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Traditional Land Use as Starting Point

Opening Cross-cultural Dialogue at Crater Lake and Lava Beds

National Park Service units were established on some of the most dramatic landscapes and at some of the most historically significant locations of the West. As such, many—perhaps most—NPS units contain places of enduring significance to American Indians: hunting and gathering areas, sacred sites, and settlements. Strong personal or collective ties to these landscapes often persist among contemporary American Indians and this cultural significance can pre-date the establishment of park units by millennia. The potential for cross-cultural discord, therefore, is woven into the structure of parks, as these lands have come under the stewardship of people who possess values, beliefs, and expectations quite different from those of nearby tribes. Some park units have attempted to meet this challenge, while others have not—a situation arising more from individual personalities than overarching NPS policy (Keller and Turek 1998). Increasingly, however, tribes assert treaty rights within park boundaries and seek to engage NPS policies within formal government-to-government relations.

Crater Lake National Park, Oregon, and Lava Beds National Monument, California—located on the northern and southern ends of the Klamath Basin, respectively—have long been areas of particular cultural significance to native peoples, particularly the Klamath and Modoc Indians. Crater Lake is a well-documented sacred site, serving traditionally as a place for vision quests and shamanistic training. Portions of this park were originally included in the lands allocated to the Klamath Tribes (consisting of the linguistically associated Klamath and Modoc peoples, as well as Paiute ‘Yahooskins’) in their 1864 treaty with the United States government. Hunting and gathering sites located within the present national park were used by some tribal members well into the 20th century, often as part of a “seasonal round” that included extended

stays at berry picking sites on adjacent national forest land. Lava Beds National Monument contains remnants of numerous villages, burial grounds, and hunting camps. These sites are equally significant to tribal members as the event leading to presidential designation of this monument in 1925—the Modocs’ ill-fated last stand against the U.S. Army in 1872-73. Abundant archeological materials persist within both parks, often corroborating ethnographic accounts. Clearly, within the contemporary political climate, issues of access, interpretation, and management loom around both of these park units.

Tribal members still visit certain sites, and some traditional uses persist in these parks. Simultaneously, park management has proven incompatible with some traditional uses, and past park managers have been, at most, vaguely aware of the enduring significance and use of Crater Lake and Lava Beds to tribal members. Consequently, the NPS had not addressed the concerns of this constituency in any consistent or systematic way. The agency lacked ethnographic information on both park units specifically and on traditional land uses generally. Although park officials knew the identity of associated tribes, they had not developed ongoing collaborative interactions or formal consultation procedures with the federally recognized Klamath Tribes.

Since managers at both parks needed to consult with the same tribal government, there was a compelling case for a traditional use study uniting both ends of the Klamath Basin. Recognizing the wide range of cross-cultural issues facing these two parks, Fred York (cultural anthropologist for the NPS Columbia-Cascades Cluster) and Steve Mark developed a scope of work for a traditional use study of both parks. Unlike a more conventional ethnographic overview and assessment that draws from existing materials, York and Mark proposed a study that would additionally seek tribal input on, and provide an analysis of, future resource interpretation



Modoc medicine flag left by tribal members at Lava Beds National Monument.

and management. As such, the Crater Lake/Lava Beds Traditional Use Study represents an innovative effort to bridge certain enduring divides—cultural, historical, administrative—between the NPS and local tribes. The contract was awarded to Douglas Deur, a researcher specializing in traditional land use and cultural geography who has collaborative research experience with Pacific Northwest tribes. The Klamath Tribes then hired tribal member Orin “Buzz” Kirk to serve as research liaison, with NPS allocated funding.

The study now seeks to identify and locate culturally significant sites and landscape features. Further, by interviewing tribal members, and looking for recurring narrative themes, this study has identified many perceptions of the land that appear to be shared and intersubjective. By emphasizing the *geographic* dimensions of traditional land use, in lieu of conventional ethnographic information, the study has already identified a wealth of previously unrecorded information about both parks. Contextualized within a broader discussion of resource use patterns and sacred geographies, such “data” provides a valuable tool for NPS managers. The study methodology was designed not merely to gather information, but also to be of mutual benefit and to develop a lasting dialogue between the NPS and local tribes. To that end, the NPS agreed to permanently archive tape recordings, notes, and other project materials with the Klamath Tribes, so that consultants’ families might continue to access these materials in the future.

This research has also identified points of contention between tribal members and the NPS. Some consultants express resentment over past archeological excavations and prohibitions on hunting within or near park boundaries. There is concern about interpretive media that they feel misrepresents tribal activities or beliefs, and some perceive the establishment of these parks as an uncompensated ‘taking’ of treaty land. Many see paying entrance fees to access traditional sacred sites as an unacceptable limitation on their reli-

gious freedom; more than one tribal consultant has asked, “what if we started charging you money to go to church?” A few of these issues may be easily resolved through government-to-government memoranda of understanding, for example, while others may prove relatively insurmountable. At the very least, these concerns are now clearly identified for present and future NPS managers.

As traditional knowledge reflects culturally rooted understandings of the world, so too do peoples’ expectations about how such information is to be used. Once a sacred site is identified, for example, how should it be managed? Often there are no simple or singular answers. Likewise, a collection of ethnographic facts does not point, unambiguously, to a representation of traditional use that would be appropriate for park interpretive media. Visitors to NPS units certainly should receive accurate information about past and present Native American uses of parks—but without violating tribes’ notions about privacy and proprietary knowledge (Rundstrom and Deur 1999). With this in mind, interviews also involve asking tribal consultants how (or if) traditional knowledge might be presented to general audiences.

The questions identified through this study will ultimately be as important as the answers it provides, as the questions shall inform future dialogue and subsequent research. This study has already created a dialogue, improving relations between the NPS and the Klamath Tribes. This may help insure that meaningful tribal consultation becomes an integral part of interpretation and planning at both parks. As one tribal consultant, hearing of the study’s goals, exclaimed, “it’s about time!”

References

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