



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).

