



Old Voices and Sacred Sites

The Question: How can we learn more about the location of ancient sacred or religious sites and landscapes within the park and, at the same time, help reconnect living American Indians with their past?

The five-year Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program (SAIP) was the first comprehensive survey of archeological resources in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP). While many important prehistoric and historic sites were located and documented, the study revealed little about places sacred to American Indian tribes that once occupied the area. Archeologists and anthropologists from the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) saw a unique opportunity to reestablish cultural links between American Indian elders and their historic and traditional landscapes and belief systems, while learning more about how to protect places of tribal importance.

The Project: Use modeling and consultation with American Indian elders to identify sacred sites and landscapes.

With information from ongoing archeological investigations in RMNP and northern Colorado, UNC archeologists developed a Geographic Information System (GIS), or mapping software, program to test landscape models to locate religious or sacred sites and landscapes in the park. The effort is based on three levels of analysis: (1) cultural features (e.g., rock art), (2) sacred sites and landmarks (e.g., mountain peaks, ground sites), and (3) sacred landscapes, including a holistic view of all three levels of analysis. With this GIS, it is possible to model spatially-referenced layers of cultural and natural features on a digitized, three-dimensional physical landscape. Consultation with tribal elders helped identify features of sacred landscapes such as elevation, viewfields of known sacred landmarks, local relief, north-facing slopes, and nearness to known prehistoric and early-historic trails.



One of the highest points on Trail Ridge may be a significant sacred landmark.

The Results: Several sacred and religious archeological sites have been identified among over 1,000 archeological sites documented in RMNP. Further studies have documented a rich and fascinating ethnographic history relating to the park.

One of the most important aspects of this cooperative effort between archeologists, anthropologists, and American Indian elders is that it has provided the elders with a chance to re-enfranchise themselves with their historic lands from which they were forcefully evicted over one hundred years ago. The GIS modeling effort is still in progress and archeologists continue to refine and improve the models. Consultation with Ute elders suggested that Longs Peak, Specimen Mountain, Grand Lake, and Lava Cliffs might be important sacred landmarks to include in models and in 2006, archeologists found several promising spatial correlations of sacred sites and sacred landmarks throughout the park. Line-of-sight to religiously significant peaks and mountains was a key factor in the predictive capabilities of the model.

Selected quotes from Northern Ute elders:

“... Coyote ... opened the bag and he let out a lot of people.... But there were a few people that were left in the bag and those were the Utes ... he placed them high in the mountain—high on the mountain tops.... For our own people we need to have that reconnection for our children, for our grandchildren, great grandchildren.” – Venita Taveapont

“I feel so humbled that I’m here and I can feel them; I can feel the spirits; it makes me cry to feel that I’m home... Seeing the medicine wheel and praying there, I knew that my ancestors heard me.” – Loya Arrum



Ute elders on Trail Ridge during consultation.