

## SACRED LANDSCAPE AND NATIVE AMERICAN ROCK ART

A sacred landscape, for the Native American, is not only a place of spectacular beauty or compelling uniqueness, but also a place deemed holy by the people who created the legends and rock art which reveal how special the site had become to them. The *Smithsonian*, in an article entitled “Below the Rim,” told of how humans had lived in the Grand Canyon for more than 8,000 years. The last site treated was the “Shaman’s Gallery,” with a spectacular rock art panel of humanlike figures which stretches for some sixty feet. Rock art researcher Polly Schaafsma, who named the Shaman’s Gallery, believed the pictographs were painted before 1000 B.C. “The rock shelter where the artists recorded their visions, she believes, must have been a sacred site.” (Roberts, 2006a:65) The impressive canyon setting of the shelter, and the equally astounding paintings, certainly elicit a sense of the holy for those in this present day who visit the site.

This paper, while dealing with a number of representative sites, will also of necessity point out that Indian sacred places are endangered. Those who study these fantastic sites must inevitably become involved in efforts to protect them. On January 25, 2006, the front page in the B Section of the *Riverside Press-Enterprise* (2006) in California carried an article about the call of tribal elders, “To Save Sacred Sites, Unite.” The subheading read “WORKSHOP: Indians want to open a dialogue with developers to protect what they treasure.” All persons interested in saving the sacred places were invited to share in the proceedings. “Whether they be Soboba, Pechanga, San Manuel or Cahuilla, American Indian Tribes must unite to protect and preserve historic and culturally important sites.” They called for all who would to join them, for “We can’t stop development, but we can be instrumental in how they develop.” This paper will seek

to point out efforts or problems in protecting sites as sacred places are discussed.

When I began a serious investigation of rock art in 1978, Aikens Arch in the Eastern Mojave was a site I first became convinced was sacred. Other sacred sites in what is now the Mojave National Preserve, like Counsel Rocks, Rock Springs, Landfair Butte, and Piute Springs, have attributes treated in my previous papers. One of the most impressive pictures I have taken of Aikens Arch was an aerial photo (Figure 1). While guiding a couple on a flight to see the the intaglios—giant desert figures—along the Colorado River, we flew along north of the prehistoric Mojave Trail, and looking down I saw the remains of the collapsed lava tube which formed Aikens Arch. When viewed from the ground level (Figure 2), the opening is illuminated from above by sunlight.

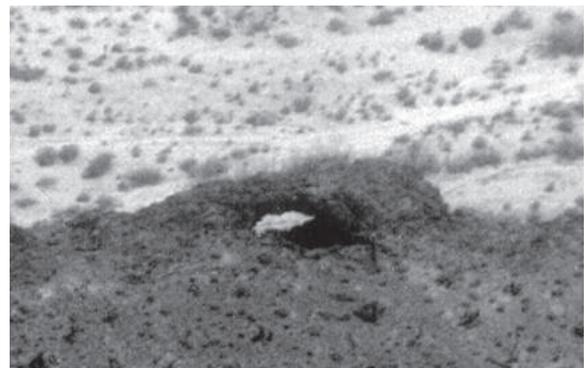


Figure 1. Aerial view of Aikens Arch.



Figure 2. Entrance to Aikens Arch illuminated from above.



Figure 3. Aikens Arch petroglyphs. (Arrow points to “Sky Coyote.”)

Inside the arch are pictograph power symbols, and on the outside, impressive petroglyphs, including the prominent symbol which Isaac Eastvold (personal communication, 1978) identified as “Sky Coyote” (Figure 3). When Ike, associated in more recent years with preservation efforts on behalf of the Petroglyph National Monument on the Albuquerque west bank escarpment, took us to Aikens Arch, we started near the Plumed Serpent petroglyph and photographed rock art for almost a half mile down wash to Aikens Arch.

The Painted Cave is in the Old Woman Mountains, and is described by Little in an essay titled “The Price of the Sacred” (Little 2001:117–121). I first visited the site in 1988. The previous year I had found the Big Wash site in the Old Woman Mountains, listed in *Indian Rock Art of Southern California* by Smith and Turner (1975:139–140), but I did not go far enough to see the huge monolith which marks the Painted Cave sacred site. So the next year I went still further, and knew, as soon as I saw the monolith (Figure 4), that the area was very special. On the ridge high to the west was the rock formation that looked like an old woman. Clusters of petroglyphs were located intermittently at the base of the monolith and around to the southeast. Looking up beyond the narrow gap east of the monolith, I saw pictographs on the outer surfaces of a cave (Figure 5). I



Figure 4. Old Woman site monolith.



Figure 5. Old Woman painted cave.

climbed up the cliff to the cave, and saw within the cave awesome concentrations of red pictographs. There was also a rear entrance, which I used to climb down more safely from the Shaman’s Cave. Still thinking the site was on BLM lands, I took my Annual Rock Art Caravan there in 1989. Ten years later a Presbyterian minister, who had accompanied me on hikes to find rock art in Joshua Tree National Park, invited me to go back to the Old Woman Mountain site, as a guest of Chemehuevis from the Twentynine Palms Band of Mission Indians. We went in their van, and drove to the site from the eastern side. They told of their struggle to gain ownership of a 2,500 acre ranch, where the site was located at the extreme end, and of their plans to build a Cultural Center near the site, to be staffed by a Chemehuevi couple.



Figure 6. Corn Springs palm oasis.

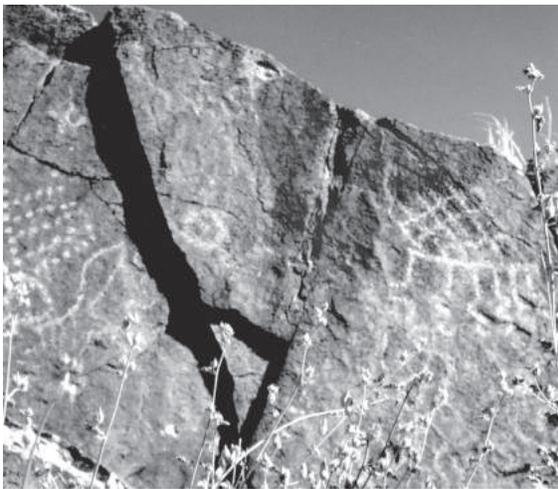


Figure 7. Corn Springs rain fringe.

The next sacred site to be treated is Corn Springs, located along the major prehistoric trail from the Palo Verde crossing of the Colorado River to the ocean. Corn Springs is a palm oasis which gave shade, rest, and refreshing water after a long, hot expanse of desert (Figure 6). Among the numerous petroglyphs at Corn Springs is a rain fringe symbol, with power cross-hatching above the horizontal bar (Figure 7). Desert springs were sacred to the Native American desert dwellers. Corn Springs is threatened, not only by a fire started by careless campers and by some graffiti, for which a Site Steward program is now in place, but also by global warming and drought lowering the water table to the danger level for palm survival.



Figure 8. Shaman's shelter above Andreas Canyon.

Another sacred site is Andreas Canyon, a side canyon located in the large Palm Canyon which is south of present-day Palm Springs. It is part of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation. Anthony Andreas, a tribal member, was asked how long his family had been in Andreas Canyon. "Since the beginning of time," he answered. "They are the original lineage from that canyon and that surrounding area" (Dozier 1998:53). Another Tribal Elder, Katherine Saubel, commented: "And this land, to us, the Indian people, just doesn't mean a piece of land. This is a sacred area. This was given to us by our Creator, to take care of it, to live here in harmony with it, and that's why we were put here—to protect it" (Dozier 1998:55). In Andreas Canyon there are bedrock mortars, smoke darkened rock shelters, and high above, a Shaman's Shelter (Figure 8) with red and black pictographs on the ceiling, a cupule boulder, and at the east base of the shelter, petroglyphs including a pipette design. Though David Whitley gives directions to the site in his rock art guide (Whitley 1996:94–96), the tribe has since closed the site to visitation to better preserve the too-often touched and deteriorating pictographs.

The waterfall from the Rancho Bernardo site cascades down into a southwest finger of Lake Hodges (Figure 9). The small creek above creates a pool, with the pictographs on the surfaces of rock formations to the north and bedrock mortars



*Figure 9. Rancho Bernardo waterfall.*



*Figure 11. Oak Springs Eagle Head.*



*Figure 10. Rancho Bernardo maze.*



*Figure 12. Climb holes on Eagle Head.*

on the flat surfaces to the south. The most dramatic pictographs are in what is called the Rancho Bernardo Maze Style (Figure 10), and that terminology has become descriptive for similar maze pictographs in the Southern California area.

The Oak Springs Site, in the Reid Valley between Sage and Anza, has bedrock mortars and faded red pictographs, which appear to be Girl's Puberty Rite symbols, on the boulders up the slope on the west ridge above the stream. But the dominating feature, clearly visible from a great distance, is a large boulder with the appearance of an eagle's head, on the ridge above (Figure 11). That the Eagle Head boulder had ceremonial significance is indicated by the foot and hand holds carved

into the west side of the boulder (Figure 12). Remains of an Indian village, with many bedrock mortars, are located downstream from the Eagle Head Rock in Reid Valley, but how the boulder might have figured in ceremony and legacy was lost long ago.

The Old Penny Ranch site near Perris, south of Riverside, is located by a spring and has a series of boulders with red pictographs. But one boulder towers above the others and "is, perhaps, the best remaining example of a pictograph relating to the Luiseno girl's puberty ceremony. The Indian girls participated in an elaborate ceremony which included instruction in being a woman. Ground paintings served as teaching aids, and the rock



Figure 13. Luiseno pictograph panel.



Figure 15. Carrizo Painted Rock site.



Figure 14. Pictograph panel in Painted Cave.

paintings made by the girls were reminders of the ceremony” (Smith and Turner 1975:iv–v). The pictograph panel (Figure 13) is more complex than most Girls Puberty rock paintings, but in such ceremonies each girl chooses her own symbolic design to commemorate the milestone experience. The site has been donated and is now called the Motte Rimrock Preserve, administered through the University of California Preserve System.

A number of Chumash pictograph sites were certainly sacred to this California tribe, and merit our respect and awe. Perhaps the best known site is Painted Cave, located near San Marcos Pass in the mountains above Santa Barbara, and it is protected by metal grates and a gate at the

entrance. Among the pictographs, painted with red, white, and black pigments, are what appear to be sun symbols, encircled crosses, red zigzag snake-like designs enclosed with red and white parallel lines, and a centipede with surrounding short legs (Figure 14).

Great sites are also on the Vandenberg Air Force Base near Lompoc, which raises an issue of concern for the Chumash people. Access to sacred ceremonial sites on the Vandenberg Base, the gated community at Point Conception, and the lands owned by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company for the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, is limited and entrance is possible only by permission, though the security provisions do protect the rock art from vandalism.

Without such protections, the Carrizo Plain Painted Rock site further to the northeast suffered grievous vandalism, beginning almost a century ago. Nevertheless, the impressive U-shaped outcrop provided a spectacular setting for a sacred site (Figure 15). Some archaeologists have suggested that the formation has the shape of a vulva, and a number of human figures appear to be involved in ceremonial dances (Figure 16). There are rattlesnake and turtle motifs, as well as human figures in relation to holes or depressions in the sandstone. Despite the degradation, enough of the extensive pictographs are still there to



*Figure 16. Red pictograph figure at Carrizo Painted Rock.*

suggest how awesome the site once was. This site is now protected by the Bureau of Land Management.

Certainly the Coso Range has a multitude of sacred rock art sites, which, by virtue of being in the province of the Naval Air Weapons Station, are recipients of careful preservation and protection efforts. My first visit to view the Coso rock art was in April of 1978 through a University of California at Riverside extension course taught by Isaac Eastvold, who made arrangements with the Maturango Museum for a two day tour. We went first to the Darwin Wash site, and then to the Carricut Lake sites. At Junction Ranch we photographed house rings, metates, and adjoining petroglyphs, with bighorn designs being most common. The next morning we went to Little Petroglyph Canyon, and spent most of the day there, taking hundreds of pictures. Among the thousands of petroglyphs, the most famous is the Coso Rain Shaman (Figure 17). The ritual headdress has the topknot quail feathers, and the cloak has the vertical lines which come down to end with what appears to be a rain fringe. In other papers I have pictured Coso medicine bags, a processional panel and impressive bighorns. But for me the elaborate human figures, especially the panel of shaman figures (Figure 18), most typify Little Petroglyph Canyon.



*Figure 17. Coso Rain Shaman glyph.*



*Figure 18. Coso Shaman panel.*

Black Canyon, Ceremonial Point and Inscription Canyon, located northwest of Barstow in the Central Mojave Desert, certainly must be included in any survey of sacred sites. In 1977 Wilson G. Turner launched the Black Canyon recording project, and soon realized he had underestimated the number of petroglyphs and the time necessary for his teams to complete the task. After two seasons they had recorded over four thousand glyphs, and the final total five years later was over ten thousand (Turner and Trupe 1983). High up on the east side of Black Canyon is a petroglyph of a cougar with padded feet and a lightning bolt tail, with bullet holes made, fortunately, by a poor marksman. Inscription Canyon is much smaller, with fewer petroglyphs, but they are concentrated and accessible. The patterned body bighorn panels (Figure 19), to the right of the entrance, are splendid.



Figure 19. *Patterned body bighorn.*



Figure 20. *Saline Valley bird glyph.*

In the Saline Canyon, made part of Death Valley National Park when the California Desert Protection Act was passed, there is a well preserved village site along Hunter Creek, though the related rock art has suffered damage. Several miles east of the hot springs is Pink Tuff Canyon, where huge bird glyphs have wing spans of three and four feet (Figure 20), and the setting is truly sacred. In Death Valley, Greenwater Canyon has magnificent petroglyphs, and the Klare Spring boulder glyphs and the trail glyphs southwest of Mesquite Springs are well worth while. Marble Canyon has a sequence of sites, with the petroglyphs on each side of a dike, with even more even more farther up canyon, making this prehistoric trail passage unique. In the main high walled narrows, there is a shelf far up on the right. When I took my caravan there in 1992,



Figure 21. *High Marble Canyon glyphs.*

only a few dared to climb up on the shelf to photograph the large rock art panel (Figure 21).

Moving into the tip of Southern Nevada, a complex of rock art sites attest to the sacredness of Spirit Mountain—Hiko Springs, Bridge Canyon, Sacatone Canyon, and to the north, Nap (Knapp) Canyon. The most accessible, and most sacred, is Grapevine Canyon, which is the major site as the Xam Kwatcan Trail draws near to Avikwaame, the Mojave name for Spirit Mountain. The trail begins at Pilot Knob, called Avikwalal, across the Colorado River from Yuma. There are numerous trail shrines, intaglios, and dancing circles along the almost 200 mile pilgrimage trail north to Spirit Mountain. The bighorn panel at Grapevine Canyon, shown here in part (Figure 22), is distinctive. Shrines along



Figure 22. *Grapevine Canyon bighorns.*



Figure 23. *Grapevine Canyon figure.*

the Xam Kwatcan Trail have intaglio representations of Kumastamho, the Creation diety, and powerful figures at Grapevine Canyon (Figure 23) may also be tributes to Spirit Mountain as the “Mountain of Creation.”

Grapevine Canyon is also sacred because of a spring, and rain diety and other rain symbols at the entrance to the canyon were treated in my paper on “Springs, Water Basins and Tanks in Native American Rock Art” (Gough 2005). There are also rain and spring images at Keyhole Canyon north of Searchlight, and Brownstone Canyon west of Las Vegas. There are many rain fringes, along with water tanks, at Atlatl Rock and Mouse’s Tank in the Valley of Fire and by the water tanks at the Whitney-Hartman “Falling Man” site east of where the Virgin River empties into Lake Mead. These sites all serve to emphasize how springs and water sources in desert lands were viewed as sacred.

Upper Pahrnagat Lake is located northeast of Las Vegas, along Highway 93, the Great Basin Highway. In the spring of 1978 I was driving to Caliente, and as we approached the passage through the lava flows which had formed the dam to create the lake, I said to my wife, “I bet there are petroglyphs on those cliffs.” There were, and I photographed several, including one that I later found out was the famous “Pahrnagat Man”



Figure 24. *The “Pahrnagat Man.”*

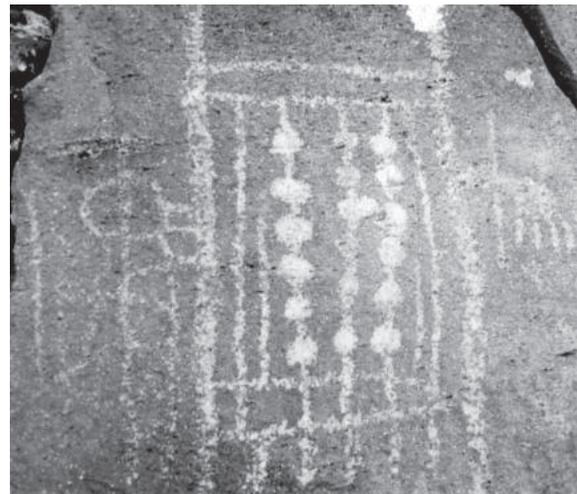


Figure 25. *Blanket-Like petroglyph.*

(Figure 24). Later, exploring that Pahrnagat ridge at the northern end, I saw rock-lined shelter areas on an elevation, and blanket-like designs, which could also include rain symbolism (Figure 25). Many more petroglyph panels were on the basaltic ridge across open space to the east, with blanket-like motifs among them. The whole complex seemed surely to comprise a sacred landscape, with protection afforded by being in the Pahrnagat National Wildlife Refuge.

Farther north are a number of sites, including Alamo Paint, Ash Springs, Crystal Wash, and Petro Village, but especially noteworthy and sacred is the cluster of sites at White River



*Figure 26. White River Narrows glyphs.*



*Figure 28. Kohta Circus zoomorphs.*



*Figure 27. Mt. Irish sheep and horned human figures.*



*Figure 29. High Katsina mask panel at Kohta Circus.*

Narrows. On a dirt side road north of the bend are amazingly complex panels, with bighorn, human, rain fringe and abstract designs (Figure 26). A series of cliffs with complex designs, a fertility site, and a spider glyph site are among the petroglyphs located south of the bend and east of Highway 318. Then to the south, west of Hiko, is another sacred complex of sites leading up to Mt. Irish. On the hogback cliffs to the left are the first petroglyph panels, with bighorn sheep and horned human figures (Figure 27). Another site follows on the right, and then the main concentration of petroglyphs with panel after panel, leads on to another “Pahranagat Man.”

The hike into the Kohta Circus site, located southwest of Mesquite between the Virgin Mountains and where the Virgin River empties into Lake Mead, is a splendid preparation for the moment when the large, deep sloping arena appears. The long circus panel is in the gallery on the left, and the high katsina mask panel is on the right. The site was named for the 75 foot panel with so many zoomorphs (Figure 28). Even more awesome is the high panel, with the finely chiseled glyphs made dramatic by the dark patinated surface (Figure 29). Green and Holmes (1999:31–40), in their paper “Katsinas Come to Kohta Circus” focused on the cone-shaped headdresses, and the ceremonies associated with the katsina



Figure 30. View from Land's End site.

cult. On the way up to the katsina mask panel are twin crooks, which, as I developed in my paper on “The Shaman’s Crook in Native American Rock Art,” are instruments of shamanic power (Gough 1996:Section 14,1–18). For me, the total site is awesome, and is certainly a sacred landscape.

On a field trip led by Boma Johnson, we headed west of St. George in Southwestern Utah to the Gunlock site, to sites in Santa Clara Canyon, and then to the Land’s End site, high over the Santa Clara River drainage. We parked by the rock-outlined shelters of a small village site, and walked to the edge of the overlook. Land’s End seemed a fitting title, though I heard others call the site Land’s Hill. The view from the cliffs looking down on the valley below was majestic (Figure 30). There were petroglyphs by the hundreds at the top edge of the cliffs, with the bighorn glyphs being characteristic of the carefully executed skill so apparent in the rock art. When I took my caravan there two weeks after Spring Equinox, light and shadows on a sun-like petroglyph design suggested that observations at key junctures of the solar calendar might be profitable. All in all, Land’s End fits the Sacred Landscape description extremely well.

Even the approach to Parowan Gap, which for me was from the west side, signaled sacred



Figure 31. Parowan Gap zipper glyph.

landscape, with an impressive petroglyph panel on the left adding emphasis. The plaque on the pedestal in front of the Zipper Glyph confirmed the sacred with the caption, “God’s Own House.” While many rock art surfaces clamored for attention, the “zipper” glyph (Figure 31) was most compelling. I had made a copy of the interpretive drawing of this glyph by Nal Morris in his paper on the “Manifestations of the Fremont Calendar” (Morris 1996:Section 15,1–20), and held it while noting his explanation of each glyph mark culminating with the designation for Summer Solstice. He also described his discovery of the summer solstice cairns, pointing in the sunset direction. He found cairns indicating the sunsets for the equinoxes and winter solstice as well. Hundreds of people gather at Parowan Gap for the Summer Solstice, and watch the sun set in the V-shaped gap as Nal Morris, who is regularly invited, explains the importance this sacred site and the solar interactions had for the prehistoric peoples.

At the convergence of Rochester Creek and Muddy Creek, there is a high promontory, crowned with huge rock formations (Figure 32). The Rochester Creek site has a number of panels with rock art, with themes of procreation and life forms in keeping with the thrust of the huge main surface dominated by a rainbow. Within the rainbow in this petroglyphic panel masterpiece



Figure 32. View of Rochester Creek petroglyph site.



Figure 33. Rochester Creek panel.

are a variety of animals and anthropomorphic figures, as well as a conception and birthing scene (Figure 33). The female figure has been created around a natural womb-like depression in the rock surface, which emphasizes the life-affirming, creation-minded panorama of bighorn sheep, deer with antlers and other zoomorphic creatures in this complex panel. The scene faces east, and there are solar calendar interactions. A video presentation of the site, produced by Chuck and Charles Bailey, and with Jesse Warner interviewed on camera, performs an important service by showing seasonal changes where sunlight, shadows, and petroglyph images interact (Bailey and Warner 1999). What appears to be the shadow

of a pregnant woman moving across the panel and intersecting with the birthing scene is impressive, and enables those who cannot come often to the site to sense the awesome majesty of the site. Outside the rainbow are many other creatures, including owls and other birds, human figures, snakes and fantastic creatures, and ferocious ones, along with what seems to be a time-line or line of ascent. Thought to be at least 2,000 years old, it must reflect an elaborate creation mythology with solar involvements.

Presenters at the Price URARA Symposium in 2005 were invited to participate in a field trip to Range Creek. Waldo Wilcox had stayed on the Utah ranch, which his father had homesteaded, for fifty years, and had protected the archaeological treasures. Now owned by the state of Utah, Kevin Jones, the state archaeologist, was committed to preserving the rich treasure of rock art, artifacts, high cliff granaries and other features. I was one of his passengers and as he drove his pickup up into the high Range Creek Canyon, he spoke of all he had seen, and he felt that there was so much more. The cliffs, pinnacles, and buttresses alone made the canyon sacred (Figure 34). But then Kevin pointed out the granaries high up the cliffs, some with nearby rock art. One upside-down figure suggested that some may have fallen from those heights. One series of very large panels had an impressive horned



Figure 34. Range Creek high cliffs.



*Figure 35. Three Shaman figures at Range Creek.*



*Figure 36. Nine Mile Canyon view.*

serpent petroglyph. Painted human figures high up on a cliff face looked out over the valley. I was particularly impressed by the three human figures (Figure 35), with the largest wearing a shaman's neck medicine pouch. Because all three were connected, I believe they represented a progression of shamanic heritage and power in Range Creek. In the August 2006 issue, *National Geographic* carried an article on Range Creek, describing Waldo Wilcox as "Guardian of a Ghost World" (Roberts 2006b), and certainly he was the protector of a sacred landscape.

Nine Mile Canyon, which is located northeast of Price, Utah, is really a forty-mile-long art gallery, with many thousands of awesome petroglyphs and some pictographs as well. My first visit back in the late nineties was like a spiritual pilgrimage—going from site to site, with some panels high above the canyon (Figure 36) and the panoramic view—convincing me that Nine Mile Canyon was truly sacred. Then I came a second time, on October 4, 2006, in the late afternoon, facing heavy traffic with semis with two tanks apiece, and workers in company vehicles heading for home. We parked at the mouth of Big Daddy Canyon as a semi with tanks passed by, sending clouds of dust into Rasmussen Cave. When we visited the cave, the petroglyph boulders at the floor level were covered with a quarter inch of dust. The nearby industrial buildings and pump



*Figure 37. Fallen boulder by road in Nine Mile Canyon.*

station were degrading to the sacred landscape of Nine Mile Canyon, and the results of dust accumulation, the impact of dust suppressing magnesium chloride, and the vibration caused by heavy industrial traffic, threatened the hundreds of recorded Native American cultural sites.

Because of the late hour, we went on to the URARA events and meetings at Vernal, in the dust of a convoy of heavy trucks going north. But we came back to Nine Mile Canyon on a Field Trip the following Monday. A room-size boulder had broken off the cliffs and fallen down to the road (Figure 37). It had not been there five days before, and dramatized for us the damage the vibration

and pounding from the heavy truck traffic, with approximately 100 industrial vehicles passing by in a twenty-four hour period, could do to the surrounding cliffs and their rock art. Because the first drilling of some 35 natural gas wells was north of Cottonwood Canyon, with the industrial traffic going by the Great Hunt panel, concern was raised to curtail traffic by this famous panel. Some heavy traffic still goes by the panel, but the greater concern is for the whole stretch of Nine Mile Canyon, if the project of 700 gas wells is continued, including the additional construction of industrial facilities and cumulative heavy traffic, without regard to the archaeology and rock art of Nine Mile Canyon.

Twice in this paper, I have noted preservation efforts at sites treated in *Sacred Lands in Indian America* (Little 2001). My daughter in Olympia, Washington, has the Sacred Lands book in her library. She has many Indian friends, and had gone to Seattle for a book signing and fund raiser for the Snoqualmie Tribe. Christopher Peters, of the Native American Seventh Generation Fund, was the main speaker. He is quoted in *Sacred Lands in Indian America*, as follows: "In the native belief system sacred places are not sacred because native people believe they are sacred. They have sacredness in and of themselves. Even if we all die off, they will continue to be sacred" (Page 2001:131). When he autographed my daughter's book, by the quote above, he wrote: "*Keep Fighting for the Sacred. Christopher.*" In concluding my presentation at the URARA Symposium, I asked those present to let me be a cheerleader, and all of us together to shout out

***KEEP FIGHTING FOR  
THE SACRED!***

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