

PRESERVING SACRED INDIAN LANDSCAPES AND PROTECTING ANCIENT ROCK ART

For most tribes a sacred place is one where the Great Creator or spirits, both good and evil, communicate with the living. Most Anglo Americans consecrate a church as a sacred place and it remains sacred as long as a congregation meets there, but when congregations outgrow a building they then often sell it, purchasing new space which they then make holy. What is important for native peoples is not the sacred *space* of a church or cathedral or any other permanent structure, but rather a location made holy by the Great Creator, by ancient and enduring myth, by repeated rituals such as sun dances or by the presence of spirits who dwell in deep canyons, mountain tops, or hidden caves. An entire landscape may represent sacred geography because for thousands of years native peoples migrated from place to place in search of food on seasonal rounds that took them into the high country in the summer and to lower elevations in the winter. There are literally dozens of sacred

sites for each tribe that are integral to tribal history, religion, and identity (Figure 1).

Whereas for Christians the sacred teachings of the Bible are text-based, Indians honor oral traditions linked to specific sites such as Ribbon Falls in the bottom of the Grand Canyon, where the Zunis believe they emerged from the center of the earth as a people. Each tribe has its own story of emergence and migration.

A sacred site is always sacred and human burials or village sites are never abandoned because they remain hallowed ground. If shamans carved rock art panels to evoke spirits in southern Utah or at the bottom of Echo Park in Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado, then those places remain special and should not be disturbed. They are sacred sites where the living communicate with the dead or with powerful animal spirits of deer, elk, and mountain lions that the rock artist came to see in his visions.

Repetition and tradition, unbroken continuity over time—these elements are essential to native religion whether it is a young man at a remote vision quest site, a tribe like the Shoshones or the Utes at their annual sun dances, or Miwok leaders on a pilgrimage to collect plants for religious purposes as they visit sacred shrines in California. Native religion is intricately bound to a tight web of place and an intimate, subtle, even secret understanding of landscape.

Protecting and preserving native sacred sites depends upon identifying them and using the stories of native peoples, the skills of ethnographers, historians, and geographers to learn these sacred places so they can be protected. When land is lost to native peoples, federal laws



Figure 1. A waterfall coming out of rock is a sacred site in Glacier National Park, Montana, for the Blackfeet Tribe who have a story of a female warrior who went to this site for a vision quest and received her vision here. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.

can help preserve and protect sites to which indigenous peoples do not have legal title or ownership.

Depending upon the circumstances, relevant federal laws may include: The Antiquities Act 1906; National Historic Preservation Act (1966 and amended 1992—especially section 304); American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978); Archaeological Resources and Protection Act (1979 and amended 1989); Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990); and Presidential Executive Order 13007 Protecting Native American Sacred Sites (1996).

Useful essays and publications include *National Register Bulletin #38 Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties* (Parker and King 1990) and articles in *CRM* (Cultural Resources Management) particularly the special issue “What You Do and How We Think” (Parker 1993). A key element in cultural resources protection for tribes is the issue of confidentiality. With legislation that passed Congress in 1992, tribes are not required to divulge information that may be sacred. Federal property managers must consult with affiliated tribes and the subsequent dialogues have gone far to improve federal-tribal relations. But what are sacred sites? After years of research, this typology emerged:

1. Religious Sites Associated With Oral Tradition/Origin Stories

The first category of sacred sites would be religious sites associated with ancient myths and oral traditions that figure prominently in emergence and migration stories. To use nomenclature from the National Register of Historic Places, these sites are “traditional cultural properties” that have deep meaning for tribal identity. Examples would include the huge stone monoliths in Navajo Tribal Park called “Big Hands” or barrels with spouts essential to storing and providing rain for the Navajo.

On the 18 million acres of the Navajo Nation, sacred places may be associated with the origin stories of clans, the origins of ceremonies, the origin of specific customs, and the general Navajo creation story. Other Southwestern tribes like the Zuni, Hopi, Walapai, etc. also have specific places linked to their clan migrations and creation stories.

2. Trails and Pilgrimage Routes

A second category of religious sites would be trails and pilgrimages through sacred landscapes such as the trail to Zuni Heaven or the Ute Trail, perhaps the longest and highest Indian trail left in the continental United States. Rising from 5,200 feet along the Colorado River to over 10,000 feet on the White River Plateau, the Ute Trail was used by prehistoric and historic Utes in their seasonal rounds of hunting on the Flat Tops Mountains. Associated sites within a few miles of the trail include vision quest sites, tall rock cairns, a shaman platform high in a piñon juniper tree, and Shield Cave.

Cairns as trail markers are particularly important for migratory peoples who remembered the cairns as a place to pause and meditate, as Nez Perce guides did along the Lolo Trail with Lewis and Clark in 1806 (Gulliford 2000:75). Indians also reverently added to the cairns as each passing traveler would say a prayer and add another rock to the pile for both personal good luck and respect for their ancestors who had gone before.

Along the Columbia River in Washington, tall cairns of basalt represented kinship and family lineage for the Yakima, as well as fishing boundaries for different plateau bands of Indians (Figure 2). Native peoples believe that cairns contain the essence of the builder and must be approached with care (Gulliford 2000:73).

3. Traditional Gathering Areas

A third category of religious sites would include gathering places for fish, wildlife, sacred plants,

and materials to quarry such as mineral deposits which are sources for face and body paint. Paint sources were so crucial to religious ceremonies that on the Great Plains paint mines would be neutral territory and warring tribes could gather red, yellow, and black clay in peace without attacking one another. Sacred paint sources include the Paint Mines near Calhan, Colorado and in Wyoming at Sunrise and Rawlins. Shield Cave in Glenwood Canyon, Colorado is a rare site that contains every clay color needed in Ute religious ceremonies. Utes knew of the cave in oral tradition and had remembered it for decades before the Bureau of Land Management contacted tribal leaders about its exact location. Now the site is officially protected and visitation by non-Indians is discouraged (Gulliford 2000:78).

Navajos gather hematite and special dirt and sand for sand paintings, and most Southwestern tribes have sacred places where men gather salt. There are sacred gathering areas for clans to gather special roots and herbs as well as family use sites. There are gathering areas for willows to be made into baskets, wild tea for medicinal purposes, and special water from sacred springs or snow melt from high elevations. For their *Jish* or medicine



Figure 2. Ancient rock cairns on the Columbia River Plateau in Washington State represent clan and family lineages and also fishing boundaries for the river below. This image was used in the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's Report to the President and Congress of the United States, 1993. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.

bundles, Navajo medicine men may also collect projectile points and pieces of petrified wood because oral traditions are also linked to the fossil record. Plants are also used in religious ceremonies.

Traditional gathering areas for sacred sage, sweetgrass, and other herbs are special places to be protected. Tribal sacred sites include these traditional cultural property areas where for generations tribes have gathered food, whether it be salmon among the Columbia Plateau Indians, bitterroot among the Shoshones, camass roots among the Nez Perce, or huckleberries among the confederated tribes of Warm Springs and the Yakima Nation. These sites are sacred because they bring the people together each year at harvest time to gather plants for the first feasts and to initiate young girls as women and young men as hunters or fishermen. Gathering roots and berries in the old way keeps the people physically strong and knitted together by social tradition.

4. Offering Areas: Altars and Shrines

Just as tribes have gathering areas for collecting plants and medicines, native peoples also make offerings either privately or within ceremonial cycles when sacred materials are gathered. There are also specific locales where at certain times of the year offerings of prayer sticks and special foods are prepared for the Creator to keep the people in harmony, to heal the sick, and to provide general balance and prosperity. Offerings are also left for powerful animals like bears and buffalos.

These sites could be prehistoric, as in altars and shrines found on Whiskey Peak in the Green Mountains in southeast Wyoming or in the Wickiup Village site near Rifle, Colorado, where at a slight remove from the wickiup village a shaman left an altar and stone palette for offerings to the Creator (Gulliford 2005:948). Though archaeologists consider the sites prehistoric in terms of age, for native peoples such time distinctions are irrelevant. Altars are never



Figure 3. *A rare Ancestral Puebloan shrine on BLM land in southeast Utah remains untouched on a steep canyon wall. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.*

abandoned; they represent active conduits to the spirit world. Figure 3 shows a rare shrine in southeast Utah.

5. Vision Quest and Other Individual Use Sites

A fifth category of religious sites would be sites used by single individuals such as vision quest sites. These are often composed of stones 18 to 24 inches high and placed in a horseshoe or circular shape. The young man or woman seeking a vision enters the earth or stone enclosure, remaining without food or water until the arrival of the animal or bird spirit who then becomes the source of his or her personal power or medicine. Most vision quest sites are on high precipices with panoramic views, often 360 degrees, and “are among the most common forms of sacred geography in North America” according to Deward Walker (1988). There may also be small, individually-used sweat lodges or wooden tree platforms used by medicine men for meditation and healing.

Vision quest sites can be found at remote locations throughout the Rocky Mountains and northern Great Plains, and Indians who visit them today often leave offerings of sacred sage, tobacco, or water to placate the spirits. An Indian might reuse

the site for a modern vision quest or leave it undisturbed, but in either case a seeker of visions has made it a sacred place and federal land managers must protect the sites.

6. Group Ceremonial Sites: Sweat Lodges, Dances, and Sings

Ceremonial dance sites such as sun dance, bear dance, or other dance sites are also sacred places and usage may date back for decades. Among Plains Indians the sun dance lodge is erected at the same spot in a lengthy ritual that includes having a virtuous woman select the forked aspen or willow tree for the central lodge support. Under the direction of the sun dance chief, dancers and helpers raise the twelve roof poles of the lodge, whose opening always faces east towards the rising sun. The lodge or corral is eventually covered with fresh willow branches to give the dancers shade as they dance and blow their eagle bone whistles (Gulliford 2000:86).

Just as with the routes taken by the Shalako spirits at Zuni or the Deer Dancers at Taos Pueblo plaza, what is sacred here is the reconstruction of tradition through meditation and performance. Keeping the sun dance structure intact in the tradition of Christian churches would be contrary to Indian beliefs. Building the sun dance lodge anew brings people together and that act is far more important than the lodge itself. The wooden frames of large, group sweat lodges are also sacred, whether they are the stout cedar poles of Navajo sweat lodges in the bottom of Canyon de Chelly or the framework of thin willow pole lodges from the mountains.

Dozens of kivas in the Southwest are still actively used by men’s societies to initiate young boys, and on the high mesas of the Southwest, like the village of Walpi on First Mesa at Hopi, ancient plazas still reverberate with the dance steps of the Kachinas and snake dancers in special ceremonies now closed to non-natives.



Figure 4. Ancestral habitation sites qualify as sacred sites for most tribes. This PIII site epitomizes a small defensive site in southeast Utah. Basketmaker II sandal petroglyphs adorn the rock wall below the ruins. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.

7. Ancestral Habitation Sites

Another category of sacred sites would be archaeological or ancestral sites still vital to the spirit world (Figure 4). This would include ancient Puebloan ruins or the cliff dwelling homes of Ancestral Puebloan peoples as well as teepee rings where Plains people once set up encampments. Brush shelters or wickiups for Great Basin tribes and Utes in Colorado would also qualify as sacred village sites, as would log hogans and sweat lodges.

8. Petroglyphs and Pictographs—Ceremonial Rock Art

Many petroglyphs, pictographs, and pictograms qualify as sacred. The Shoshone believe petroglyphs represent messages from the spirit world and that only properly trained medicine men or shamans can decipher them. Ceremonial rock art also often illustrates origin and creation stories and can be found on the tops of mountain peaks, on boulders in the bottom of drainages, and along pilgrimage routes—anywhere the rock surface can be incised down to the desert patina and under ledges protected from weathering (Figure 5).

9. Individual Burials and Massacre Sites

As with all cultures, human remains are sacred to tribal peoples and with the passage of the Native American Graves Repatriation and Protection Act of 1990, all unmarked graves found on public lands are now protected, though tribes have different opinions as to what reverence should be attached to burials.

In addition to Indian burials both historic and prehistoric, another sacred category includes massacre sites and mass burials such as the Marias River Massacre site and Big Hole Battlefield in Montana, Sand Creek in eastern Colorado, Washita River Battlefield in Oklahoma, the Camp Grant Massacre in Arizona, and Wounded Knee Battlefield at Pine Ridge, South Dakota. These sites of shame, where armed military forces attacked Indian villages, are only recently being protected and interpreted.

10. Observatories and Calendar Sites

Massive stones atop Fajada Butte at Chaco Canyon National Historical Park in New Mexico function as a solar and lunar calendar, designed by ancient Puebloan peoples to mark the passage of time and seasons for their communities.



Figure 5. To protect Newspaper Rock and its thousand years of petroglyphs in Canyonlands National Park, the National Park Service has erected a chain link fence. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.

Throughout the Southwest, stone alignments and concentric circles on rock art may indicate solstice markers.

THE LACK OF AN AMERICAN CULTURAL EXPORT LAW

Native American cultural traditions are being sustained and created, but prehistoric rock art sites need to be protected. Native American cultural objects also need protection because they are routinely stolen and often leave the United States (Gulliford 2009b). The black market for cultural objects, specifically antiquities, continues to thrive in part because unlike most other countries, the United States does not have a cultural export law. Anyone can get on an airplane with a rare Zuni pot, an Ancestral Puebloan basket, Civil War uniforms, or any other American artifact and take it overseas (Figure 6).

One reason the antiquities market is so successful is that it is, and has been, an excellent way to



Figure 6. One of the rarest of all Southwestern prehistoric ceramics, the Mimbres bowl known as the Three Cranes Bowl was pothunted, stolen, returned to its pothunting owners, and then promptly sold on the black market. It has not been seen for over twenty years. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.

launder illegally acquired cash. In the Southwest the phrase is “rugs and drugs.” Native peoples are now deeply burdened with rural addictions to methamphetamines and to pay for an expensive drug habit, antiquities and cultural objects are stolen and sold. Each time an artifact is sold it increases in value until it finally lands in the hands of unscrupulous collectors who could care less where something came from as long as they can own an authentic piece of the past. Tony Hillerman has explored this chain of theft in his popular book *A Thief of Time* (Hillerman 1988).

As Native American populations grow, as elders pass on, as tribes continue to defend their treaty rights and sovereignty, protecting sacred objects and sacred places such as rock art sites will become even more important. For five centuries now Indians have fought to survive and maintain their identity amidst non-native encroachment, theft, and misguided assimilation policies. Now Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Alaskan natives can help to determine their own futures, in part by knowing their ancient cultural traditions and by preserving that which is centuries old. In Utah, the fight continues to preserve and protect some of the finest and oldest rock art in North America.

Of the thousands of Indian rock art panels in the Southwest, few are older than Barrier Canyon pictographs found throughout the San Rafael Swell in Utah. From tiny five-inch animal figures to stunning seven-foot tall human shapes with no arms or legs and alien-like bug eyes, Barrier Canyon style images are usually a dark blood red color. They may have been painted 8,000 years ago; many panels are at least 5,000 years old (Kelen and Sucec 1996:13, 14).

For a week friends and I drove 4WDs and then hiked into remote locations in Emery County, Utah, to photograph these spectacular ochre red paintings. We set out to find a few of those sites, and in side canyons and small slot canyons, we found them. The images of eerie, elongated figures



Figure 7. *A detailed image of an evocative Barrier Canyon pictograph on the San Rafael Swell. Note what appear to be free-floating eyeballs with wings. Photo © Andrew Gulliford.*

with shortened arms and legs are hard to decipher. The anthropomorphs, or human figures, often have overly large eyes, no ears or noses, and no way to distinguish gender. Snakes writhe in their hands or above their heads. Yet circling these fierce, faceless creatures are delicate menageries of exquisitely painted birds, ducks, geese, deer, and occasionally what appear to be free floating eyeballs with wings (Figure 7).

I'll not forget the blustery spring day with a storm front moving across Utah and we seven hiking all morning to finally find a few red symbols high on a cliff face shaded by a small alcove. We scrambled up and there, in the silence of the Swell, the few symbols seen below blossomed into small panels of intricate images expertly drawn in the Barrier Canyon style's signature red paint.

Standing just a few feet from the panels, we could study the masterful brush strokes, the lyrical zoomorphs or animal-like creatures, and the red paint's perfect preservation. The artist had added a few white dots and faint white streaks. Seated on a sandstone ledge, looking south across a vast canyon landscape, rare pictographs just behind my shoulder, the twenty-first century melted away. Time ceased. I thought if we waited, with luck the artist might return. Instead, there was only the wind.

Another afternoon hike up an unnamed canyon seemed fruitless. Perhaps one of our guides had made a mistake. Then when we were almost across from it, we saw a panel of human figures with the largest one a somber red, almost brown, that may have been eight feet tall. We stared in wonder. The ghost-like images without arms or legs may be shamanistic art.

The most famous Barrier Canyon panel is the Great Gallery in a remote section of Canyonlands National Park named Horseshoe Canyon. But we wanted to hike in wilderness study areas to see ancient art generally not visited. In the vastness of the Swell we could do that. On the fifth day we came across a finger-painted panel of four figures that looked as fresh as if it had been painted that week. One of our party quipped, "If this paint can last 5,000 years, why can't my house paint?"

Barrier Canyon paint is only one of the mysteries. Probably mixed from vegetable and mineral compounds, the paint is 10 percent blood according to BLM interpretive signs, but whether human or animal is uncertain. The sophistication of the art, which seems to represent a vibrant and complex spirit world, is made more mystifying by the fact that the artists were Archaic period (6500–2000 B.C.) mobile hunters and gatherers who did not plant corn and who lived a precarious subsistence lifestyle. They hunted with spears, and yet when we returned to the famous Buckhorn Wash panel to study it in afternoon shade using binoculars and long camera lenses, I felt I was in the presence of sacred art as powerful as anything on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

In 1995 in an award-winning Utah State Centennial Legacy Project, dozens of citizens and volunteers worked to remove bullet holes, graffiti, crayon, and chalk from the Buckhorn Wash Rock Art site's eight panels (Gulliford 2009a). They moved the road farther from the site, added fencing, parking, landscaping, an interpretive trail, and restrooms. Special erasers, jeweler's tools, watercolor paints, and pastels were used in panel

restoration. Now visitors can see scenes of rituals, celebrations, and homage to Native American gods painted thousands of years ago by artists using brushes of hair, feathers, and yucca fibers.

But all is not well on the Swell, which is a BLM Special Recreation Management Area of 938,500 acres. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and ATV groups continue to squabble over wilderness designation and wilderness boundaries for seven wilderness study areas. ATV use and illegal roads increase yearly. The under-funded Bureau of Land Management has few staff to enforce regulations on back country travel, and rock art vandalism is an ongoing problem. Far too many panels have been shot at or scratched over.

One site we visited, not as impressive as the Buckhorn Panel but still possessing ancient Barrier Canyon Rock Art, was beneath a small cliff face at Molen Seep. For many yards the base of the cliff was covered in cow poop. I'd like to forget that afternoon but I can't; just as I can't forget the rare feeling of hiking into remote canyons to discover 5,000 year-old paintings. Exploring the Southwest is why many of us live here, and yet personal self-discovery isn't enough. We must advocate for public lands and do our best to protect the natural and cultural treasures we enjoy.

I wrote a letter to the BLM. I told them I'm happy to put on leather gloves and volunteer to string fence at Molen Seep. No one ever replied. Meanwhile, I keep thinking of those blood-red Barrier Canyon figures in the unnamed canyon wash. How much longer will they be safe?

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