



Resource Bulletin

Ninaistako (Chief Mountain)

Standing Out As a Leader

Chief Mountain's presence is so commanding that almost every early explorer in the region took notice of it. The strong chief with authority over all the rest, Chief Mountain is one of only a few mountains named on early maps. While not the highest peak in Glacier, at 9080 feet, Chief Mountain stands ahead of the other mountains on the eastern edge of the Rockies and looks out over the plains. It can be seen for over a hundred miles away.

Lying half in Glacier, half in the Blackfoot Reservation to the east, and just under 5 miles from the border that passes through the Peace Park, the mountain transcends boundaries. For people of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which includes tribes in the US and Canada, Chief Mountain has helped define their territory for millennia. The prominence and visibility of the mountain provided guidance, shelter, and a landmark for travelers. Today, according to the Blackfoot People who reside in Canada, the vision of Chief Mountain removes the artificial boundary that separates the Confederacy into northern and southern bands. The mountain belongs to all of the Blackfoot People and it symbolizes that the 49th parallel does not exist.

The Geologic Past

Geologically, the mountain is referred to as a klippe structure, which means it has been moved tectonically away from its place of origin through thrust faulting and erosion. The Lewis Overthrust, a major discontinuity of this region, is featured prominently in the mountain and it is often cited as a classic example of the fault.



Situated high above the sudden break between the mountains and the plains, Ninaistako, or Chief Mountain, is a prominent cultural and natural landmark along the northeast boundary of Glacier National Park.

Through compressional mountain-building forces, older rocks that were once buried far beneath the surface, have been pushed up and over much younger strata. The uppermost layers of Chief Mountain form a cap made of ancient ocean sediments that are Precambrian in age, more than 600 million years old. These sediments contain some of the oldest life forms found on the planet. The gentle flanks of the mountain and most of the surrounding area are formed during the Cretaceous time period and are younger than the overlying rocks by 400-500 million years.

Steeped in Tradition

All land is sacred to indigenous peoples of the area and all mountains are known to have power. Recent studies into cultural use of the

landscape have made it clear that attempting to separate Chief Mountain from the surrounding landscape is like trying to remove one intricate piece from a puzzle for study; it cannot be properly understood outside its context. However, within the context of the Crown of the Continent landscape, Chief Mountain does hold special significance.

Named "Ninaistako" by the Blackfoot People, Chief Mountain is a place where particularly powerful and significant visions can be obtained through fasting and prayer (vision questing). The Blackfoot People have lived near Chief Mountain for millennia and are aware the mountain holds great power and ancient knowledge. Use of the mountain for ritual and ceremonial purposes goes back thousands of years. It is a sacred area.



Recent landslides have occurred at Chief Mountain. A prophecy was given that when the mountain falls down, the People will no longer exist. Efforts to protect the mountain from vandalism and casual use are linked to preservation of the Blackfoot way of life.



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Resources for More Information

Glacier National Park staff:

Lon Johnson, Cultural Resource Manager
Leigh Welling, Director, Crown of the Continent
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Blackfeet Tribal representatives:

John Murray & Betty Matthews, Tribal Historical
Preservation Officers

Documents and web sites:

“Our Mountains Are Our Pillows”: An Ethno-
graphic Overview of Glacier National Park
National Parks Conservation Association: Ethno-
graphy of Glacier National Park webpage:
http://www.npca.org/across_the_nation/park_pulse/glacier/assessment/ethnography.asp

“Ninaistako: Oral Documentation of
Cultural Use by the Blackfoot People”
<http://www.glac.nps.gov/glac/office/parkoffice.cfm?office=learningcenter> (Chief Mountain
Report)

Chief Mountain is considered the oldest spirit of any of the mountains and creation stories of the Blackfoot People are linked to it. Some believe there is an old man’s spirit living in the mountain. Thunder resides there and Thunder Pipe Medicine always refers to it. Brings Down the Sun received his bundle at Chief Mountain and his bundle contains the sacred power of thunder. Thunder brings an annual renewal of life to the Blackfoot People.

Practice of traditional customs is important to the Blackfoot People, who are in many ways experiencing a renewal and rebirth of their beliefs. Indigenous people were prohibited from openly practicing their religion for decades following European invasion and settlement of the land. With the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, a reclamation of spiritual and cultural knowledge was initiated for the Blackfoot culture. While this knowledge had been kept alive, it had not been widely available. Chief Mountain serves as a church to the Blackfoot People and is an important location for them to renew and sustain their faith.

Glacier’s Management Strategy

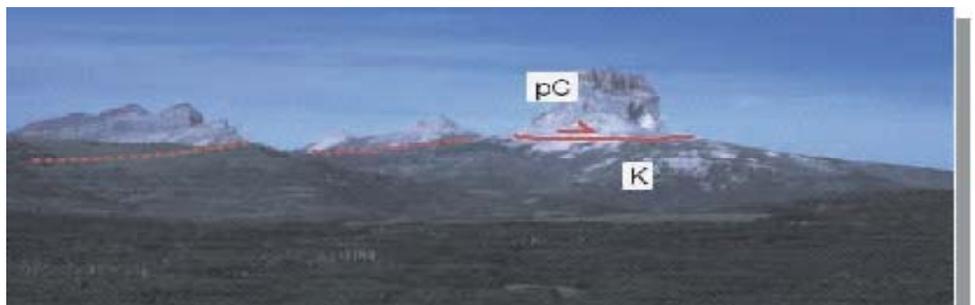
Chief Mountain lies on the boundary between Glacier National Park and the Blackfeet Reservation to the east. It is acknowledged that the mountain is sacred for all of the People of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which includes the Kainah, or Blood, the Siksika, or Blackfoot, and the Pikuni, or Blackfeet. But it is the southern Blackfeet Tribe, located in the U.S., that has legal jurisdiction of the mountain and the responsibility to jointly manage

it with the park. This is complicated by the fact that the U.S.-determined location of the eastern boundary of the park has always been disputed by the Blackfeet.

Casual recreational use of the mountain is increasing along with ritual use and it is not uncommon for ceremonies to be interrupted and offerings to be desecrated by tourists. Land slides began to be documented in the late 1970s, causing great concern for many Blackfoot People. They believe their survival is tied to the mountain and that if it is destroyed, the People will cease to exist. Access to the mountain is primarily from the eastern side and in 1981 the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council passed a resolution to protect the Chief Mountain Area and preserve it for spiritual use.

Efforts to understand and document the cultural significance of the mountain have been undertaken in recent years by the Tribe and park working together. Currently, information gathered from oral histories about past and current use of the mountain is being compiled for a Traditional Cultural Property Report that will be submitted to the National Register of Historic Places. Future work will involve an expanded effort to document use of the mountain by tribes other than those of the Blackfoot Confederacy.

By documenting and raising awareness of the mountain’s cultural significance, the Tribe and the park hope to bring more effort toward protecting it from vandalism and casual recreational use. Because of its spiritual significance to the Blackfoot People, visitors are respectfully requested to enjoy Chief Mountain’s distinctive profile from a distance.



The Lewis Overthrust is exposed on Chief Mountain, with older Precambrian rocks (pC) resting on top of younger Cretaceous (K) age rocks.