

# U of T pondering problem telescope

*Apaches say observatory project planned by University of Arizona is on ceremonial lands*

By ELLIE KIRZNER

In the desert town of San Carlos, Arizona, one of the poorest reservations in the United States, Apache organizers are carefully monitoring the astronomy department at the University of Toronto.

Last week, the University of Arizona began pouring concrete for the foundations of two monster telescopes on Mount Graham in the state's southeast — a spread of pine peaks and alpine meadows considered by traditional Apaches to be the home of mountain spirits sent by the creator to teach healing songs.

Observatory boosters are now planning the third — and largest — set of binoculars in the world, which will allow scientists unprecedented visual access to cosmic secrets. But administrators need the influx of cash from one more partner for this \$200-million dream.

U of T's stargazers say clear, cloudless, Arizona would be one of the best vantage points on the North American continent for peering into outer space. They are now considering whether their department has the finances to step into the enterprise.

But for Apaches of the old way, this galactic probe represents the desecration of an ancestral shrine they call Big Seated Mountain. On the San Carlos reservation, activists are making use of the world's fascination with native culture to embarrass the Vatican, Germany's Max Planck Institute, Ohio State University and Italy's Arcetri Observatory — all observatory participants.

They are also hoping to give potential backers like the U of T cold feet.

Just as construction trucks roared up the mountain last week, Apache lawyers headed into a Phoenix courtroom charging the U.S. forest service, which approved the project, with violating the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and other laws.

"It's an altar," says medicine man Ernest Stanley, speaking from San Carlos. "This is a living being. When you are there, you feel so great and get to appreciate your very life in the mountain itself. Some of our ancestors are buried there."

## Sierra suit

Stanley, one of the few Apaches who knows the mountain's healing songs, ceremonially uses herbs and waters from the high peaks, but he says the insights of Apache theology should not become the property of those outside his community. "There are words that we just cannot explain the meaning of," he says.

Some spiritual teachers are saying that insults to the spirits could cause a seismic reaction.

The Apache lawsuit is not the only court challenge to the development. The National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club of Arizona and the Phoenix Audubon Society have filed suit in 9th circuit court, attempting to make the university abide by the Endangered Species Act.

## NATIVE PEOPLE

Called a "sky island," Mount Graham offers a lush ecology which differs drastically from the desert terrain which surrounds it. This isolation has generated a range of unique species that can't migrate to the drylands beyond — one of these being a variety of red squirrel that environmentalists say is threatened by the observatory.

"It's the first time a university has claimed they are exempt from an environmental law," says Bob Witzeman of the Phoenix Audubon Society. "The question is why would a great institution which holds itself to be a role model for future generations want to take such an anti-human rights, anti-environmental position?"

Those who speak for the University of Arizona say the aboriginal sacred land issue is a recent addition to the coalition of forces who have been trying to block the project. It's not a compelling argument either, says Steve Emerine of the university's public relations office.

## Ecosystem damage

"We don't have anthropological data and they don't either. Everyone will concede that the Apaches at one time lived in the valley in the area and, undoubtedly, occasionally went up on some of those mountains. But in all the studies, and in what little construction has been done, we haven't run into any indication of Indian relics or settlements. We certainly can't prove that it didn't happen, and we can't prove that it did."

Furthermore, the university does have some first-nation support, he says. The university president visited San Carlos in June, and the then chair of the tribal council stated clearly that the project on the mountain was not a pressing issue for him, Emerine says.