



Yellowstone National Park’s ethnographic resources are natural and cultural features that are significant to certain American Indians because those features are linked with the ways in which a tribe identifies itself as a distinct group. Ethnographic resources include sites used for ceremonial activities, hunting, and gathering, as well as those associated with migration routes and a tribe’s history. They also include objects, plants, animals, and structures that are important to a tribe’s sense of purpose or way of life. For purposes of definition and management, Yellowstone National Park’s Ethnography Program considers ethnographic resources from the viewpoint of the group for which they have an importance that is distinct from that recognized by the general public.

The Transition from “Indian Country” to “Uninhabited Wilderness”

Before Yellowstone National Park’s inception in 1872, many American Indians used the area to hunt, fish, gather plants, quarry obsidian, take the thermal waters for spiritual and medicinal purposes, rendezvous with other tribes, trade, and live in on a seasonal basis. Although the Crow, Shoshone, and Bannock were the most frequent historical inhabitants, the park’s location at the convergence of the Great Plains, Great Basin, and Plateau Indian cultures meant that other tribes had also developed traditional connections to the area (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

However, the congressional act that established Yellowstone lacked any reference to American Indians, and congressional delegates declared that “no Indians lived there.” In part, this may have been because by the time Yellowstone was established, many American Indians already had been relocated to reservations. It is also possible that American Indians were thought to be a rather inconvenient part of the Yellowstone story. By the late nineteenth century, scenic grandeur had become a matter of national pride. Wild nature became a unifying symbol for the U.S.; one that Old Europe could not claim (Spence 1999). In the midst of this movement, Congress called for the creation of a “great public park,” and Yellowstone was established. To Euro-Americans, the park represented a conception of wilderness so powerful that early preservationists often tended either to dismiss or to ignore any

evidence of American Indian use. Seeing no landscapes that had been altered by farming, Euro-Americans were apt to assume that local Indians were rootless people without ties to the lands they traveled across (Spence 1999).

However, continuous occupation over the course of 10,000 years has left archeological evidence of campsites, fishing grounds, hunting, obsidian trade, and burial places, all linked by an extensive trail system into and out of what is now Yellowstone National Park and across the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Interviews with contemporary American Indian descendants of those who created the archeological sites have not only confirmed the activities reflected by the sites, but also offered additional interpretations related to their use of the land. These ideas can inform research hypotheses for archeologists.

The sequestering of American Indians on reservations in the nineteenth century also obstructed, though not completely, their traditional use of resources in the Yellowstone area and consequently diminished, through lack of association, the richness of oral traditions that convey legendary and historical information, place names, other geographic knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, and personal memories. Nevertheless, all of these groups still retain oral knowledge about their ancestral relationships with Yellowstone, as well as a vital interest in the contemporary management issues surrounding the natural and cultural resources that remain integral to their traditions and community identities (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

The Associated Tribes of Yellowstone National Park

According to a recent ethnographic study of the park (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004), there are “ten major tribes with cultural or historical associations to the Yellowstone Valley ecosystem.” However, as has become customary throughout the National Park System, any tribe that possesses oral traditions indicating that their ancestors resided in or used areas that now lie within a park’s boundaries may claim a formal association with that park. The National Park Service then has the responsibility to engage in consultation with those tribes to learn more about those ancestral and contemporary associations. The



first six tribes to request association with Yellowstone were accepted in 1996; by 2003, the following 26 associated tribes (in alphabetical order) were formally associated with the park:

1. Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes
2. Blackfeet Tribe
3. Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe
4. Coeur d'Alene Tribe
5. Comanche Tribe of Oklahoma
6. Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes
7. Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation
8. Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
9. Crow Tribe
10. Crow Creek Sioux Tribe
11. Eastern Shoshone Tribe
12. Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe
13. Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes
14. Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma
15. Lower Brule Sioux Tribe
16. Nez Perce Tribe
17. Northern Arapaho Tribe
18. Northern Cheyenne Tribe
19. Oglala Sioux Tribe
20. Rosebud Sioux Tribe
21. Shoshone–Bannock Tribes
22. Sisseton–Wahpeton Sioux Tribe
23. Spirit Lake Sioux Tribe
24. Standing Rock Sioux Tribe
25. Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa Indians
26. Yankton Sioux Tribe

American Indian Presence in Yellowstone

Before the 19th Century

The oldest intact cultural deposit found in the park was discovered in 1958, along Yellowstone Lake. These two chipped obsidian pieces were associated with the Cody Complex people, whose artifacts dating from 9,400 to 9,600 B.C. have also been found along the park's eastern boundary south into Jackson Hole and throughout eastern Idaho (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

After the bones of a bison began to erode from a cliff of billowing steam vents above Yellowstone Lake at Steamboat Point, archeologists exposed nearly the entire animal, including bones that showed butchering marks, and obsidian flakes from the cutting tools that made them. The site was dated to around 1,200 A.D., and may have been chosen as a place to camp because of the warmth provided by nearby steam vents as well as the possibility of cornering animals against the lakeside cliff (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

A subsistence culture based on hunting and plant gathering continued in the Yellowstone area until late in the nineteenth century. While small bands of hunters and gatherers made the longest and most persistent use of Yellowstone, larger outlying groups from the eastern and western slopes of the Rocky Mountains also used the area seasonally. Indigenous groups traded with horticultural societies that flourished in the Mississippi and upper Rio Grande valleys more than 500 years ago (Spence 1999).

Yellowstone possesses one of the richest obsidian deposits in North America, and American Indians' use of this highly valued material for blades, tools, and ornaments made the area important far beyond the Rockies. Samples of Yellowstone obsidian have been found at several Hopewellian sites in the Ohio River valley. Obsidian Cliff in the northwest portion of the park is pocked with ancient quarries.

From Spanish settlements in Texas and New Mexico, the horse spread to the Great Plains and reached Wyoming and eastern Idaho by the early 1700s. American Indians with horses could travel more quickly and comfortably with their families, and carry more possessions than those without. Nearly all of the tribes in the Yellowstone area eventually adopted the horse and developed a nomadic lifestyle that was also affected by diseases, firearms, and trade incentives introduced by Euro-Americans (Janetski 2002).

1800 to Park Establishment in 1872

By the start of the nineteenth century, several American Indian nations overlapped and contested each other in the Yellowstone area, including groups who lived primarily west of the continental divide—the Flathead, Nez Perce, Coeur D'Alene, and Shoshone–Bannock. To the north were the Blackfeet, who also ventured into the area. To the east were the Crow, whose territorial claims took in parts of the Great Plains and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. In fact, a treaty ratified by Congress recognized that almost one-half of Yellowstone was the aboriginal homeland of the Crow. To the west and south, Shoshones and Bannocks made their home in what includes Yellowstone National Park, Grand Teton National Park, and the National Elk Refuge. Congress also recognized this domain in a treaty as the aboriginal territory of the Shoshone.

Although the Kiowa are primarily associated with western Oklahoma, their oral tradition places them in the Yellowstone and Black Hills regions. One account has it that the Yellowstone region was given to them at a hydrothermal feature, Dragon's Mouth/Mud Volcano, by their Creator. Centuries later they are said to have emigrated east and then south, to where they could have a life of abundance among the bison herds (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

Intermountain groups like the Nez Perce, Salish, and



Coeur D'Alene also traveled through Yellowstone on their way to bison ranges and trading centers along the Missouri River (Spence 1999). Increased Euro-American settlement throughout the Rocky Mountains began to make long-distance travel more difficult by the mid-nineteenth century and, by the time most western tribes were forced to settle on reservations, the groups that continued to use the Yellowstone area on a regular basis were those with the longest claim to it—the Crow, Shoshone, and Bannock (Spence 1999).

Crow. The oral traditions of the Crow indicate that several waves of migration occurred from their ancestral home among the Hidatsa. The Mountain Crow were the first to make the migratory excursion to the Rocky Mountains in search of the sacred tobacco seed (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004). Archeological evidence shows that Crow occupation in Wyoming began to occur around the 1500s to the 1600s (Frison 1976; 1991). The River Crow migrated later and occupied the area north of the Yellowstone River up to the Milk River (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

By the early nineteenth century, Crow were living in the area of the future park during the late spring to late fall—hunting, collecting obsidian, gathering plants, seeking assistance from spiritual helpers through vision quests, and following the trails into and out of Yellowstone to visit their close friends, the Nez Perce (Bulltail 2002; Spence 1999).

The U.S. government first recognized American Indian rights in the Yellowstone area in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. With this, government officials sought little more than to ensure that settlers could travel safely across American Indian territories and to prevent conflicts between Indian groups. The assembled tribal leaders recognized as Crow territory lands from the continental divide to the Powderhorn River, and from the Wind River Mountains to the Musselshell River, which included what would become almost the eastern half of Yellowstone National Park. The upper reaches of the Yellowstone River served as an important refuge for the Crow from the more heavily armed Sioux, who began moving with impunity through portions of Crow territory in the late 1860s (Spence 1999).

In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the Crow were compelled to relinquish most of their lands, including all those in Wyoming, north of the Yellowstone River, and east of Little Bighorn country at the 107th meridian. The Crow's first reservation agency was constructed near present-day Livingston, Montana, in 1869. Crow families still moved through their traditional territories, but starting in 1869, the discovery of silver and gold near the headwaters of the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone resulted in bloody ambushes between miners and American Indians (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

Shoshone. From late autumn and through winter,

equestrian bands of Shoshone established camps in the foothills and sheltered valleys of the Rockies. They supplemented winter food stores by hunting elk, deer, and small game. In spring, some of these bands traveled to the eastern Great Basin to hunt bison until those herds were eliminated; they then turned east to the plains south of the Yellowstone River for bison (Spence 1999). As a result of the Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868, the Eastern Shoshone agreed to live on a reservation in the Wind River Valley in exchange for the government's providing protection against the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

The Sheep Eaters were a group of Mountain Shoshone who, as pedestrians with canines, occupied the mountains and valleys of the Rocky Mountains, including Yellowstone National Park. Photographer William Henry Jackson, who visited the park in 1871 with the Hayden expedition, reported there were 340 Sheep Eaters “living a retired life in the Mountains dividing Idaho from Montana.”

Bannock. Close relatives of the Shoshone, in the 1800s the Bannock were relatively recent arrivals on the Snake River Plain from farther west. With the help of horses and firearms, they eliminated bison from southern Idaho, and by the late 1830s they were joining other tribes from west of the continental divide, especially the Shoshone, who began making annual migrations to bison ranges farther east. Traveling together increased the tribes' safety from attacks by the Blackfeet and Crow, and they chose to risk attack for hunting in enemy territory rather than return to their former way of life without bison. Digging camas roots and catching salmon in Idaho were necessary for their survival, but the annual bison hunt made the Bannocks wealthy in terms of the possessions desired by American Indians (Janetski 2002). Until they had horses, the Bannock used dogs to drag the travois that carried their belongings and small children.

To cross the Yellowstone Plateau, the Indians used what became known as the Bannock Trail, although it was actually a system of trails rather than a single route. Starting at the Camas Prairie in Idaho, the primary route extended about 200 miles over Targhee Pass into the Madison River Valley, over the southern end of the Gallatin Mountains into the Gardner River valley, then eastward up the Yellowstone and Lamar rivers and across the Absaroka Mountains through various passes that dropped into a favored hunting ground between the Yellowstone and Musselshell rivers in south-central Montana. (The trail provided the initial access from the mouth of the Gardner River to Cooke City, Montana, and the road that was later constructed from Mammoth Hot Springs followed it closely. Remnants of the trail are also still evident between Indian Creek and the Lamar River, especially in the Blacktail Deer Creek meadows, where there are often several parallel travois tracks, and in the Tower Fall area, where the roughness of the terrain forced traffic into a



single track.)

As more white settlers moved into Idaho, the territorial governor established the Fort Hall Reservation for the Banock and Northern Shoshone in 1867. During this period, American Indian tribes in the Yellowstone area began their transformation from free-roaming, autonomous nations to clusters of dependent peoples on reservations administered by the U.S. government. Conditions on and off the reservations varied, but many peoples faced the same losses: of population due to disease and warfare, of the authority of traditional tribal leaders, of a nomadic lifestyle based on bison hunting, and of cultural traditions as they were converted to Christianity and their children were sent to boarding schools (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004).

Under the Indian Appropriation Act of 1871, a government policy that had previously acknowledged the tribes' semi-sovereign ability to sign treaties with the U.S. government was suspended. This did not extinguish the obligations associated with treaties already in place, but thenceforth, recognition of American Indian tribes as nations or independent powers was outlawed, and negotiating any further treaties was forbidden.

From 1872 to 1900

By consolidating them near the park under circumstances in which ration shortages often left tribes with little choice except to hunt, the assignment of American Indians to reservations encouraged the continued Indian use of Yellowstone over the short term. The tribes had treaty rights to hunt off-reservation, and their forays attracted little notice in the park's early years, when the number of visitors was small and official oversight limited. Despite a growing awareness that American Indians probably outnumbered tourists during the first years of the new park, officials made little mention of their presence until the late 1870s. However, increased tourism and several conflicts led Philetus Norris, Yellowstone's superintendent from 1877 to 1882, to prohibit Indians from being in the park. Park officials did not want them to scare away tourists, and they blamed American Indian hunting and fires for losses of game and forests. But the concentration of tourists in the geyser basins and the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone made it possible for Indians to avoid contact with them, and they continued to use the park areas much as they had in the past (Spence 1999).

Crow. In the 1870s, Crow hunted elk that gathered in the lower elevations near one of their principal winter camps, a few miles downstream from Yellowstone's north boundary. Crow cooperation with the U.S. Army provided a buffer against Sioux encroachments on their land. However, by 1880, Crow use of the northeast part of the park was dropping off as more gold miners established camps along the park boundary and depleted game and destroyed food-gathering sites on both sides of the boundary. The

combined impact of commercial and American Indian hunting in the lower Yellowstone valley eliminated the game that remained there and, with the near extermination of the bison, made the Crow almost wholly dependent on agency rations. Weakened and divided, in 1882 the Crow ceded the western fifth of their reservation, including the strip of land that lay within the park east of the Yellowstone River and north of the 45th parallel along the Montana–Wyoming boundary. Four years later they were moved to a new agency almost 200 miles east of the park, and Crow use of the Yellowstone area ceased almost completely (Spence 1999).

Nez Perce. In the summer of 1877, forced to move from their territory in eastern Oregon and central Idaho to a reservation in Lapwai, Idaho, several embittered young warriors avenged the deaths of several of their people by killing four white settlers. Fearing retaliation, about 800 Nez Perce men, women, and children set off with nearly 2,000 horses. Although leaders of the other bands favored heading north to Canada, Chief Lookingglass, who wanted to avoid white settlements and find refuge with the Crow in Montana, persuaded them to go south and east through Yellowstone. But they soon had more than 2,000 cavalrymen, civilian volunteers, and American Indians of other tribes trying to track them down. On around August 22, the Nez Perce crossed the west boundary along the Madison and Firehole rivers and spent two weeks resting and traversing the park, crossing Mary Mountain and the Yellowstone River, and trekking up Pelican Valley over the Absaroka Mountains into Montana. While in the park, the Nez Perce encountered three groups of tourists and prospectors, captured some of them, killed two men, and seriously injured a third.

The Nez Perce largely eluded their pursuers while in the park, but they did suffer casualties from the hardships of travel and skirmishes elsewhere. After the Crow declined to give them sanctuary, the Nez Perce headed for Canada, but Chief Lookingglass died at Bear Paw Mountain, fewer than 40 miles from the border, and Chief Joseph surrendered to the U.S. Army there on October 5. More than 200 Nez Perce made it to Canada, but the remaining 430 were taken down the Missouri River by flatboat to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and then to Indian Territory, Oklahoma, where many died because of the harsh living conditions. Eight years later, 149 of the surviving Nez Perce were re-settled on reservations in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington.

Sheep Eaters. Although Sheep Eaters were often employed as guides for government officials, Norris compelled the several hundred who lived in the park to relocate to the Wind River or Fort Hall reservations in 1879. Some Sheep Eaters clung to their traditions and lived off the reservations until the turn of the century. Togwotee, a Sheep Eater medicine man, guided the entourage of President Chester Arthur over American Indian and game trails in 1883, when they traveled from Wash-



akie Springs, up the Wind River, over the pass that now bears Togwotee's name, and then north into Yellowstone (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004)

Bannock. After the Fort Hall Reservation was established in 1867, the Bannock came under increasing pressure to stay there. However, after years of near-starvation, several bands of Bannock rebelled in 1878, when livestock herds grazed over the Camas Prairie, one of their most important food gathering areas in central Idaho. The last band of 60 insurgents took a detour through the park, raiding horses and frightening tourists, before they were attacked by a platoon of soldiers and Crow scouts and surrendered just east of the park (Spence 1999).

Every year, large parties of Bannock and Shoshone left their reservations in Idaho and Wyoming to spend the summer and early fall months along the remote southern and western perimeters of the park in areas long used for hunting, plant harvesting, and gathering medicinal herbs. Although development of the Cooke City mines forced them to pass over the Absarokas by a more rugged trail to the south, some Bannock, Shoshone, Nez Perce, and Flathead continued to use the Bannock Trail to travel to the Montana plains until the bison herds were eliminated there in the early 1880s, which made hunting elk and other game in the park area more important.

According to a 1889 report that appeared in *Forest and Stream*, in September 1886, several weeks after the park's administration had been turned over to the U.S. Army, a band of Bannock hunters whose number was variously estimated from 50 to 100, crossed the park's west boundary "in such warlike array as to give rise to much anxiety and excitement among the tourists, causing many of them to shorten their stay in the Park." The army induced the Bannock to shorten their stay, but as soon as the officer and detachment had gone, the Bannock started two forest fires and withdrew into the mountains outside the park to continue their hunting activities.

Instead of moving surreptitiously in small bands, as white poachers were doing by the late 1880s, the Bannock and Shoshone hunted openly as they always had, in large groups. Their camps, and their practice of setting fires to dislodge game, made their presence conspicuous. Army scouts came across a recently abandoned tipi near Cook Peak in the northern part of the park in December 1897, but lacking any jurisdiction over the Indians, park officials could do little more than insist they leave the park (Spence 1999).

In wording similar to other treaties of the time, the Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868 included a stipulation that the Bannock and Shoshone had "the right to hunt on the unoccupied lands of the U.S. so long as game may be found thereon, and so long as peace subsists among the whites and Indians on the borders of the hunting districts." However, after Wyoming became a state in 1890, it passed laws that set hunting seasons and limits. American

Indians lost their right to hunt on unoccupied public lands in a case that was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which concluded that "the right to hunt given by the treaty clearly contemplated the disappearance of the conditions therein specified," and that American Indians could not hunt on federal lands in violation of state laws. The matter was further settled in 1897, when a Bannock delegation traveled to Washington and agreed to give up their right to hunt on public lands "in return for proper compensation." A provision was included to pay them \$75,000 "for the relinquishment of their hunting rights."

1900–1980

Yellowstone's early administrators did not encourage or exploit the park's association with American Indians, and even sought to publicize the erroneous idea that local tribes avoided the Yellowstone area because they were afraid of the geysers. However, as fears of Indians subsided and American Indian culture became a source of greater interest as access to it became more difficult, park officials made occasional efforts to invite Indians to display their wares or to exhibit dances for visitors.

To promote visitation to the park in 1925, Superintendent Horace Albright organized a "Buffalo Plains Week" to which he invited some Crow to camp in the park and assist in the annual roundup of bison in the Lamar Valley. The Crow were known for their showy costumes and horsemanship, and Albright later described the event as a "colorful pageant" presented by "a score or more of Crow from the nearby reservation dressed in their regalia and war paints of other days, and a few real western cowboys." The event was popular with tourists, who were taken in "old time stagecoaches" to see the roundup and the Indian camps, which were "a vivid reminder of the fact that not so many years ago the ancestors of these very Indians roamed and hunted over the lands in this vicinity," Albright said.

In 1934, the Crow and Oglala Sioux became the first tribes to receive shipments of live bison from federal land. Robert Summers Yellowtail, the first American Indian to be appointed a reservation superintendent, cajoled white ranchers on the Crow Reservation to return 40,000 acres to the tribe, and he borrowed trucks to transport the bison 350 miles from Yellowstone. The Crow received a total of about 200 bison during the 1930s, most of them from Yellowstone and the rest from the National Bison Range. Yellowtail also obtained live elk from Yellowstone, but his repeated requests for bear and trout were turned down, as was his argument that Yellowstone should waive its entrance fee for the Crow. The Oglala Sioux began with 43 bison on a fenced pasture at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, nine of them from Yellowstone and the others from Wind Cave National Park.



1980–2005

Although policies at different national parks have varied depending on American Indian presence in the area when the park was established, overall the relationship of national parks to Indians has gone through several phases: from government appropriation of tribal land, to government neglect of tribal treaties and disregard for tribal cultures, to Indian demands that their interests be reckoned with, to a commitment from the National Park Service to inter-cultural cooperation (Keller and Turek 1998). In 1978, the park service began drafting a policy that became the Native American Relationships Management Policy when it was adopted in 1987. In it, the park service pledged to actively promote tribal cultures as a component of the national parks.

Pressure from Indian groups for recognition in Yellowstone was sparked by the controversy over bison management that increased during the 1980s along with the size of the herd and the number of bison trying to leave the park in search of forage in the winter. Because some of the bison are infected with brucellosis, a disease that could theoretically be transmitted to livestock from the afterbirth of a normal or aborted calf, bison that cross the park boundary may be shot, hunted, or sent to slaughter by the surrounding states. In 1991, the Medicine Wheel Alliance, a consortium of tribes including the Crow, Oglala Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, Blackfeet, Eastern Shoshone, and Shoshone–Bannock, asked for bison leaving the park to be sent to reservations that wanted to maintain herds. Yellowstone Superintendent Robert Barbee responded that he wished that was possible, but federal and state regulations prohibited shipment of live bison from an infected herd to anywhere except a slaughterhouse.

In 1992, to “help ensure that the proposed project will not negatively impact ethnographic resources with a cultural affinity to members of your tribe,” eight tribes were notified that the National Park Service had begun to draft an environmental impact statement (EIS) for managing bison that crossed the park boundary into Montana. Although some tribes maintained that treaty rights entitled them to participate in drafting the EIS, their request was not granted because they were not considered to have any authority for making decisions about the bison.

In 1994, several tribes received a total of 335 bison from Yellowstone, but only in exchange for butchering them after the animals had been shot outside the park. Some tribes welcomed the meat, but the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative, an organization that seeks to restore bison herds to millions of acres of reservation land, declined to participate in subsequent years as a matter of principle.

In 1996, while drafting of the EIS was still underway, Yellowstone managers began holding “government-to-government” consultations with representatives from interested Indian tribes once or twice each year. Bison have been the major topic of discussion at the tribal

consultations, but other issues have also been raised, including archeological research, infusing park media with information about tribes, the appropriate handling of human remains found in the park during construction, and the status of threatened and endangered park species.

On February 12, 1997, a winter during which more than 1,000 bison were killed or sent to slaughter at the park boundary, Caleb Shield, the tribal chairman of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux, was permitted to address a joint session of the Montana legislature. “I speak for all Montana Indian Nations when I say that the slaughter of this wild herd must stop,” he said. “Our cultures are different on this issue. Under our religion, buffalo are respected. They are good medicine. Their skulls and hides adorn our most sacred lodges. We still dance, sing, and pray to them.” On March 6 of that year, a group of American Indians and others in mourning gathered for a prayer vigil near the bison confined in the park at Stephens Creek. Arvol Looking Horse, a respected Indian elder and one of several Lakota Sioux who had come from South Dakota, explained that the Yellowstone bison were special because like the Indians, they were “survivors of an apocalypse.” The group shared a pipe and prayers to release the spirit of the bison that had been killed.

In the intervening years, collaboration has been achieved on many issues, and relationships have been strengthened at the government-to-government consultations. However, tribes also have often expressed frustration at the lack of weight they believe has been given to their views. Instead of being consulted about bison management in Yellowstone, for instance, they felt they were merely being informed about decisions that had already been made. When negotiations over the EIS were completed with the state of Montana and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2000, the resulting bison management plan did not include any specific concessions to American Indians.

Ethnography Program Overview

Federal legislation and National Park Service policies mandate that attention be paid to the peoples whose lifeways are traditionally associated with resources under National Park Service stewardship. Ethnography is a research methodology that reveals information about people associated with parks, with their cultural systems or ways of life, and with related technologies, sites, structures, other material features, and natural resources. In addition to traditional practices of resource use, for example, cultural systems include expressive elements that celebrate or record significant events and may carry considerable symbolic and emotional weight. These include rituals; sacred narratives such as origin myths; legendary accounts; and performing, graphic, or material arts. Cultural anthropologists refer to behaviors, values, expressive patterns, and technologies as features of cultural systems.



Developing programs, policies, guidelines, and data to help management identify and protect culturally significant resources to traditionally associated peoples is one responsibility of Yellowstone National Park's Ethnography Program. Another major goal is to facilitate collaborative relationships between the park service and the peoples whose customary ways of life affect, and are affected by, park resource management. Seeking practical outcomes, the program identifies issues and informs management regarding relationships with traditionally associated communities such as American Indian tribes and the resources valued by both the park and communities. The program works with management to promote mutually acceptable solutions and cooperates with other park programs and with the public associated with parks to help reduce tensions and close gaps between NPS and community goals.

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