



## NAVAJO NATION HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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### **NNHRC presents the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to college students**

SAINT MICHAELS, Navajo Nation—Navajo human rights officials presented an overview of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to students of the History & Culture of Indian Meso America course at the University of New Mexico at Gallup on November 8, 2012.

The invitation to the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission was the first from a Navajo college student to present the U.N. Declaration since President Obama formally announced the United States' support for the U.N. Declaration on December 16, 2010.

"I was glad to see how engaged the students were in talking about the U.N. Declaration," said NNHRC Executive

Director Leonard Gorman. "I hope we can engage more college students on the Navajo Nation."

Gorman shared the same presentation he presented to the Navajo Nation Sacred Sites Task Force on November 5, 2012 titled, "Diné Sacred Places." He elaborated on NNHRC's international efforts to protect sacred sites using the U.N. Declaration.

Some of those efforts include: participating in the development of the Organization of American States draft declaration, providing testimony at the United Nations' Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review on the United States, adopting the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at NNHRC to utilize the U.N. Declaration, registering a complaint with the United Nations' Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, registering a complaint with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, providing testimony to the United Nations' Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples during his official visit to the United States.



Following a presentation on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNM-Gallup students of Thursday's upper level course, History & Culture of Indian Meso America, pose with a Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission sign to make the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples the norm.

He explained in the early 1900s indigenous peoples complained to the League of Nations as to how the United States of America was violating their rights. In the 1960s, the United Nations finally pooled a group of experts including indigenous peoples to assess indigenous rights and developed a draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

The draft declaration was referred to a working group to examine it. Once the working group was established the Navajo Nation began their participation.

From 1992 to 2006, the working group met every year in Geneva to negotiate the text with indigenous peoples of the draft declaration. During that time, the Navajo Nation submitted specific recommendations and language changes to the draft declaration.

Gorman explained several deadlock issues: self-determination, lands, territories, and resources, which left four countries withholding its support for the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when the U.N. General Assembly adopted the U.N. Declaration on September 13, 2007. Nearly three years later, President Obama announced the United States support on December 16, 2010.

While the U.N. Declaration is non-binding, it's supported by long standing human rights standards that are a part of other legally binding international human rights laws explained Gorman.

In relation to sacred sites, Gorman told the students NNHRC stated that Article 25 of the U.N. Declaration is one of the articles that provides for the need to respect that the Navajo people hold San Francisco Peaks as a sacred place.

Article 25 states, "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations."

Gorman continued with other international efforts NNHRC actively pursued and the text from the U.N. Declaration. He explained why he no longer uses the term "tribe," explained the use of the term "peoples," and how freedom of speech for Americans is different from a Navajo perspective of freedom of speech. Navajos are responsible for their words with others to build harmony.

***“We hope that the U.N. Declaration will become the norm and people will aspire to understand like world citizens.”***

In the finale, much to Gorman's surprise, the students applauded.

"That's the first time anyone has literally applauded for one of my presentations," said Gorman to the students.

Students mostly used their question and answer time to share their appreciation for NNHRC efforts.

"It's good to know that they have an idea of what NNHRC efforts were prior to the presentation," said Gorman. "The United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides the legal standards that nation-states (countries) would achieve. We hope that the U.N. Declaration will become the norm and people will aspire to understand like world citizens."

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