



Foundation Document Overview

Canyon de Chelly National Monument

Arizona



Contact Information

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Purpose



CANYON DE CHELLEY NATIONAL MONUMENT, in the heart of the Navajo Nation, was established to maintain and preserve an outstanding concentration of archeological resources, representing thousands of years of continuous occupation and agriculture, as well as other features of scientific, historical, and educational interest. The canyon preserves resources of sacred significance and perpetuates lifeways of past and present cultures connected to these landscapes.



Significance

Significance statements express why Canyon de Chelly National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- **Relationships.** Located on Navajo trust land and having a resident community, Canyon de Chelly is unique among national park units. A mutual decision was made to establish the site as a national monument because the National Park Service and Navajo Tribal Council recognized the importance of Canyon de Chelly. The National Park Service, Navajo Nation, and canyon community work in conjunction to manage park resources and enable traditional and contemporary lifeways.
- **Cultural Continuity.** Canyon de Chelly National Monument preserves one of the longest continually inhabited locations by American Indian communities in the United States, spanning at least 5,000 years. Tséyi', the place within the rock, sustains a living community connected to a landscape of great historical and spiritual significance—a landscape composed of places infused with collective memory and defining moments in Navajo history. It is essential to the spiritual and traditional lives and cultural identity of many native peoples.
- **Watershed.** Water is the central element woven throughout the landscape, history, and cultures associated with the canyon. In this environment, “water is life.” The largest watershed on the Defiance Plateau, Canyon de Chelly, Canyon del Muerto, Monument Canyon, and associated tributaries, provide a perpetual water source that has sustained diverse plant, animal, and human life throughout time.



Significance



- **Cultural Resources.** The quantity, diversity, and integrity of cultural resources at Canyon de Chelly provide outstanding opportunities to study and interpret long-term relationships between people and land. Integrated archeological and cultural landscapes reflect a long occupational history, spanning the Archaic through Basketmaker, prehistoric Puebloan, transitional period, historic Navajo and Pueblo, and early European contact. The canyon system contains protective alcoves and cavates that preserve exceptional architecture, the largest, most intact assemblage of perishable materials (i.e., basketry, sandals, reed mats, etc.) in the country, and one of the largest concentrations of pictographs and petroglyphs in North America.
- **Scenic Values.** Canyon de Chelly offers especially striking examples of canyon scenery. The vibrant yet serene beauty of the monument is found in the shapes, colors, contrasts, and interplay of light and shadows across natural and cultural features. The perpendicular red cliffs of the de Chelly sandstone rise from the wash to heights of up to 1,200 feet. Scenic vistas from the canyon rims look onto spectacular geological formations, such as Spider Rock and Fortress Rock, as well as spectacular night skies. From the north and south rim roads, visitors also experience expansive views of high desert mesas, vegetation, dark night skies, and distant mountains. These qualities create inspirational and memorable experiences for residents and visitors from around the world.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Archeological Landscapes and Associated Museum Collections**
- **Cultural Landscapes**
- **Continuing Cultural Connections**
- **Experience of Place**
- **Partnerships and Relationships**
- **Scenic Views and Vistas**



Description

Canyon de Chelly National Monument is in northeastern Arizona on the outskirts of the town of Chinle. The monument encompasses approximately 84,000 acres within the Defiance Plateau on tribal trust lands belonging to the Navajo Nation. Generations of Navajo have lived in Canyon de Chelly, Canyon del Muerto, and Monument Canyon, and families continue to reside along the canyon floors and rim areas where they maintain homes, farms, and traditional grazing lands.

The monument was authorized by an act of Congress on February 14, 1931 (Public Law 71-667). The legislation affirmed that the Navajo Nation would retain surface and subsurface rights, and the National Park Service was charged with administration of the monument and preservation of prehistoric sites. The resultant overlay of management and ownership responsibilities among the Navajo Nation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the National Park Service continues to the present and is unique within the national park system.

Geological processes of uplift and erosion exposed the monument's colorful cliff walls as streams cut through layers of sandstone. Towering spires of erosion-resistant sandstone and cap-rock (such as Spider Rock and Face Rock) rise from the canyon floor. Dependable water from springs and seeps, and streams originating from the Chuska Mountains, eventually reach Chinle Wash. Water and the rich soils of the canyons support a variety of native and introduced plants and animals that have sustained canyon residents for thousands of years.

Archaic period hunters and gatherers made use of canyon resources and occupied seasonal rock shelter camps. Basketmaker people later introduced farming and built pit houses, granaries, and other structures. Concentrated village sites and multistoried stone and adobe-walled structures were developed during the Puebloan period (AD 750–1300). The Hopi and other modern Pueblo tribes are culturally associated with Canyon de Chelly and its former ancestral Puebloan inhabitants.

The Navajo (Diné) are believed to have arrived in the Southwest between about AD 1200 and 1400, and reached Canyon de Chelly over 400 years ago. For many Navajo, their presence in Canyon de Chelly extends further back several hundred years to the time of the earlier inhabitants (*Nihinasaazi*). Their tranquil pastoral way of life was disrupted in the late 18th century by conflict and raids with other tribes and Spanish colonists. Canyon alcoves and natural features such as Fortress Rock provided places of refuge.

The U.S. Army forcibly removed the Navajo from Canyon de Chelly in the winter of 1864. Those who survived the fighting faced the 300 mile “Long Walk” to Fort Sumner in New Mexico Territory. Scores died during the trek and four-year interment. The Navajo were eventually allowed to return, and regional trading posts assisted their recovery. A trading post established in 1902 near the mouth of Canyon de Chelly eventually became the Thunderbird Lodge, providing visitor services and canyon tours.

The enduring spiritual and cultural connections that bind the Diné and others to Canyon de Chelly contribute to make it an extraordinary and vibrant place. Visitors can receive orientation at the NPS visitor center; tour the canyons with a Navajo guide; take the self-guided hiking trail from the canyon rim to the White House ruin; and drive along the north and south rim roads to scenic overlooks.

