



Enhancing Communication Between the NPS and Native Americans Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site faced challenges in communicating and consulting with Native American tribes. Through shared leadership and vision, the park and its partners have developed mechanisms for the Cheyenne to have their own voice in park planning, development, and interpretation.

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, located in western Oklahoma, was established on November 12, 1996, to interpret the attack of Lt. Col. George Custer and the 7th Cavalry on Black Kettle's sleeping Cheyenne village in 1868. The word "Battlefield" as part of the name for the park may be debatable, because the park interprets an unprovoked attack on one of the greatest peace chiefs of the Cheyenne tribe. The Cheyenne people have certainly never agreed with the park's nomenclature, and it became a strong point of contention when the NPS convened discussions, negotiations, and collaboration to develop the story of this important time of American history.

It is easy to tell the story of Washita in a one-sided fashion. In developing the park's interpretive media, park staff made every effort to tell a balanced story of the Southern Plains Indian Wars and of the bloody atrocities that were being committed by both the American military and the Plains tribes that led up to the Washita attack. They also made every effort to engage the Native Americans that are affiliated with this site in the park's planning and development.

The park's first superintendent, Sarah Craighead, arrived with the intention of gaining substantive, consistent involvement of the tribes in developing the park. She wanted Native American partners to be at the table helping to make plans and decisions, not at the receiving end of a draft document that they were automatically expected to approve.

One of the biggest problems that plagued the process was finding the right person to talk to. The political turnover within the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribe made it very difficult to get strong consistent involvement. By executive order the NPS must deal with tribes on a government-to-government basis. Very early in the process, park staff members were asked to work with the religious leadership of the tribe, and in fact were asked to pay a visit to the sacred arrow keeper, an important spiritual leader. However, some in the tribe thought that it was improper for a religious leader to work on this type of process. Other religious factions were also unhappy that they had not been consulted. The park returned to the government-to-government relationship as the main consultation relationship, although a representative of the sacred arrow keeper did attend many meetings.

Dialogue can be difficult. Any successes achieved at Washita brought the park beyond telling a basic interpretive story to relating a way of life.

Because there had been such difficulty in engaging the tribe on a consistent basis, the park felt like it needed a person to help make sure that park issues were being taken seriously within the tribe and that tribal issues were being addressed within the park. The tribe had assigned the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinator to work with the park, but when the tribe changed NAGPRA coordinators several times within a three-year period, thus changing the contact person, the park had to find a better way of collaborating. They devised the idea of a cultural liaison position for the tribe who would work with the park. In Fiscal Year 2001, the

park received an NPS challenge cost share grant to fund half of the position. The tribe agreed to fund the other half of the salary and benefits. They worked together to create a cooperative agreement and a simple position description. They jointly hired someone to do the job for one year as a tribal employee. His main objective was to develop a consultation guideline that was realistic for all parties and affordable for everyone involved, allowed the tribe to tell the park staff how they would like to collaborate, and gave the park staff the important information they needed to develop the park and educate the public. The position, dedicated to forming a strong bond between the two entities, gained unparalleled good will for both the park and the tribes in the first year.

Also working with the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation, the park became a key partner in a project to develop links between sites of Cheyenne history and culture. The Cheyenne Heritage Trail was established as the first Native American Cultural Route in the state of Oklahoma. The trail is a 420-mile route that passes through historic and cultural sites that are significant to the Cheyenne people and to other tribes that lived in the historic tribal lands of western Oklahoma. The trail includes twelve sites that interpret significant portions of the Cheyenne story. The trail gives visitors the opportunity to explore not only Native American culture but also the idea of westward expansion, cultural conflict, and the Plains Indian Wars as a part of Western history.

Visitors may travel the trail in their own vehicles using a brochure as a guide, or they may participate in a bus tour provided by companies that purchase a guided program. Each venue along the route has different activities, some of which are interactive, all of which teach visitors about Cheyenne and Native American cultures. Each partner in the Cheyenne Heritage Trail is responsible for orienting visitors to their site and to the overall concept of the trail. Washita is, of course, one of the stops on the trip.

The benefits of this endeavor have been substantial. The partnership has created a high degree of cooperative spirit between local, state, federal, and tribal agencies in Oklahoma. Collaboration and contact between the partners has created a sense of ownership of the Cheyenne Heritage Trail and a feeling that all parties are concerned about the best interests of educating the public about Native American heritage. This is particularly advantageous to the National Park Service as we strive to develop a new national park site at Washita and look for creative ways to enhance partnerships and interpretive techniques.