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Devils Tower/Bear Lodge: Sacred Site and Modern Conflict

Devils Tower National Monument stands 1,267 feet in sharp relief against the flat terrain of the Wyoming landscape. This unique landform still inspires discussion amongst geologists in regards to its formation. Most scholars agree that this feature is most likely the neck of a long extinct volcano, called a volcanic plug. Whatever its scientific history may be, this natural wonder has long been an important feature to Native Americans and Euro Americans alike. In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt declared Devils Tower the first ever United States National Monument. However, this decision also distanced many Native American tribes who have cultural and religious ties to this land feature. Tribes such as the Lakota, Crow, Arapaho, Kiowa, and many others can trace their cultural and tribal roots to the site. Yet, it was not until the 1930s that the Civilian Conservation Corps built roads that enabled the formerly “inaccessible tower” to be easily accessed to by tourists (Cooper 147). Parking lots and a visitor center were built as well, making it a destination site for Americans. As tourism increased so did the conflicts between the Native and non-Native communities.

For many Native American tribes that have cultural and religious ties to the monument, the monolith is known as Bears Lodge; however there are a few other names associated to it by various tribes. According to one of the religious legends, “seven sisters too refuge from a pursuing bear at the tower. There they prayed for the rock’s aid, the rock began to grow, and when it reached the sky, the girls turned into the seven stars of the Big Dipper” (Yablon 27).

The columnar jointing of the igneous rock is associated with the bear's clawing of the rock in many of the legends. It is important to note that more than twenty tribes "maintain reverence for the place, possess oral traditions about it, and have their own separate names for the unique formation" (Cooper 147). The problem with the 'Devils Tower' name stem from the 1875 book, *The Black Hills*, by Colonel Dodge, he said "the Indians call this shaft *The Bad God's Tower*, a name adopted with proper modification, by our surveyors" ("Current Issues"). Yet, there is evidence that suggests the translation was done incorrectly by Dodge's team. The first official name change campaign was introduced in 1996 by former Superintendent Deborah Liggett, and then was reintroduced again in 2005 by then-Superintendent Lisa Eckert (Rogers 219). During the 1996 campaign the suggested proposal called for a dual-name for the site; the Tower itself would be renamed to "Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark", while the surrounding area would retain the name of Devils Tower National Monument. Over the years, different tribal leaders have met together to reach an intertribal consensus for what they wish to see the name changed to, with Bear Lodge as the leading choice (Brooke).

This has been an ongoing struggle between those in the Native community and other citizens regarding the Devils Tower name. Both groups of people have very passionate responses to the idea of a name change. During the first campaign for the name change, a Lakota Sioux member said "[f]or us, in our culture, there was no word for devil, no description of the devil. That name is offensive, demeaning" (Brooke). An Eastern Shoshone woman in a *New York Times* article was quoted saying, "to name it Devils Tower is a slap in the face because of what the whites used to call Indians back then: they were devils, dirty devils" (Brooke). To many in the Native communities the continuation of the Devils Tower name is a continuation of Native cultural oppression by the dominant white society.

Yet, it seems that non-Natives also have very powerful associations to the site as well. To some non-Natives, the proposed “name change idea is like a rattlesnake... [y]ou can’t just let it sit there” (Brooke). For those who are white residents of the area they see the idea of a name change as a way that would sever the connection that they have with the site, “[m]y dad came here [Wyoming] in 1913 in a covered wagon... If the tower’s sacred to them, it’s sacred to us, too” (Brooke). There is also a fear that should the Devils Tower name change it would cause confusion for potential tourism and could thereby negatively impact the local economy. The various attempts for change by the Superintendents of the Devils Tower Monument have been met with opposition by Congresswoman Barbara Cubin who created bills in both 1999 and in 2005 that would prevent the site from having any name change (Rogers 220). However, these bills have been indefinitely postponed in the Senate with unanimous consent and no further legislation has been enacted.

Another one of the more modern problems that the site is currently facing relates to the landform being a favorite spot for recreational climbing. Since the year 1937, over 50,000 climbers have made it to the peak of Devils Tower/Bear Loge (Rogers 219). The monument with its joint columns makes it one of the most popular climbing destinations in the United States. The greatest number of climbers seems to have occurred in the 1990s with over 6,000 climbers, the average has come down to 5,000 climbers in recent years (Rogers 219). However, to many of the Native American communities this climbing is disrespectful and desecrates the sacred site, “[w]hile American Indian visitors left prayer bundles, climbers left climbing bolts in the Tower’s stone face” (Cooper 147). The amount of people scaling the tower also made it so there was a lack of privacy during the cultural and religious ceremonies. Much of the conflict seemed to stem from the fact that “Natives and non-Natives both connect with their

environments and understand their cultural heritages differently... [and] how Natives' cultural-historical relationship with the land is intertwined with their futures and their pasts" (Freedman 3).

It seems that in regards to the Devils Tower/Bear Lodge Monument, the National Park Service has a history with trying to develop management policies that facilitate effective discourse between Native communities and the government organization in regards to the land. In 1989, the National Park Service conducted an ethnographic study to determine what potential management policies might impact the relationship the Natives to the site. The hopes of the survey was "1) to identify the traditional resources (such as plants, campgrounds, geologic features, or places that held current cultural value); and 2) to conduct an ethnohistorical literature review on the traditional basis for tribal relationships to Bear's Lodge" (Hanson and Moore 55). Through this survey and interviews with Native Americans, the Park Service found it "helpful in providing qualitative, in-depth information on beliefs, values, and perceptions concerning the spiritual and religious context of Bear's Lodge, the rituals associated with it, and the issue of conflicting use, especially climbing" (Hanson and Moore 57). It was from this study, and another one conducted again in 1992, that led to the 1995 implementation of the 1995 Climbing Management Plan. Over recent years, it seems that land agencies have been trying to change their role in regards to their interactions with those in the Native American communities. These agencies are becoming more "willing to accommodate and protect Indian sacred sites", but what's more is that the "protection they are providing can often be quite effective" (Yablon 25).

The 1995 Climbing Management Plan was the product of two years of careful deliberations with those in Native, climbing, environmental, and government communities. This

was done as a way to inspire understanding and respect for the Native American culture at the public site. One of the main components of this decision was the inclusion of a voluntary ban on climbing at the monument during the month of June in respect of the Natives religious rites (Levendosky 39). In addition, it was also decided that the placing of new bolts or fixed pitons in the tower would be prohibited, but it did allow for the replacement of worn and old bolts or pitons (Levendosky 39). Also, stemming from this were the increased efforts for multicultural awareness and education relating to Native American ties to the site. The National Park Service believes in the “[a]dherence to equal respect and the sharing of this unique place between spiritual practitioners and rock climbers”, and that this relationship is an “evolving” one (Hill 146). Before the implementation of the 1995 Climbing Management Plan, when interviewed, some climbers believed that “tourists had a far greater negative impact on the local environment than did climbing” (Hanson and Moore 59). Part of the problem that led to this plan was that many climbers perceived the monument as a recreational and shared resource with Native American communities because it was seen as public property. And that, “regardless of Native American beliefs, they would continue to climb” the Tower (Hanson and Moore 59). It was these attitudes that created the necessity for the plan so that Native people and climbers could better coexist in relation to the monolith.

The effects of this voluntary climbing ban resulted in the staggering 85% reduction in climbing during its first year of implementation. It was recorded that in June of 1995, only 193 people climbed the monument, while during the previous June there were 1,293 climbers recorded (Levendosky 39). And this was “[i]n spite of racist complaint letters and threats of illegal activit[ies]” that the park had received (Rogers 201). This statistic seems to stem from the idea of mutual respect that is suggested in the management plan. For many climbers there is not

only a respect for Native American rights to practice their cultural and religious beliefs, but there also seems to be a respect for the landform itself. To many climbers the site holds special meaning for them as well; for some, they contend that their ascending the rock is comparable to having a religious experience (Blatt 686).

In 2005, there were resumed talks about what the endgame should be for the Climbing Management Plan. For some climbers, it is that idea of cultural respect and good faith that keeps them from scaling the tower, "[a]s long as they use the word 'voluntary,' I will abide by it. But as soon as they use the word mandatory, break out the handcuffs because I'm going to jail" (Bleizeffer). It seems that many involved in the modern climbing culture attempt to respect the wishes expressed by those in the Native American communities and the park service. While the most recent rendition of the Climbing Management Plan for the site still upholds the voluntary ban of climbing, there are those in the Native American communities that desire to see an end to all climbing of the monument because of its cultural and religious significance. The voluntary no-climb compliance rate is not as high as some park officials would like to see and the compliance rate had been in decline, it reached a new low in 2004 with a rate of 69 percent (Freedman 3). However, in 2005 there were fewer climbers than there had been in the previous year with only 122 people making 283 climbs during the month as compared to 177 people making 342 climbs (Bleizeffer).

Many different religious groups outside of the Native American community were also supportive of this new plan, it was met with dispute by those who had "commercial interests, which regarded Devils Tower not simply as a site to be preserved but as a resource to be managed" (Blatt 684). A large portion of the climbing community accepted the voluntary ban as discussed about, but a small group of mostly commercial climbing companies challenged it as a

violation of the Establishment Clause (Yablon 28). The opposition to this decision by the National Park Service seemed to stem from an economic standpoint. Instigated by the Mountain States Legal Foundation in 1996, a lawsuit was put into effect against the cultural sensitivity of the Park Service (Levendosky 38). The plaintiffs seemed to try and create a very distinct “us” vs. “them” mentality in regards to Native Americans and the site. The opposition claim that the voluntary ban on climbing during the month of June is in violation of constitutional freedoms. They argue that by restricting the activities (i.e. climbing) that can occur on the public land forces others by default to adopt to the practicing religion (Petefish 69). There were fears from those in the climbing community during 1995 that the federal action in regards to Devils Tower/Bear Lodge could have further implications, “if allowed [...] will only lead to longer closures and eventually the inevitable prohibition of all access, all the time, at Devils Tower and on many other public lands” (Petefish 70). Under the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment, it prohibits lawmakers from creating laws “respecting [or favoring] an establishment of religion”, yet in other court cases the Supreme Court has also decided that under the Establishment Clause that “callous indifference” to religion is not necessary either (Yablon 25).

During the time of the *Bear Lodge Multiple Use Ass’n v. Babbitt* court case, those who argued against the voluntary ban were claiming that the Native Americans had ulterior motives; and that the “true goal” was to permanently end all climbing on the monument, or to even prohibit all non-Natives from being on the site (Petefish71). However, the U.S. District Court maintained the National Park Service’s climbing plan in 1998. In 1999, it was ruled in the Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit that the voluntary ban did not conflict with the purpose of the Establishment Clause. And, in March of the year 2000, the Supreme Court denied the plaintiff’s

appeal of the prior ruling, making the court's decision finalized (Rogers 206). Many have acknowledged this particular court case as being unique. Often, litigation involving Native American communities was instigated due to the disputes between the communities and the United States government. With this case, a group of non-Native individuals initiated the lawsuit in retaliation to the U.S. government supporting the rights of Native claims to the land. The Tenth Circuit Court upholding the voluntary ban led to other successful cases that upheld the accommodation of Native rights, such as *Natural Arch & Bridge Society v. Alston* and *Wyoming Sawmills, Inc. v. United States Forest Service* (Yablon 29).

While both the proposed name change and climbing are still very much issues today, strides have been made to try and come to a compromise between Native and non-Native communities. In the United States, we have seen how “the last several centuries have transformed and marginalized American Indian communities to conditions of economic dependence, political subordination, and cultural secrecy” (Champagne 270). In current times, we are beginning to see an addressing of these issues in regards to Native American rights. We see how this idea of cultural sensitivity has overarching effects into the larger community. When an airport was constructed near the site it enacted a voluntary 2-mile “no-fly” zone around the tower, in the month of June they increase that no-fly zone to 3-miles in respect for the Native American communities (Rogers 215). And in 2006, Dorothy FireCloud, who is of the Rosebud Sioux, became the first Native American to be given the position of Superintendent to the sacred site. This willingness of government agencies to work with and exert authority in favor of cultural sensitivity and cooperation with Native American communities will hopefully bring forth the emergence of cultural inclusion in not just Devils Tower/Bear Lodge, but in other sacred sites as well.

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