



## American Indians and the Tower



American Indian people have long considered the Tower a place of spiritual and cultural importance. Their sacred connections to this place continue today as part of centuries-old ancestral traditions.

### A Sacred Place

Traditionally, indigenous cultures around the world gather at places of great natural beauty for ceremonial purposes. Sites like the Tower have profound significance to many peoples.

Over twenty American Indian tribes are associated with the Tower. Among these are six distinct American Indian Nations that have a direct geographical connection to the Tower, meaning that they have lived in the area at some point in their history. These six nations are the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Crow, Kiowa, Lakota, and Shoshone.

Members of these groups continue to revere the sacred significance of the Tower. Their stories and beliefs explain its cultural importance. These stories are part of a larger oral tradition and cultural belief system.

Historically, American Indian traditions are dominated by a sense of place. This means that American Indian people focus not on who or when, but where. For this reason, the Tower continues to be an important facet of American Indian culture.

### Managing a Sacred Site

The scientific value of Devils Tower was the reason for its original designation in 1906. Since that time, there has been a growing awareness of the Tower as a cultural resource. In 1978, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed. It underscores the importance of access to sacred sites, and protection of American Indian religious rights on public lands. Executive Order No. 13007 (1996) reinforced the duty land managers have in accommodating American Indian ceremonial use on federally managed sacred sites. All of these contribute to management decisions here at the Tower.

The issues surrounding the management of Devils Tower National Monument are compounded by historical facts and current events. Prior to 1868, tribes such as the Lakota claimed a large swath of territory that covered several present-day states (see below). The Tower is located within that territory. In 1868, the Lakotas and several other nations signed a treaty with the United States government. This

treaty granted certain land rights within the region to these nations.

When white Americans flooded the Black Hills during the 1870s gold rush, conflict ensued. The United States seized the Black Hills and other portions of tribal lands in 1877. By the early 1900s the territory was broken into small reservations for the various *oyates*, or tribal nations (see below).

A 1980 Supreme Court ruling declared that the United States had illegally taken this land. Although a settlement was granted, tribal nations refused payment. Today, American Indians continue to be an integral part of the region's communities. Management of the Tower requires collaboration with associated tribes. The National Park Service (NPS) has an obligation to uphold cultural and ceremonial access American Indians have with respect to this site.



Oceti Sakowin Homelands, ca. 1849



Oceti Sakowin Lands, ca. 2012

*Oceti Sakowin* is Lakota for "Seven Council Fires," and signifies the seven *oyates*, or nations, which comprise the Dakota, Nakota and Lakota people.

Colloquially, they are known as the "Sioux," which is a French word derived from the enemies of the Dakotas, the Chippewas (or Ojibwas).

## Traditional and Ceremonial Uses



A sketch showing the design and placement of prayer cloths.

American Indians use the Tower as a place of worship. Most of the ceremonies are private rituals for small groups or individuals, such as prayer, pipe ceremonies, and vision quests. Devils Tower National Monument issues special use permits for longer duration ceremonies with larger group size, such as sweatlodge ceremonies. The ceremonies that take place here require quiet and solitude. Please avoid interfering with these rituals, as they are personal ceremonial functions, not public events.

The most common form of modern American Indian ceremonial connection can be seen in prayer cloths. These are the brightly colored pieces of cloth seen hanging in the trees around the park. They are physical, symbolic

representations of prayers made by American Indian people as part of their ceremonies.

Prayer cloths are commonly seen in two forms: many small bundles tied together by a single string; and a large bundle, sometimes by itself or up to four tied together. The colors used are representative of the four directions, each with its own significance. While the colors are common to many American Indian nations, their meaning differs between tribes.

Please do not touch, take, or disturb these prayer cloths in any way. It is considered culturally insensitive to photograph these items and we request that you do not do so.

## Name of the Tower



Many traditional stories and names of the Tower associate bears with the formation.

The place known as Devils Tower has been a facet of American Indian cultures for hundreds of years. It plays a prominent role in the sacred narratives of their oral histories. The indigenous names for the Tower are as varied as the tribes connected with the place.

Names such as Bear's Tipi, Grizzly Bear's Lodge, and Bear Lodge Butte indicate a common theme in many of the Tower stories. Grey Horn Butte and Tree Rock liken its appearance to other parts of the natural world. The earliest official map of the area dates to 1857, where the formation was shown as "Bear Lodge." It was not until the late 1800s that the name "Devils Tower" was first ascribed to the formation.

Colonel Richard Dodge led an expedition into the Black Hills in 1875. The colonel would go on to publish a book about his expedition. In his book, Dodge wrote that "the Indians call this shaft The Bad God's Tower." This name was "modified... to a better form of English, calling it Devils Tower." The name "Devils Tower" grew in popularity amongst white settlers. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt

designated the first national monument Devils Tower National Monument, and the new name became official.

Some Plains Indian tribes have objected to the name Devils Tower, considering it offensive to a site they regard as sacred. Many local white Americans view the name as important to their own cultural identity. In recent years, controversy has grown over whether or not to change the name.

In the 1990s, a coalition of American Indian tribes met to decide on an appropriate name for Devils Tower. Despite the many cultural differences, they agreed on "Bear Lodge." This name is a direct translation of the Lakota and Cheyenne names for the Tower, and similar to names from other associated tribes.

A monument name change would require legislation and congressional action. The NPS cannot change the name. While the significance of the name cannot be overlooked, the importance of the place is what the park service preserves and interprets through the telling of the stories of the Tower.

## Voluntary Climbing Closure

Some traditional American Indians view the practice of climbing on the Tower as a disrespectful act. With over 100 years of climbing history at Devils Tower National Monument, the NPS considers climbing an acceptable recreational use. The park service developed a Climbing Management Plan (CMP) in 1995 to address these conflicting views.

Climbers are no longer allowed to drill anchors, or otherwise make permanent changes to the rock. In addition, a voluntary climbing closure is in place for the month of

June. This voluntary closure was developed as part of the 1995 CMP by a workgroup that included tribal and climbing advocacy group representatives.

Plains Indian people consider June a sacred time due to traditions linked to the summer solstice. The park requests that visitors consider the uses and viewpoints of tribal cultures and not climb the Tower in June. Regardless of the time of year or cultural background, the Tower is a place of inspiration for all people.

## Astronomical Connections



Seen from the north the Tower has a slight lean, similar to the Lakota constellation which shares its name.

The sacred narratives and oral histories of several American Indian tribes link their knowledge of the stars with the Tower site. A story from the Kiowa nation tells of a group of seven sisters; these girls were rescued from a group of bears by the Tower growing into the sky. The Tower grew so tall that the girls were pushed into the sky to become stars. These stars are linked to constellations we know today as the Big Dipper or the Pleiades.

Star knowledge from Lakota culture includes a constellation named Mato Tipila; this is the same name the Lakotas use for the Tower itself, and means Bear Lodge. The shape of this constellation is roughly rectangular with a

slight lean, just like the Tower. You may know this constellation by the name Gemini.

Astronomy is one of many ways that American Indians today find connection with the Tower. The dark skies of northeast Wyoming offer amazing opportunities for people to reconnect with their primordial roots. Human beings have long found fascination and inspiration in the night sky, but as our nights become brighter that connection is quickly being lost. The night skies over the Tower offer us a chance not only to learn about American Indian culture, but to enjoy a resource which has been a common facet of cultures throughout the world.

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