

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park.
By Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/08j2w4st>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Deur, Douglas

Publication Date

2005-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

manuscript by representatives of Virginia's Rappahannock and Nansemond Indian tribes. Building on multicultural collaborations may be the next stage of scholarship for the early American narrative, reaching past time-honored legends and ideologies to bring our national creation story into balance.

Lisa L. Hewel

The College of William and Mary

Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park. By Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. 400 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

Try as they might, neither the National Park Service (NPS) nor American Indian tribes can avoid working with one another. Bound together by peculiar historical circumstances and varying commitments to the same prominent places, the NPS and many American Indian tribes have formed myriad relationships—frequently, challenging and complex relationships—all over the American West. To understand this history, one must first recognize that national parks usually were carved out of Indian Country with little or no acknowledgment of an enduring tribal presence. In the West, the NPS typically claimed places of especial grandeur, environmental distinctiveness, and power—some of the very same places that loomed large in the worlds and worldviews of American Indian communities, places like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley, Chaco Canyon, Glacier National Park, Crater Lake, Mount Rainier, and many others. Early park boosters, guided by romanticist notions of primordial nature that were fundamentally inextricable from the larger colonial project, sought to carve out strictly natural spaces from inhabited places. From the first moments of park creation, these places became playgrounds of privilege, federally managed in such a way that they might cater to the predilections of America's urban elites. While such management nominally "protected" tribal lands and resources in museum-like stasis, Indian access eroded proportionately. Residence on these lands was typically curtailed or prohibited. Religious and ceremonial uses, plant-gathering traditions, and other place-bound practices often persisted clandestinely, or with unprecedented scrutiny and regulation, if they persisted at all. In recent years, a wave of federal laws and policies have emerged—the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and others—and tribes are now able to reassert historical claims on park lands and resources, albeit in ways that tend to be symbolic and commemorative but do relatively little to tangibly "restore a presence." Nonetheless, tribes have gained modest leverage as America continues its long-standing debate regarding the roles of its national parks and the nature of these parks' relationships with resident peoples.

As eminent ethnohistorian Peter Nabokov and seasoned archaeologist Lawrence Loendorf attest in their book, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park*, Yellowstone National Park stands out

in the history outlined here. The nation's first national park, Yellowstone continues to be one of the largest and most prominent parks in the nation. It is a symbolically potent place and a nexus of national debates regarding national parks and, arguably, the larger human relationship with the natural world. Yellowstone was carved out of the Western landscape in 1872, a period when U.S. control of this region was still tenuous and was actively contested by the region's tribes; indeed, the Nez Perce battled U.S. forces while passing through the national park five years after the its creation; the Bannock passed through the area a year later, seeking to join Sitting Bull across the Canadian border. In the 1880s, amidst outcries regarding visitors' fears of Indian presence, as well as Indian buffalo hunting in the park, the use of fire to manage vegetation, and other traditional activities that defied the preservationist logic of early park managers, U.S. troops were sent to the park to restrict tribal access. In the years that followed, as widespread tribal use of the park faded into memory, Euro-Americans fashioned their own myths of Yellowstone. Park interpreters and popular authors suggested that the area was, in fact, primordial wilderness at the time of Euro-American "discovery," avoided by area tribes principally due to a "fear" of geysers and other geological phenomena. Yet clearly a rich record, consisting of oral traditions, archaeological materials, and ethnographic documents, suggests otherwise. In recent decades, a growing list of tribes has come forward to assert their historical ties to Yellowstone and to seek a voice in how these contested lands are managed and interpreted to the visiting public.

The emphases of *Restoring a Presence* are uniquely shaped by the book's institutional genesis. This book first appeared as an NPS report, "American Indians and Yellowstone National Park: A Documentary Overview"—an Ethnographic Overview and Assessment commissioned by the NPS. A standard NPS report type, Ethnographic Overview and Assessments involve the documentation of "ethnographic resources" within a park—a problematic designation that is meant to include discrete sites and natural resources of cultural importance—and the peoples who hold those resources to be significant. Research methods typically focus on the written record, with relatively limited communication with park-associated tribal members. These reports provide park managers with a guidebook of peoples, places, and resources that are fundamental to the park's tribal history. They are commissioned by the NPS, in part to redress old grievances and improve park-tribes rapport, and in part to facilitate mandatory compliance with federal laws and policies.

In *Restoring a Presence*, Nabokov and Loendorf have crafted a challenging critique of the myth that American Indians never occupied the Yellowstone area prior to European arrival. Their meticulous research demonstrates that Yellowstone clearly was, and is, a place of importance to American Indian peoples. As they demonstrate, oral traditions describe Yellowstone's topography in detail; ritual activities tied to geysers and other geological features were integral to some tribes' ceremonial traditions; buffalo and myriad other species were sometimes hunted there; specialized plant harvests were carried out in the high country; some peoples burned vegetation to influence the movement of game; the park was dissected by networks of intertribal trails;

and seasonal settlements were apparently widespread. Nabokov and Loendorf draw heavily from archival accounts and infer a great deal from archaeological records and artifact collections, producing an integrated vision of precontact ties to the area that is compelling.

The book is organized into five main chapters, each addressing the principal peoples associated with the park: the Crow to Yellowstone's east, the Blackfeet and Flathead from its north, the Bannock and Nez Perce from its west, and the Shoshone from its south. The resident Shoshonean "Sheep Eaters," which are of particular interest to Loendorf, receive especially detailed attention in the book's longest chapter. Each of these chapters includes an encyclopedic overview of each group's culture and history. Coverage in these chapters is broad—in places it is reminiscent of a handbook—with emphasis upon cultural activities that are of salience to park managers: historical tribal distributions and migration patterns, locations and resources of special significance in and around the park, and ritual, technological, and artistic differences between historic tribes that might help them to identify, for example, which tribes were associated with the contents of particular archaeological sites. In each chapter, the authors' attention returns repeatedly to the salience of these general cultural patterns in the overall understanding of American Indian attachments to Yellowstone. While the thematic focus of the volume is extremely broad, and the detailed information regarding Yellowstone is sometimes elusive, the volume identifies over seventy "ethnographic resources," including ritual sites—especially geysers and rock features—archaeological sites, trails, plants, animals, and mineral resources that were used historically by American Indian peoples and are presumably of importance to them today.

The volume is indispensable for those wishing to understand the historical and cultural associations of American Indians with the Yellowstone area. However, it has aspects, emanating from its institutional genesis, that will frustrate many readers. Clearly, much of the material in the volume is derivative, and sometimes it repeats content found in standard sources; the voices of contemporary tribal members are not foregrounded in the text and, accordingly, Indian ties to the park are sometimes spoken of in the past tense when this may not be appropriate. But perhaps most importantly, this book, more than most, cannot be judged by its cover. Despite the revisionary tone of the book's title, its introductory and concluding remarks, and the University of Oklahoma Press's promotional spin, *Restoring a Presence* is not especially valuable for those hoping critically to comprehend the long history of relations between the NPS and American Indian tribes, in Yellowstone or more broadly. While tackling the question of precontact tribal use of the Yellowstone area, the book's critique remains largely implicit, rather than explicit, within the text. Relatively little overt attention is given to the relationships between the NPS and area tribes, which have actively shaped tribal uses and perceptions of the area over the last 133 years. (Indeed, the claims made in this book's promotional materials that Yellowstone stands out as an egregious example of poor NPS-tribes relations, relative to the successes of counterpart parks such as Yosemite, Glacier, or Grand Canyon,

is not addressed in the text, and smacks of disingenuous hype to anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the tribal history of those other park units.) To the authors' credit, such a critical examination of park-tribes relations is not especially practical in a document that originated within an NPS-funded study. They are well poised to examine this relationship in the wake of their research efforts for the current book, however, and would perform an important service if they might give this theme more considered attention in subsequent works. In the meantime, those wishing to understand parks-tribes relations at Yellowstone and elsewhere should consult the growing literature on the topic, such as Robert Keller and Michael Turek's *American Indians and the National Parks* (1999), Philip Burnham's *Indian Country, God's Country* (2000), and Mark David Spence's *Dispossessing the Wilderness* (2000). Nabokov and Loendorf's book performs an important service—it stands apart in its documentation of Yellowstone's unique position in the histories and cultures of the principal peoples of the region. Read in conjunction with these other sources, it provides us with a clear understanding of the past, a glimpse of the present, and hints of the future, as we seek to understand the enduring relationship between American Indian peoples and this unique place on the North American landscape.

Douglas Deur

University of Washington

Rolling in Ditches with Shamans: Jaime de Angulo and the Professionalization of American Anthropology. By Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. 359 pages. \$59.95 cloth.

Rolling in Ditches with Shamans addresses the politics of the professionalization of American anthropology shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. The discipline's major goal at the time was to salvage traditional cultures "before they all went to pieces," as anthropologist Alfred Kroeber liked to put it. Leeds-Hurwitz's thorough analysis of archival documents—mostly personal letters written in the 1920s between the French physician, amateur anthropologist, and self-proclaimed "anarchist" Jaime de Angulo (1887–1950) and Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Kroeber himself—reveals that the field of anthropology was shaped not only by the functionalist paradigm of the day but also by a conservative and xenophobic American society intolerant of unconventional writing styles and eclectic social behaviors. Results of professional, ethnographic fieldwork were said to be restricted to the formation of large databases and to the description of "perishing data" in periodicals and volumes aimed at a highly erudite audience interested exclusively in the advancement of "science." The writings were never intended for an indigent audience and rarely made it to California reservations and rancherias, which helps explain their present-day hostility to research, and to anthropologists in particular. De Angulo, instead, wrote for "his Indians" as well, while insisting that "ethnographic texts" were not merely descriptive and objective,