

The Social Context of Archaeological Research in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

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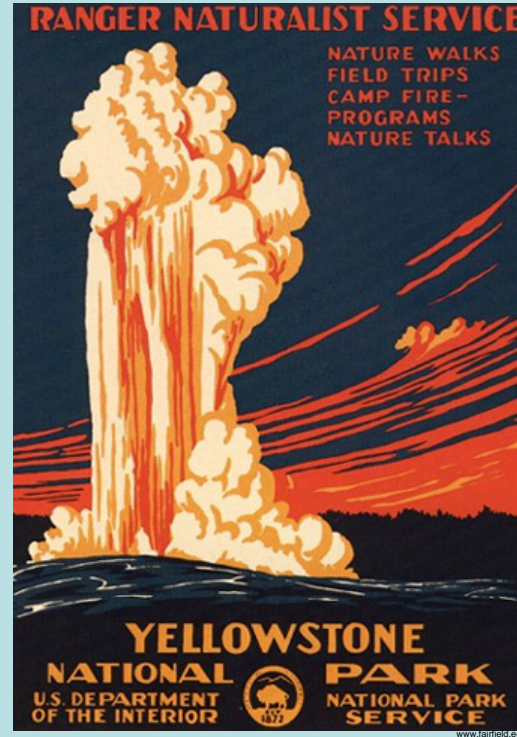
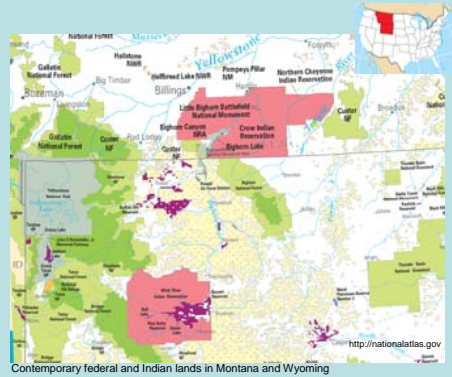
Introduction

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) is a marked landscape in which geographic, social, and political boundaries articulate across space and time. Research initiated in 2006 by archaeologists from Indiana University and Northwest College provides an example of the ways in which archaeological research in the GYE must straddle these boundaries in the present in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the past.



Conducting Research in a Cultural Landscape

Research was conducted at two locations: first, at Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area north of the Wyoming-Montana border and south of the contemporary Crow Indian Reservation, and, second, in the Shoshone National Forest, Washakie Wilderness near present-day Yellowstone National Park. Both research locations exist on what is now federal land. As a result, the interests of the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service are particularly relevant as they relate to public cultural resources and education. The locations of contemporary federal lands and Indian reservations in Montana and Wyoming are important places in terms of political and cultural articulations. The Bighorn Canyon NRA is an enclave of federal land within the Crow Indian Reservation, Montana. Similarly, the Shoshone National Forest is located adjacent to the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming. The proximity of archaeological research areas and descendant communities provides a unique opportunity for dialogue, collaboration, and multivocal interpretive frameworks.



A Social History of National Park Formation

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) is a landscape charged with beliefs, understandings, and meanings concerning nature and culture as they interact at the locus of Yellowstone National Park. As America's first national park, Yellowstone invokes a sense of natural place, heritage, and conservation. Lakes, mountains, canyons, buffalo, grizzly bears, and geysers are all important symbols of an earlier America of pristine wilderness and geological marvels. Ideas about wilderness are an interesting platform for exploring a social history of national park formation. The creation of federally protected wilderness areas is complicated by diverse cultural understandings of place and by historical issues of land claims, access, and management. In a geographic and ecological sense, the boundaries of Yellowstone Park are permeable; the GYE spans upwards of eighteen million acres including Grand Teton National Park, several wildlife refuges and national forests, BLM and private land, and part of the Wind River reservation in Wyoming. In a cultural sense, the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park may be characterized as simultaneously permeable and contested. As Nabokov and Loendorf (2004: xi) state in *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park*, "When they imagined this Wyoming preserve into being, the park's conceivers projected themselves backward. They reconceived this environment as a natural Eden of pristine and pre-human existence, teeming with game, devoid of human meddling or cultural usage. In this primordial scenario, Indians had little place." A number of prehistoric and historic Indian groups utilized and lived in Yellowstone Park as well as the GYE. In order to conduct archaeological research within the GYE that may provide answers to broader anthropological questions, archaeologists must carefully work with a variety of stakeholders including the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, descendant communities such as the Crow and Wind River Shoshone, the BLM, private landowners, and an American public invested in cultural and natural heritage.

Shoshone National Forest, Washakie Wilderness



2006 field research was conducted in Shoshone National Forest, Washakie Wilderness, Wyoming in a high altitude mountain setting. The Shoshone National Forest was heavily impacted by an 11,000-acre natural wildfire in 2003. The fire created a unique situation in which surface visibility was dramatically increased. The ability to see archaeological surface remains, particularly undocumented campsites and related artifacts in association with previously visible ridgeline sheep traps, has various impacts. It provides an opportunity for increased recreational surface collection, in turn necessitating immediate response from cultural resource management agencies. Preliminary archaeological research was conducted by Northwest College and the Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist prior to the fire, and the negative impact of surface collection requires an extensive archaeological investigation of the area. This investigation is simultaneously enabled by post-fire visibility and framed by a pressing conservation ethic. The research area is associated with a transitional time period from prehistoric to historic lifeways among Shoshonean people of the GYE.

Teams from Indiana University and Northwest College surveyed and mapped all surface artifacts using a four-fold methodology including pedestrian survey, GPS mapping, PDA data recording, and remote sensing.

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area



2006 research at Bighorn Canyon NRA focused on pre-Contact domestic spaces, particularly tipi ring locations. Teams from Indiana University and Northwest College worked with National Park Service officials to document spatial relationships among tipi rings at various sites within the Bighorn Canyon NRA. Research methodologies included pedestrian survey, GPS mapping, remote sensing, and test excavation.

Archaeological sites have been impacted through surface collection by locals and tourists visiting the the NRA. Currently, the National Park Service has put forth efforts to curb these negative impacts through educational outreach. Other impacts to archaeological remains within the NRA include surface damage by cattle trampling.

Interpretations of archaeological sites in the Bighorn Canyon NRA are relevant to several stakeholders including descendant communities such as the Crow, local non-Indian communities, local ranchers, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as steward of the wild horse population, and tourists invested in natural and cultural heritage.



Tipi ring locations showing proximity to road



Ranchers with grazing leases at Bighorn Canyon NRA

How The West Was Won (or Lost)

Interpretations of archaeological remains in the GYE are bound up in cultural perceptions of the Old West. History is not neutral for contemporary Plains Indian communities, local non-Indian communities, or the broader American public raised on the mythology of cowboys and Indians and vested with diverse opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about the American past. In this way, the stories that archaeologists tell about the past become socially, politically, and culturally important.



Contemporary Crow tribal emblem



Wyoming state flag



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