"With Anything Manmade There Is Going to Be Danger": The Cultural Context of Navajo Opinions Regarding Snowmaking on the San Francisco Peaks

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Abstract

Among the many ways that academics conceptualize sacred space, one of my favorite definitions of sacred space is land that people are willing to fight or debate over (Lane 2001). This is certainly the case with the San Francisco Peaks. We can see this in the strong negative response of some Navajo towards a proposal to expand a ski resort - the Arizona Snowbowl - located on this mountain.

I was shocked one day during this project when, while setting up an interview with an elderly Navajo woman, she asked me if I was for or against this ski resort expansion. She then informed me that if I were for it, she would “run me out”. Whether she was joking or not (I believe she was) this reflects the degree to which some Navajo see the ski resort expansion as a threat to the San Francisco Peaks.

Nowadays it is estimated that little more than one per cent of the population of the country use Irish as their daily first language. Even in the areas of the country which are supposed to be Irish-speaking, the use of the language is decreasing. These areas, known officially as the ‘Gaeltacht’, are mainly in the remote far west of the country and have a total population of 83,000, of whom nearly all can speak Irish, although only about 30,000 use it as their normal language of communication. Snowmaking begins with a water supply such as a river or reservoir. Water is pushed up a pipeline on the mountain using very large electric pumps in a pump house. Arizona Snowbowl is situated in the San Francisco peaks, which are one of the holiest sites for various Native American tribes in the Four Corners area, including the Navajo Nation. In 2008, Arizona Snowbowl was renting its slopes from the US Forest Service, and was looking to build new ski slopes and increase the production of artificial snow.
Advisory Council

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