

Top 10 Facts about “Operation PowWow” & Pastor Soto’s fight for eagle feathers

1. Native Americans believe eagles have a special connection to the Creator. The feathers are sacred, symbolizing wisdom, strength, power, and freedom.
2. Pastor Robert Soto is an internationally recognized feather dancer and a member of the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas. He has been a Native American dancer for 56 years and has danced in 46 states, 17 countries, and four continents.
3. In 2006, the Department of Interior sent an undercover agent in a sting operation called “Operation Powwow” to a private family powwow – searching for “illegal” eagle feathers.
4. Bald eagles were [removed from the endangered species list](#) almost a decade ago. But the undercover agents claimed they were enforcing the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which prohibits possession of eagle feathers without a permit.
5. The federal agents confiscated Pastor Soto’s 42 feathers – passed down from generation to generation –and threatened Pastor Soto and others with criminal prosecution unless they handed over their feathers.
6. Federal law grants permits to big power companies to kill eagles. It also gives permits to museums, scientists, zoos and farmers to collect their feathers, as well as for Native American religious uses – but only if the person is a member of a “federally recognized tribe.”
7. Pastor Soto’s tribe, the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas, is recognized by historians, sociologists, and the State of Texas, but not the federal government. Thus, his tribe is barred from using eagle feathers as they have for generations.
8. Pastor Soto challenged this arbitrary law in federal court, arguing that it violated the [Religious Freedom Restoration Act](#).
9. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled in favor of Pastor Soto, relying on the Supreme Court’s decision in [Hobby Lobby](#).
10. On June 13, 2016, the federal government entered a historic settlement agreement with Pastor Soto and over 400 members of his congregation, resolving 10 years of litigation. The agreement recognizes the right of Mr. Soto and other Native Americans to pick up naturally molted feathers from the wild, exchange feathers with other Native Americans, and fashion feathers into objects for ceremonial use. They can also receive feathers from the National Eagle Repository. It also promises that the government will reconsider its policies for enforcing feather restrictions in the future.

This is also the first time in over a decade that the federal government has acknowledged that all sincere Native Americans—not just members of federally recognized tribes—have a right to possess eagle feathers. This settlement could be the catalyst that prompts the government to abolish its discriminatory regulations once and for all.

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