

Lava Beds

National Monument

National Park Service

The Land of Burnt-out Fires

Here, on the northern flank of the Medicine Lake volcano, a fascinating world waits to be discovered. It is an ancient world...of unusual beauty...a spiritual world...a tumbled world of bewitching lava formations and underground passageways, decorated in delicate detail.

This strange land is the spiritual home of the Modoc People. To them the physical world and the spiritual world are the same. Their ancestors once lived in permanent villages along the shore of ancient Tule Lake. They came into the rugged lava beds, hunting game and gathering roots and berries to supplement their stores of fish, waterfowl, and wocas from the lake. This seemingly inhospitable land of burnt-out fires provided for all their needs, both biological and spiritual. The spirits of their ancestors date back some 11,500 years.

Long ago, before the time of the Modoc People, in a time when animals and people weren't really all that different, volcanic eruptions sent great rivers of molten rock burning across the land every few years. As the surface of a flow began to cool and harden, it insulated the interior. The lava within remained hot enough to flow in interior channels. When the eruption stopped, the lava drained out leaving lava tubes. As the lava cooled, it cracked and collapsed, allowing access into lava tube caves. Crusted surfaces of these tortured, tossing rivers were often split into winding trenches, or thrust up in great slabs, their flow patterns and surface ripples frozen there in time.

As the burnt-out fires cooled, plant and animal spirits began to return in their visible forms, each in succession, establishing itself in growing conditions specifically suited to its unique needs...first, the lichens, clinging tenaciously to the newly formed rocks...then the mosses, growing where the presence of the lichens had changed the conditions. New soil was formed as the lichens broke the surface of the rocks into sand, and as cracks and crevices trapped blowing dust and organic material. The new soil deepened, providing conditions just right for grasses, wildflowers, shrubs, and finally, trees.

Animals returned to make their home among their brothers, the plants. Together they formed a complex web of interrelated dependency. For countless centuries this delicate balance was upset regularly as new lava flows burned across the land, or as the lightning bolts of summer thunderstorms brought fire into the system. Plant communities were disrupted--changed abruptly--and the process of succession began anew, plants growing from the nutrients released by the ashes of their predecessors.

Into this world of balance and harmony, *Kamookumpt*s, the Creator, brought a basket of bones. From these bones he created the tribes of the Earth. The bones of the Modocs, he brought forth last and said to them "You will eat what I eat. You will keep this place after I am gone. You will be the bravest of all. Though you may be few, even if many People come against you, you will destroy them." These First Americans considered themselves always to be simply part of the land--nothing more, nothing less--brothers and sisters of the plants, the animals, the wind, rain, and fire. Their ancestors, who continue to dwell here in their spirit forms, were their strongest ties to the land.

This spiritual relationship with the land was not understood by *all* the tribes of the Earth and in 1826 the timeless spirituality of the land of burnt-out fires was disrupted. These entrepreneurs came with different values and purposes and they coveted the land that the Modocs called their homeland. In time, the government put the Modocs on a reservation with the Klamath Tribe, but uncomfortable on someone else's spiritual land, many Modocs left to return to their own.

An attempt by the army to return these "dissidents" or "renegades" to the reservation resulted in a six-month war that cost the lives of 53 soldiers, 14 civilians, and 14 Modocs. Of the 14 Modocs, only 3 were killed in actual combat. Four were murdered by settlers as they were being transported under guard as prisoners of war, two committed suicide rather than go to prison, one died in prison at Alcatraz, and four were hanged for the murder of two Peace Commissioners.

The remaining 153 Modocs, who had left the Klamath Reservation, were deported to the Territory of Oklahoma to live on the Quapaw Reservation. Some 200 Modoc People live there today as members of the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma. They are descendants of only 7 of the original prisoners of war. In Oregon there are about 750 Modocs, descendants of those who never left the reservation. They are represented administratively by the Klamath Tribe.

For fifty years after the Modoc War this ageless land of burnt-out fires was changed dramatically by the grazing of sheep, by the suppression of fires, and by the use and misuse of the lava tube caves. In 1925 the area was set aside as a National Monument to preserve the lava tube caves and the battlefields of the Modoc War.

You can enjoy the fascinating underground world of Lava Beds by borrowing lanterns to explore the caves, but please be careful, both for your own safety and for the protection of the caves. Formations broken off, however accidentally, cannot be replaced.

You can also see all the other features typical of a shield volcano. Mammoth Crater is the source of most of the lava covering the monument and across the road you'll see one of the feeder tubes emanating from Mammoth Crater. At Fleener Chimneys you'll see the spatter cones that formed around the vent that produced the Devils Homestead Lava Flow. At Black Crater look for tree molds, made as lava flowed around and incinerated trees in its path.

Hike to the top of Schonchin Butte to learn about the formation of cinder cones, to get an overview of the distant battlefields of the Modoc War, or to enjoy the grand Modoc landscape with Mount Shasta brooding on the horizon.

In the historic district you can walk in the wearied footsteps of those who fought in the Modoc War. At turnouts along the road interpretive signs briefly describe the geology, the history, and the wildlife of Lava Beds. In summer, rangers lead walks and cave trips and present campfire programs in the campground. Ask at the information desk for details and schedules or read the information boards in the restrooms and at the campground.

Today, the spirituality of the land of burnt-out fires is undergoing an awakening. In 1986 a ranger, representing the monument, went to visit the Modocs of Oklahoma, the first government official to do so since 1873. In 1988 monument staff assisted the tribe in the reburial of the human remains from our museum collections. In 1990 the National Park Service initiated and hosted a reunion of the two Modoc tribes. They sang and danced here for the first time, as a people, since they were exiled from this place. Now they return annually to celebrate that reunion.

At various sites throughout the monument the presence of spirits can still be felt and if you take the time, you may actually hear them singing. Sometimes you can see them when they chose to appear in discernable forms. Eagle is still the supreme source of power. Coyote, the prankster and perfect politician, still tricks his friends into letting him have his own way. Owl still frightens people with the sad news he brings. Jay is still the inveterate, insatiable gossip and Red-tailed Hawk, as he did for the Ancients so many years ago, still precedes you on your way to bless your safe journey.

Alone here, at sunset, you may also find that your own spirituality has been strengthened or reawakened.

Written and recorded by Gary Hathaway, Chief Interpreter, Lava Beds National Monument. Music Composed by Sheldon Mirowitz, a frequent contributor to the *Nova* television series on PBS. This music is from *Columbus and the Age of Discovery*. I used the following selections: #4 *South to Africa*, for the introduction and the geology/ecology story (3:38); #16 *The Last Voyage*, for the creation of the tribes and the Modoc War (2:40); #7 *Triumphant Departure*, for the things to see and do section (2:23); #8 *The Caravels at Sea*, for the closing spirituality section (1:41); #19 *The Age of Discovery*, for the walk-away music (1:02).