



Learn about Badlands National Park!

Badlands Mythology

The Lakota people tell this tale to explain how the Badlands came to be. **You can carry on the oral tradition by reading it aloud then listening to someone read it to you.** Does your understanding of the tale change as you voice the events and/or listen to the imagery?

Extra thinking points are included in the right-hand column.

There was a time when the land that is now the Badlands was a high plain covered in the greenest and richest of grasses and the animal people lived there in great numbers. The Great Spirit that had created this land decreed that all quarrels must be forgotten when any tribes were camped upon this plain.

For many years, many bands came together here, and though they might be unfriendly at other times, here they danced and sang and traded in peace. But then, from the western mountains came the people without meat or skins and with the look of a hungry wolf in their eyes. They wanted this place for their own and were not willing to share, so they at once set about driving off all the other tribes until there were no others on the plain.

A council was called to ask for help from the Great Spirit. But if He heard, he gave no sign. The people from the mountains grew fiercer and were not content to stay on the plain anymore. Now they went about the country seizing all villages that stood in their path.

The sky became cloudy from smoke signals sent as the tribes began to call upon others long distances away to help carry out an attack upon these mountain people. Warriors began to make ready for the great battle, and fighting men began to gather from every corner of the land. At last all were assembled and the day had come for the advance. Now the Great Spirit took matters into His own hands.

Dark clouds hid the sun from the face of the world. Lightning streaked across the blackness and thunder rumbled high over the hills. From the ground flamed forth fire, and the earth shuddered and rocked. A wide gulf opened and into it sank the mountain tribe—all their people and all they possessed. With them sank all life—the waving grass and clear spring and animals.

As suddenly as it came the storm ceased. The earth became fixed in waves as it had rolled and shaken. There was only a barren waste on which nothing has ever grown or can grow. The Great Spirit had taken away the lands that had caused wars among His children and left to those He spared the evidence of His power and His punishment.

Geologic evidence -- rock layers and fossils -- also indicates that a lush prairie ecosystem emerged here about 30 million years ago.

The Lakota people -- members of the Oglala Sioux, one tribe among seven -- have been living in this area for centuries. They developed a rich culture well-suited for the arid environment.

As explorers, homesteaders, and gold-seekers began moving West into Lakota territory in the early-mid nineteenth century, clashes erupted over ownership and use of the land.

The United States Army was sent to keep peace in the region, but ended up fighting a series of battles, wars, and massacres with the Native people. Wounded Knee, just south of the Badlands, is the site of a famous engagement. The book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown describes this sad history of conflict.

The Lakota people refer to the harsh environment and rugged terrain as *mako sica* or “bad lands.” Today, they work with the National Park Service to protect the south unit of Badlands National Park. You can learn more about their relationship with this place by going to the White River Visitor Center.

“A Paradise Lost” taken from
Indian Legends of American Scenes. Marion E. Gridley. 1939. M.A. Donohue & Company. Chicago.