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Destination or Desecration?

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Despite having the potential of bringing in millions of dollars, putting a resort offering one of the highest ski lifts in the country on Mount Adams would be a desecration to Mother Earth, some tribal members say.

Recently, Mount Hood Meadows Development Corp., which owns Mount Hood Ski Resort in northern Oregon, approached the Yakama Nation with a proposal to construct a massive four-season resort, which would put 11 ski lifts reaching the 11,100-foot level on the south side of the mountain. It would also include three 18-hole golf courses, a mid-sloped restaurant, casino, night club, and 2,500 lodging units.

The corporation is calling the project an "eco-resort," meaning it would incorporate the Yakama heritage in theme and design and offer a summer camp for tribal youth with year-round educational courses on Yakama culture, said Dave Riley, vice president of Mount Hood Meadows.

"Because of our local experience, we understand and appreciate northwest tribal interests and rights, and the importance of the Treaty of 1855," Riley added.

Developers pitch such ski resort and other outdoor recreation projects to the nation every few years, but the tribe isn't rushing into anything, said Yakama Nation tribal Secretary Davis Washines, who goes by his traditional name Yallowash.

The full tribal council has yet to hear the proposal, and it would have to be approved at General Council, where voting tribal members decide on major decisions and elect the 14-member tribal council, which oversees daily operations of the Yakama Nation.

But the idea of putting any kind of development on the mountain located in the closed section of the Yakama reservation has some tribal members up in arms, said Regina Jerry, assistant minister of the White Swan Shaker Church.

"I feel that that would be a terrible violation of our people if they open that up," said Jerry. "(Tribal leaders) were sworn to an oath to protect the things that are sacred to our people."

The closed area consists of more than 600,000 acres of wildlife and natural habitat stretching from Ahtanum Ridge to below Satus Pass, and reaching to Mount Adams. There, only enrolled Yakama tribal members are allowed to practice sacred food gatherings, such as berry picking, root digging, and hunting and fishing. Outsiders need tribal permission to enter and must be accompanied by a tribal member.

Guarded by four main gates, the tribe closed the reservation during the 1950s to protect wildlife and the natural habitat. The only structures there are a fire and ranger station and Camp Chaparral, which consists of a few living dorms and a dining hall.

"That's the last place we can go and camp and try to get back to our traditional ways," Jerry said.

The tribe engaged in a 49-year boundary dispute with the federal government before President Richard Nixon in 1972 returned half of Mount Adams to the Yakama Nation.

Today, remains of a former ski resort are still present on the mountain's south side, where Mount Hood Meadows wants to build. The tribe kicked the resort off after reclaiming the sacred mountain, said tribal council chairman Jerry Meninick.

The more than 12,000-foot-tall volcano is much more than a mountain to the Yakama, he says.

"It tells us of the many different disciplines ... reminders of our existence," he said.

Yakama legends describe the mountain as a living being that's responsible for taking care of the people below, said Johnson Meninick, cultural resources manager for the Yakama Nation.

"You can't get a queen and climb all over her and dance on her," he added.

The mountain, like everything else in the arms of Mother Earth, is part of an unwritten law patterned after the natural resources that the tribe has lived on for thousands of years, Johnson Meninick said.

"The resources don't belong to us, we belong to the resources," he added. "Resources are the giver of life."

However, the earning potential of such a resort — which tribal members would receive a share in its profits — has some tribal officials weighing cash against culture, Jerry Meninick said.

"We're talking a multimillion-dollar industry," he said. "It's something that needs to be taken very seriously."

But the resort would be a hard sell to the tribal membership, Meninick admits.

"It would be very difficult to present this to General Council and have them pass this resort," he said. "If the tribe didn't have the values on its religious beliefs, according to the feasibility (of the proposal), it probably would have been done by now."

Though creating more income for the tribe is important, tribal officials don't want to give the impression they're moving ahead with the proposal or ignoring the cultural aspects of Mount Adams, Yallowash said.

"Even myself, I get up in the morning and that mountain is the first thing I see, and I have these same concerns," he said.

Also, the legalities of allowing non-Indians into the closed section and getting building permits approved would require legal research since federal law supports the closure, Jerry Meninick said.

"Do we go back to U.S. Supreme Court and get a clarification?" Johnson Meninick asked hypothetically.

Questioning who would actually own the resort, Johnson Meninick noted that tremors in the area have been increasing the past five years.

"Who's going to be responsible for the lives that would be lost in an avalanche?" he asked. "We don't have anyone stepping forward to say, 'This is my project.'"

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