobotic Technology, aimed at transporting human remains to the Moon via the Vulcan Centaur rocket. The mission's failure mirrored past grievances, notably the Lunar Prospector mission in the late 1990s, which transported the remains of Eugene Shoemaker without prior consultation with the Navajo Nation.

Expressing deep apprehension and disappointment, President Nygren penned a letter to Administrator Nelson and Secretary of Transportation Peter Buttigieg on December 21, 2023, highlighting the absence of consultation—a disregard for NASA's commitment, following the Shoemaker incident, to engage with Indigenous tribes regarding future lunar missions involving human remains. NASA's pledge aligns with federal policies such as Executive Order 13175 and President Biden's executive orders to ensure consultation and coordination with tribal nations.

During the meeting, President Nygren urged reevaluating NASA's policies and contracts to mirror the federal government's dedication to preserving sacred sites and fostering tribal involvement in space exploration. Speaker Curley elaborated on the Moon's significance in Navajo cosmology, known as Ooljéé' or T'íéé Honaa'éeí, revering it not solely as a celestial entity but as a deity intertwined with Navajo creation narratives and ceremonies.

Furthermore, Navajo Nation leadership called for broader international policy discussions to promote comprehension and respect for Indigenous viewpoints on celestial matters. They stressed the necessity for space policies to explicitly allocate federal funds towards exploration endeavors, acknowledging the sanctity of the Moon and other sacred sites in line with Navajo beliefs.

President Nygren emphasized the importance of creating STEM opportunities for Native American youth, proposing NASA-sponsored events on Navajo land to inspire and engage the next generation of Indigenous scientists, engineers, and astronauts. This initiative reinforces NASA's commitment to educational outreach and honors the Navajo Nation's cultural heritage within space exploration.

The meeting marks a significant step towards integrating Native American perspectives into U.S. space policy, ensuring that space exploration respects Indigenous cultural values. The Navajo Nation remains steadfast in its commitment to safeguard the sanctity of celestial sites and empower its youth through education, aspiring that ongoing dialogues with NASA and federal agencies will acknowledge and integrate Navajo cultural values in national space exploration endeavors.

Moreover, acknowledging the historical context of Indigenous communities' relationship with the United States government concerning land rights, cultural preservation, and consultation processes is crucial. Understanding how legal frameworks like the National Historic Preservation Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act intersect with NASA's mission underscores the necessity of meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities.

The Navajo Nation's long-term vision involves aspirations for future partnerships with NASA, developments in Indigenous-led research initiatives, and strategies for sustaining community engagement in STEM fields. International collaboration and dialogue on Indigenous perspectives in space exploration also offer opportunities to engage with other Indigenous communities globally, demonstrating the broader significance of the Navajo Nation's advocacy efforts within the context of Indigenous rights and cultural sovereignty.