



Examination of the NPS Policy on Reconstruction of Historic Sites Manzanar National Historic Site

Civic Engagement can be instrumental in determining treatment for resources. At Manzanar National Historic Site, conversations with the Japanese American community resulted in a close examination of NPS policy towards reconstruction, and the eventual decision to reconstruct key elements of the camp at the site.

Manzanar National Historic Site, located at the foot of the Sierra Nevada in eastern California, tells the story of Japanese Americans who were denied constitutional rights and were interned in one of ten War Relocation Centers because of their ethnicity. How the National Park Service (NPS) tells the story of the internment is an issue currently being addressed at the site. Some people advocate an active role for NPS in informing social conscience through its interpretations of the internment of Japanese Americans at Manzanar. However, others have suggested that NPS has succumbed to the "Japanese American propaganda machine" and neglects and even refuses to tell the truth about War Relocation Centers. There are strong and varied points of view.

The first challenge at Manzanar is to provide an adequate context through which the public can be engaged in a discussion of social issues related to the internment of Japanese Americans. Manzanar National Historic Site is characterized by an abundance of sagebrush and dust; only a few remnants of the camp are visible. Without physical reminders it is difficult to explain to visitors that this was indeed an internment camp.

When you visit Manzanar today, you can be so inspired by the location's beauty that you miss the important story told there. Manzanar is located in one of the primary recreation areas for millions of southern Californians. The park is surrounded by recreational opportunities such as fishing in countless alpine lakes and streams, hiking in the Sierra Nevada, and climbing Mount Whitney. In fact, some visitors have mentioned that, with its location near such beautiful mountains, the camp experience couldn't have been so bad. The camp has been likened to a summer camp in the mountains rather than an important site in the history of the struggle for civil rights.

To ensure that visitors gain a sense of history and place, the Japanese American community pushed very hard for reconstruction of various camp features. These include the barbed wire fence that surrounded the camp, one of the eight guard towers, a barracks building, and other significant camp features.

Reconstruction, as many know, is one of four treatment options for historic sites; the others are preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration. Reconstruction represents the alternative with the least historic authenticity and is defined as "the depiction of one period in history using new materials based on archaeology and other research findings." Usually, NPS discourages reconstructions. The following abstract from a session on reconstruction at the 1997 Society for American Archaeology outlines the debate:

The reconstruction of historical and archaeological sites and features has long been a controversial subject among professional archaeologists and historians. Some preservation purists claim that the public is unnecessarily misled by many reconstructions that have not been absolutely verified by archaeology and documentary records.

The abstract goes on to note that others have advocated a more liberal approach, emphasizing the educational and interpretive value of reconstructions. The National Park Service has clear management policies about reconstruction. As stated in its 2001 *Management Policies*, "[n]o matter how well conceived or executed, reconstructions are contemporary interpretations of the past rather than authentic survivals from it." Thus, NPS will not reconstruct a missing structure unless four criteria are met: there is no alternative that would accomplish the park's interpretive mission; there is sufficient data to enable an accurate reconstruction; the reconstruction occurs on the original location; and the NPS director approves the reconstruction (NPS 2000). Thus, members of the Japanese American community and others had to demonstrate cause to allow reconstruction to be made a part of the park's general management plan. Not much physical evidence of the camp remains. Only three of over eight hundred buildings still stand. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence of foundations, sidewalks, rock gardens, and the camp road network. That these remnants speak volumes can be heard in this quote from *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston:

It is so characteristically Japanese, the way lives were made more tolerable by gathering loose desert stones and forming with them something enduringly human. These rock gardens had outlived the barracks and the towers and would surely outlive the asphalt road and rusted pipes and shattered slabs of concrete. Each stone was a mouth, speaking for a family, for some man who had beautified his doorstep.

However, not everyone sees the crumbling foundations, rockwork, and other physical remnants from the same perspective. One *Los Angeles Times* article from 1997 criticized the lack of facilities at, and the appearance of, the site:

Manzanar National Historic Site was created as a memorial to remind future generations that in times of crisis, the constitution can be dangerously fragile. Yet today, Manzanar looks more like a vacant lot than a hallowed memorial. The site is littered with beer bottles and graffiti. There are no visitors' centers, no rangers on duty, no guided tours or displays. Cattle graze the area, trampling archaeological sites, while tourists who pull off the highway leave confused and disappointed.

We have taken great strides to begin to address the problems noted in this article. Many people, particularly in the Japanese American community, have long recognized the problems noted in the *Los Angeles Times* article and have been actively engaged in the development of Manzanar's general management plan. Even at that time, people like T. Shiokari expressed strong support for reconstruction efforts, noting: "I strongly urge the NPS to depict the typical conditions when the Japanese race was first evacuated into the centers, and also the conditions near the end of the war where gardens, schools, recreation facilities were made available." The current chairperson of a citizen's advocacy group known as the Manzanar Committee, Sue Kunitomi Embrey, also participated in the dialogue about the park's management plan. In fact, the Manzanar Committee was instrumental in having one of the ten former internment camps designated as a national park unit. Embrey reported the sense of the group this way:

We strongly recommend the reconstruction of some of the rock gardens located throughout the camp area to give the viewer an enhanced visitor experience. We support the placement of one or more barracks in the demonstration blocks.... A demonstration block would not be complete without the inclusion of latrines, mess hall and laundry building. We encourage the addition of these structures in the demonstration block. It is absolutely essential that one or more guard towers be reconstructed.

These and other similar views greatly affected the general management plan for Manzanar. The approved plan for the park calls for reconstruction of the camp's barbed wire fence, camp entrance

sign, guard tower, and barracks buildings. The fence and camp entrance have already been reconstructed and we will be reconstructing one guard tower in the next few years. We will relocate and restore one or more of the camp barracks buildings that still exist in the local area.