



The Medicine Wheel



What is the significance?

The medicine wheel (the Sun Dance Circle or Sacred Hoop) is an ancient and sacred symbol used by many tribes. It signifies Earth's boundary and all the knowledge of the universe.

What do the colors represent?

The four colors (black, white, yellow, and red) embody concepts such as the Four Directions, four seasons, and sacred path of both the sun and human beings. Arrangement of colors vary among different tribal customs.

What is it used for?

It is used in ceremonies to put feathers and medicines on, like in a bundle. However, it can also be used in daily life and decoration.

What about as decoration?

The medicine wheel can have different colors than black, white, yellow, and red. In ceremonies, they can have colors that correspond with the medicine being used. They can also be used in decoration with as many or few colors as desired.

What are medicine wheels made with?

They may be an object, art, or constructed with stones on the landscape. For objects, the base of the wheel is often dried buffalo or elk hide. Dyed porcupine quills are flattened and wrapped around the base in different patterns.



Bighorn Medicine Wheel (photo c/o US Forest Service)

How old is the medicine wheel?

They have been used for centuries. Hundreds of stone medicine wheels dot the landscapes of the U.S. and Canada. The oldest (in Alberta, Canada) is estimated to be over 5,000 years old. One of the largest and best-preserved is the Bighorn Medicine Wheel in Wyoming.

“In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it.”
- Heháka Sápa (Black Elk)