

Q&A: Navajo President Buu Nygren on Objections to Sending Human Remains to the Moon

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By Native News Online Staff, January 14, 2024

Late last month, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren became aware that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was going to launch a Vulcan Centaur rocket carrying the Peregrine Mission One by Astrobotic Technology to the moon with cremated human remains.

Levi Rickert interviews Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren on his opposition to sending human remains to the moon. (Photo/Screenshot)

The human ashes were part of 28 payloads headed for the moon. Celestis and Elysium Space, private companies known for providing memorial services by shipping human cremated remains, paid for the transport of the cremated human remains. Due to the Navajo people holding the moon in high reverence, Nygren was opposed to human ashes going to the moon. The rocket launched on Tuesday, January 8, 2024, but soon ran into problems with its fuel supply, jeopardizing its mission.

Nygren's opposition to the moon mission became national news, with coverage on [CNN](#), [NPR](#), [USAToday](#), and more. He agreed to be interviewed for *Native News Online's Native Bidaské* to discuss his objection to the NASA mission.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Levi Rickert: You have recently been in the national news because of your objection to having human remains going to the moon. Why do you object to this practice?

President Buu Nygren: This issue came about over 20 years ago when I was either in middle or elementary school when the late Albert Hill, the president of the Navajo Nation, brought this to NASA's attention when they had an actual astronaut's ashes spread out across the moon. The Navajo people basically said we hold the moon to high sacredness, it's part of our ceremonies. It's a part of our culture and the way we balance who we are as Navajo people here on Earth.

Back then, NASA issued an apology, saying next time, we'll make sure we consult with the Navajo Nation. Well, the next time is now. We found out about three weeks ago. We got together with my team, and we issued letters stating a lot of time has passed. But the Navajo people still feel the same; we still hold the moon in such high regard. And, we know it's just not the Navajo people, but we believe there are a lot of tribes across Indian Country that feel the same way when it comes to the moon.

Rickert: Talk about the Native perspective on the sacredness of why sending human ashes to the moon is not a good idea.

Nygren: Talking with some of our traditional Navajo practitioners, I was struck with one of their sentiments that just the thought of ashes of our loved ones— anybody's loved ones—circling us every single day is a tough scenario to think about. Within Native cultures, we try to make sure that we honor our people when they pass on from this world.

And the other thing I think about is no matter how far people have looked into the universe, they have never found another Earth. And they've never found another special being like a human being — especially like us Indigenous people. To me, there are certain things that you should do and things you shouldn't do.

Rickert: You sent the letter to NASA. How has NASA responded?

Nygren: I actually talked to NASA's administrator, who said their commitment is still the same, and they will consult with the Navajo Nation. If it's a NASA mission, they have control. In this case, it was a private company that paid NASA to be part of the mission to the moon.

I told NASA, "You promised to consult with us." Private companies can get around the rules.

I told him President Biden also reiterated the executive order to consult with tribes in 2021 that was issued by President Bill Clinton in 2000. I told him they need to do consultation with tribes on sacred sites—celestial bodies are part of sacred sites, as well.

I've expressed to NASA that I, for one, will never say we shouldn't explore, we shouldn't visit the stars, visit the planets and really push science and technology and creativity. It's through technologies like that we're able to do video conferencing today. But there are certain things like there's only one Earth, and there's no other human being like us.

Rickert: I understand you had a conversation with the White House on this issue. What happened?

Nygren: They are aware of the situation, as is the Department of Transportation. We were told if it's a NASA mission, they will make sure the Navajo Nation will be consulted. I told them if NASA puts any dollars up for this mission, then they should honor the commitment to the Navajo people.

Rickert: I understand the rocket was launched, but they have run into technical difficulties.

Nygren: From what I'm hearing now, the only way to land on the moon is for them to crash into it. This is one of those things where I think it's, as Native people, you kind of know that there's another realm working in the works. And I think it's just reiterating some of our prayers and our ceremonies and the sacredness that we hold to the moon as well, just kind of playing into that as well.