

## THE CHACO NIGHT SKY PROGRAM

**Chaco's Night Sky Initiative:** Since 1991, Chaco Culture NHP has offered a strong component of astronomy in its public interpretive programs. Public programs emphasize the practices of the Chacoan people a thousand years ago, as well as modern approaches to viewing the same night sky they viewed--in a remote environment with clear, dark skies, and free from urban light pollution.

Astronomy also provides a framework for helping to protect park resources. All park lighting has been retrofitted to reduce light pollution and enhance night sky viewing. In 1993, the park designated the night sky as a critical natural resource to be protected, and has worked on efforts to reduce the threat of urban light pollution in the Southwest.

The park established an on-going partnership with The Albuquerque Astronomical Society (TAAS) in 1991. Star parties have been offered twice yearly. In January 1997, TAAS member John Sefick brought his astronomy equipment to Chaco. He was so impressed with the skies above Chaco that he offered to donate a domed observatory and equipment to the park.

**The Chaco Night Sky Program:** The park began constructing a permanent observatory at the visitor center in 1997. In May 1998, Superintendent C. T. Wilson, John Sefick, staff, volunteers, and hundreds of visitors participated in the dedication and grand opening of the Chaco Observatory. The observatory has added a new dimension to Chaco's interpretation of astronomy, and now serves many different people:

- The 90,000 plus visitors per year who attend the astronomy programs, slide shows, and solar observations scheduled several times weekly.
- Serious amateurs with an interest in using the state-of-the-art Charged Coupled Device (CCD) imaging systems in order to conduct research.
- Interested amateurs who want to use the several telescopes available to view the very dark skies of the northwestern New Mexico.
- Interested volunteers who wish to sharpen their teaching skills by presenting to the public basic information regarding our scientific understanding of the universe and star lore from a variety of cultures, and provide hands-on use of a telescope.

In 1999, the National Park Foundation awarded Chaco Culture NHP and TAAS an Honorable Mention in the category of education at its Partnership Award Ceremony in Washington, D.C.

**Ancient Connections--Modern Connections:** The Chacoan people were intimately aware of all their surroundings. They were close observers of the skies and seasonal cycles, and their observations provided them with the invaluable ability to time their agricultural and ceremonial events, which were central to their survival. Today, Puebloan descendants carry on many of these same traditions.

Visitors are drawn to the park to learn about the monumental Chacoan sites, to view the pecked and painted images on canyon walls, to observe scattered pieces of pottery, and to ponder the greatness of the Chacoan world. It is natural to wish for a connection with the people who flourished in this stark and challenging place. The night sky, so clear and brilliant at Chaco Canyon, is a special connection that we all share, as we look to the skies to better understand our place on earth.