



# PLACES *of* POWER

*There is a growing movement among Native people to protect sacred places like Mato Tipila (above) from intrusion, defilement, and in some cases, destruction.*

by Valerie Taliman\*

**I**n spring 2001, the Seventh Generation Fund coordinated the Sacred Earth Conference in Seattle, Wash., to expand the work of a growing coalition of environmental, human rights, religious, and Native organizations dedicated to preserving sacred sites. In her keynote address to some 400 participants, Dr. Henrietta Mann (Southern Cheyenne) explained the importance of Native peoples maintaining their connection to the land. Access to and protection of sacred sites are a constant struggle, she said, with as much as 75 percent of those sites unavailable to Native people today.

“We’ve lost 98 percent of our land base, so what is so wrong about keeping our sacred sites from development?” she asked. “Mutuality and respect are part of our tradition — give and take. Somewhere along the way I hope people will learn that you can’t just take, that you have to give back to the land. When you are talking about Earth-based spirituality, the whole erosion of our land base threw us into cultural chaos. The road we are on to protect the Earth is a sacred road that leads way back to our creation.”

## **Who Defines What Is Sacred?**

Within the natural landscapes of the Americas are countless sacred sites revered by indigenous peoples. Many tribes have ceremonies and spiritual responsibilities dedicated to caring for and renewing

## **It is Our Responsibility to Renew the Earth**

It is a fact: this land is sacred. It is not debatable; it is not negotiable. Over the time we have been here, we have built cultural ways on and about this land.

Because of our diversity, we have our own respected versions of how we came to be. These origin stories — that we emerged or fell from the sky or were brought

Mother Earth that have been carried on for virtually hundreds of years.

Certain places in the natural world — mountains, rivers, forests, springs, canyons, mineral deposits, rock formations, echo canyons, lava tubes, craters, and areas where spiritual events occurred or medicines grow — are among sites sacred to Native peoples. Ancestral burial grounds are also hallowed. “In the Native belief system, sacred places are not sacred because Native people believe they are sacred,” said Chris Peters, executive director of the Seventh Generation Fund, a Native advocacy foundation based in Arcata, Calif. “They are sacred in and of themselves. Even if we all die off, they will still be sacred.”

Many tribes have origin or emergence stories that define traditional cultural sites and places of spiritual power. Oral histories and cultural values are passed down to younger generations through stories, ceremonial rituals, and songs embedded with instructions on how to live with respect for natural laws and all of creation. It is the responsibility of each generation to protect and honor these holy places.

But as time goes on and growing populations place increasing burdens on the land, many of these sacred sites have been destroyed or damaged by those seeking to develop Mother Earth for timber, mining, farming, dams, or other development ventures. The Native worldview of the land as a living, breathing entity is not well understood or appreciated by those who view the land only as real estate.

forth — connect us to this land and establish our realities, our belief systems. They explain the origins of the seasons. Creation stories also contain accounts of how land came to be and the origins of human beings.



**HENRIETTA MANN** gave us the breath of life. The Great One created four sacred substances: sinew to hold the world together, sweetgrass as the beginning of plant life, buffalo fat which was the beginning of animal life, and finally, he created red Earth which was the substance of all things on Earth. These substances are sacred, and these four sacred beings were fused into something that looked like a ball. So he breathed on the ball four times to give it life.

This is the same thing that happens every year at our sundance — we bring down and renew the breath of life. That is our responsibility, to renew this Earth, and we do this through our ceremonies so that our Mother, our Grandmother, the Earth can continue to support us. We have ceremonial and spiritual responsibilities to renew the Earth.

DR. HENRIETTA MANN, Cheyenne  
Endowed Chair of Native American  
Studies  
Montana State University  
Bozeman

### ***Tsimontukwi***

For more than a decade, Hopi religious leaders tried in vain to prevent a private landowner from bulldozing sacred shrines at Woodruff Butte, a cinder cone peak in Northern Arizona. The Hopi call it *Tsimontukwi* after the *tsimona* plant, and it is one of nine important pilgrimage shrines that mark the boundaries of Hopi territory. For more than 1,000 years, Hopi people have made journeys to the butte to gather eaglets for ceremonies, to pray for rain, and to collect healing plants.

In 1990 the landowner decided to grind Woodruff Butte into gravel to supply asphalt for paving Interstate 40, a major freeway that crosses the homelands of a dozen tribes in the Southwest. When Hopi people objected, he offered to sell the property for \$1 million, an amount they could not pay. So the mining continued. "Native people are the only ones who take care of that area by prayer," explained the late Thomas Banyanca in the 2001 award-winning documentary *In the Light of Reverence*. "[We] fast, meditate, [do] ceremony. That's how we keep this land in balance."

A new owner, Dale McKinnon, bought Woodruff Butte in 1996. "I didn't realize I was destroying anything but a big ugly pile of rocks out in the middle of nowhere," said McKinnon. "When the Native Americans came with their concerns, I had to take a step back and I tried to put myself in their position. And realizing that I can't totally agree with them for my own religious reasons and beliefs, I was willing to make a compromise." His compromise was to raise the selling price to \$3 million.

Despite legal efforts by the tribe to use the National Historic Preservation Act to stop the destruction and to seek a cultural resources inventory, the archaeologist responsible for conducting a cultural sites survey did not make note of the shrines in his report to the court. The quarrying continued. "We literally saw one Hopi shrine bulldozed before our presence there," said Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, Hopi cultural preservation officer. He likened it to "Hopis going into [the town of] Woodruff and bulldozing part of the Mormon church." When the top of the butte was pulverized, it destroyed nearly all of the Hopi clan shrines, along with eagle nests that once rested there. Tourists traveling I-40 to see Indian Country have no idea they're driving on Hopi heritage.

### **Climbing the Bear's Lodge**

Far to the north in Wyoming lies *Mato Tipila*, or Bear's Lodge, a massive granite tower that rises dramatically from the Northern Plains. It is an ancient ceremonial place used by more than 20 tribes in the region, whose oral histories about its formation say it was created to save a group of children from an angry bear. It is said the Lakota were given the sacred pipe from the spirit world by the White Buffalo Calf Woman there, and many ceremonies occur there still. In 1875 Col. Richard Dodge assigned the moniker Devil's Tower to the 867-foot-high volcanic plug, which became America's first national monument. The name offends tribes in the region because of the reference to evil; they've asked that it be renamed Bear's Lodge or Grey Horn Butte.

After the site was popularized in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, visitor traffic increased to some 450,000 people annually, and outdoor enthusiasts charted more than 200 climbing routes on the tower. It has become the center of ongoing conflict and legal battles over the Plains tribes' need for privacy while conducting ceremonies and rock climbers' right to use it

for recreation.

The National Park Service, which manages the national monument, first attempted to accommodate multiple uses as required by law in 1995 and asked climbers to voluntarily stay off the tower for the month of June, around the summer solstice, when vision quests and sundance ceremonies are held.

Many honored the request, and the number of climbers in June dropped from some 1,300 to about 200 who refused to honor the Plains tribes' request. Andy Petefish, a climbing guide and member of the Wise Use movement, argued that the voluntary ban constitutes a legal "taking" of his right to use public lands to earn his living. He said climbing was his religion. With the help of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, he sued the Park Service for the right to use public lands any time he and other climbers desire.

In response to the lawsuit, Lakota Chief Arvol Looking Horse, 19th-generation keeper of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe, explained to the court, "Grey Horn Butte, *He Hota Paha*, is a sacred site which our people need so we can pray for world peace, preserve our traditional culture, and exercise our Lakota spirituality. This is something we can only do if we are undisturbed and in complete isolation. When people climb on this sacred butte and hammer metal objects into it, the butte is defiled and our worship is intruded upon. It's like they pounded something into our bodies. When they climb using ropes, they come and look at us, and some of the bolder non-Indian climbers even walk right up to us and disturb us as we fast there, crying and praying for guidance."

Noting that vision quests take four days and four nights of absolute solitude, Cheyenne River Sioux spiritual leader Romanus Bear Stops said, "Even when climbers were asked not to interfere with our people when we are praying, some of them keep on climbing. The vision quest ceremony requires a year of preparation, but our young people couldn't finish what they started because they weren't left alone. The climbers interfered. We must have the opportunity to conduct our ceremonies without interference at our sacred sites. Only in this way can we receive guidance from our Creator and gain cultural and spiritual knowledge. How would you like climbers constantly assaulting the outside of your church or cathedral?"

In the conflict to balance economic interests and spiritual values, public opinion appears to be swaying toward greater understanding and appreciation for places that are sacred. The new NPS general management plan for *Mato Tipila* will look at zoning for particular uses, including one that will better accommodate those seeking a quiet, natural experience. Until then, climbing the Bear's Lodge continues.

### **Protections for Sacred Sites**

There are dozens of sacred sites that are the focus of ongoing struggles by Native activists, elders, environmentalists, and religious organizations working to protect sacred sites and the spiritual welfare of Native peoples. They include:

***Dzil Nchaa Si An (Mount Graham)*** in central Arizona, where a seven-telescope observatory is being erected on a holy mountain that is home to the Apache Mountain Spirits, sacred springs, and

pilgrimage sites where medicines are gathered. Two of the telescopes have been built, and more are coming. The San Carlos Apache and many tribes throughout the region oppose expansion plans.

**Zuni Salt Lake, New Mexico**, home of the sacred deity *Ma'l Oyattsik'i*, or Salt Woman. The lake could be drained by an Arizona utility company, which plans to mine coal 12 miles from the lake and pump millions of gallons of water from beneath it. Puberty ceremonies for young Zuni boys are held here, and the Navajo Salt Clan reveres the area as home of their clan mother.

**Petroglyph National Monument**, the largest group of petroglyphs in the country, carved into lava flows more than 1,000 years ago. The 17,000 petroglyphs are threatened by the city of Albuquerque's plans to build a six-lane highway through the monument to provide easier access to new homes. The road is opposed by all of New Mexico's 19 Pueblo tribes, who want to preserve the messages their ancestors left behind.

Several organizations are working to broaden coalitions and craft amendments to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the National Historic Preservation Act that will offer real protections for these sites. They include the Seventh Generation Fund, the Indigenous Environmental Network, the American Land Alliance, the Indigenous Women's Network, the Sage Council, and the Washington Association of Churches. Educating the public about the critical need to protect sacred sites and support religious freedom for First Americans seems to work best through partnerships. To this end, they supported the efforts of filmmaker Christopher McLeod, who spent ten years producing *In the Light of Reverence*. They also worked with the authors of the newly published *Sacred Lands of Indian America* in hopes that greater understanding will foster greater respect.

"Without the land there is no sovereignty, without sovereignty there is no relationship, and without relationship there is no responsibility to the Earth," said Dr. Mann. "I hope our brothers and sisters of all races will learn to walk with us on this sacred road."

\*[Valerie Taliman](#) (Navajo) is associate producer of *Native America Calling*, a nationally syndicated Native talk radio show heard on 46 stations in the United States and Canada.

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#### Resources on Sacred Sites

The [Seventh Generation Fund](#), founded in 1977, is a n advocacy organization dedicated to promoting and maintaining the uniqueness of Native Peoples. For more information contact Chris Peters at (707) 825-7640 or visit [www.7genfund.org](http://www.7genfund.org).

The [Indigenous Environmental Network](#) is a nonprofit Native environmental organization. For information contact Tom Goldtooth at (218) 751-4967 or visit [www.ienearth.org](http://www.ienearth.org).

#### Further Reading

Charles E. Little, *Sacred Lands of Indian America*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Andrew Gulliford, *Sacred Objects and Sacred Places*, Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000.