

“Blackfeet Belong to the Mountains”: Hope, Loss, and Blackfeet Claims to Glacier National Park, Montana

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Abstract

While relationships between indigenous groups and protected areas have been extensively documented internationally, research on Native Americans and US National Parks is surprisingly sparse. Based on in-depth interviews with Blackfeet Indians, this article examines the complex contemporary relationship between the Blackfeet and Glacier National Park. According to the Blackfeet, tribal relationships with the park landscape are sustained through on-site practices that provide an interwoven and inseparable set of material, cultural, and spiritual benefits. The prohibition and regulation of many historic practices within park boundaries prevents the realisation of these benefits and fuels tensions between the tribe and the park, especially in the context of past dispossession and longstanding animosity toward the federal government. At the same time, the undeveloped landscape of Glacier National Park is evocative of an ancestral past and has, for many Blackfeet, preserved the potential for cultural reclamation and renewal. To realise this potential, Blackfeet argued for greater integration of their needs and perspectives into park management and policy. We suggest reinstatement of treaty rights, voluntary closure of cultural sites, co-management of parklands, and special legal designations as possible paths forward.

Keywords: national parks, Native Americans, cultural landscapes, reserved rights, indigenous people, on-site material practices

INTRODUCTION

National parks and similar protected areas have long been considered a critical component of conservation. In the USA, national parks symbolise American heritage and history, protect important biodiversity, and provide opportunities for people to connect with wild nature at a scale unavailable in most urban areas. But the establishment of national parks has often resulted in the dispossession of lands and resources previously controlled and utilised by native peoples. In the international arena, co-management, community-based conservation, and

integrated conservation and development are increasingly heralded as ways to share power and resources with resident and local communities. Traditional park models in the US, however, are well established and alternative models are still uncommon. In this article, we explore the relationship of the Blackfeet Indians to the Glacier National Park landscape and institution in an effort to provide insights into contemporary Native American relations with US national parks and ways that longstanding tensions might be addressed.

NATIVE AMERICANS AND NATIONAL PARKS

The following exploration needs to be situated within a broader history of US parks and native peoples. The national parks of the American West were widely inhabited and utilised by Native American peoples prior to designation, including the ‘crown jewels’ of the US park system: Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier, and Grand Canyon (Keller and Turek 1998). In many cases, native peoples were forcibly removed from these lands and prohibited access to park resources that historically

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provided material, cultural, and spiritual sustenance (Spence 1999; Burnham 2000). Removal was driven in part by a desire for parks to conform to notions of ‘pristine wilderness’ devoid of any sign of human use and habitation (Cronon 1996), an interest in assimilating native peoples into mainstream American society by severing them from historic subsistence and cultural practices, and to ostensibly protect tourists from the violence they sometimes associated with Indian tribes (Spence 1999). There was also little recognition of tribal sovereignty or prior occupation of parklands. Despite a long and often contentious history between tribes and parks, the literature describing contemporary relationships is minimal, and empirical studies are few (Flood and McAvoy 2007).

By contrast, there is a rich literature on relationships between parks and indigenous peoples in the developing world (Colchester 2004; Brockington and Igoe 2006). The ‘Yellowstone model’ of national park conservation was adopted and adapted around the world, and as in the United States, local people were typically removed and their access to park resources restricted, often with substantial, adverse impacts (West and Brechin 1991; Neumann 1998; Wolmer 2005). Organisations and individuals concerned about the resulting conflict and impoverishment called for alternative strategies that integrate people and parks (Dowie 2009). Consequently, biosphere reserves with inhabited buffer zones, community-based conservation, and integrated conservation and development projects were established, and international aid and conservation organisations made prominent policy statements prohibiting involuntary resettlement and restriction of access to subsistence resources (Adams and Hutton 2007). The success of these initiatives has been mixed, but they signal a move toward conservation models that include indigenous interests.

Poirier and Ostergren (2002) suggest that the influence of international declarations and guidelines regarding protected areas and the treatment of indigenous peoples has moved the US toward practices that recognise Native American rights and interests. The National Park System Advisory Board (2001: 21) issued a statement on living cultures and communities that specifically recommended that parks provide Native Americans access to sacred sites and allow “ecologically sustainable cultural practices and traditions”, including harvesting practices. Current management policy states that the National Park Service (NPS) “generally supports the limited and controlled consumption of natural resources for traditional religious and ceremonial purposes and is moving toward a goal of greater access and accommodation” (NPS 2006: 119). Along these lines, the Southern Paiute have negotiated formal agreements to gather plant materials in Zion National Park and Pipe Spring National Monument (Ruppert 2003).

Many in the NPS, however, see Native American requests to access and utilise park resources as conflicting with the agency’s mission of natural and historical preservation (Ruppert 2003). Calls for co-management of park resources between tribes and the NPS also challenge conventional notions of park management and decision making, but

examples do exist. The Oglala Sioux manage the visitor centre at the South Unit of Badlands National Park, and tribal members are allowed to hunt, gather edible and medicinal plants, and herd cattle; however, these activities are ultimately regulated by the NPS (Igoe 2004). Also, Canyon de Chelly National Monument lies within the Navajo Reservation and is managed by the NPS while ownership is retained by the Navajo Nation. The NPS has responsibility for visitor services and cultural resource management, and the Navajo manage natural resources primarily through land use regulation and permitting (King 2007). It is important to note that these power-sharing arrangements were established by Congress with the designation of each park unit. In contrast, for tribes such as the Blackfeet, enabling legislation designating national parks effectively eliminated tribal interests through their lack of inclusion.

Legislation such as the 1994 Tribal Self Governance Act “provides a mechanism for transferring authority over federal programs, including the management of federal lands, to Indian tribes” (King 2007: 475). Goodman (2000) argues that tribal reserved rights to hunt, fish, trap, and gather off-reservation include rights to co-manage habitat and resources as “sovereign governments with power-sharing capacity”. However, King (2007) suggests that, in practice, emerging arrangements between tribes and the NPS look more like contracting than co-management. Federal agencies sometimes resist co-management proposals “on the grounds that sharing decision-making power with tribes conflicts with the management authority delegated to the agency” (Goodman 2000: 284).

While perhaps unwilling to relinquish greater control of park resources, the NPS does officially recognise the contemporary cultural significance of certain park landscapes to particular tribes. NPS cultural resource management guidelines define “ethnographic landscapes”, as places which “associated peoples perceive...as traditionally meaningful to their identity as a group and the survival of their lifeways” (NPS1998: 160). Similarly, Parks Canada defines an “Aboriginal cultural landscape” as

...a place valued by an Aboriginal group because of their long and complex relationship with that land. [The landscape] expresses their unity with the natural and spiritual environment. It embodies their traditional knowledge of spirits, places, land uses, and ecology. Material remains of the association may be prominent, but will often be minimal or absent (Buggey 1999).

These definitions suggest that the contemporary value of parks to native peoples is different from that of most Anglo-Americans (although it should be acknowledged that some Anglo-Americans would also like to hunt, harvest, and occupy parklands). For many Native Americans, park landscapes reflect a fundamental cultural identity, and while native cultures are dynamic, they are often inextricably linked to an extended history of engagement with particular places. Whereas parks and other protected areas are generally viewed by Anglo-

Americans as places separate from everyday human life, many native peoples view themselves as an integral part of specific park landscapes (McAvoy et al. 2003). These contrasting views of park landscapes partially explain the conflicts that often characterise relationships between tribes and national parks (Keller and Turek 1998; Burnham 2000).

According to Greider and Garkovich (1994: 1), landscapes are “symbolic environments” that “reflect our self-definitions that are grounded in culture”. Similarly, Basso (1996: 53) maintains that “attachments to geographic localities contribute fundamentally to the formation of personal and social identities”. Cultural identity is a key component of many native relationships with parklands [see Whiting’s (2004) study of the Qikitagrugmiut and Kotzebue Sound protected areas for an example]. Because landscapes can represent different things to different people, they are often contested terrain, home to competing stories and discourses, and sites of struggles over power and the rights of marginalised people (Feld and Basso 1996; Yung et al. 2003). Cultural identity is often deployed as part of native claims to parklands and resources through the use of social memory, storytelling, and collective ideas about justice (Moore 1993; Sokolove et al. 2002).

Native American relationships with these landscapes, however, are about more than just cultural identity. Struggles are simultaneously material (e.g., struggles over land and resources) and cultural (e.g., struggles over landscape meanings and spiritual practices) (Moore 1993). Tribes have sought access to, and management changes for, sacred sites on federal lands through the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978)¹ and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993)²; however, many Native Americans envision their use of these landscapes as more broadly spiritual than conventional notions of ritual and ceremony. For example, many Salish-Kootenai described hunting, fishing, and gathering on such landscapes as “an extension of their spiritual practices” (Flood and McAvoy 2007). Other legal struggles have focused specifically on material resources and tribal subsistence rights to hunt, fish, trap, and gather on federal lands. Despite assumptions that subsistence activities have been erased by modernisation and the marketplace, such practices persist in the US outside of the formal economy, among both natives and non-natives alike (Emery and Pierce 2005). We adopt Emery and Pierce’s (2005: 983) definition of subsistence as: “any direct use of natural resources to meet the requirements of material and cultural survival outside the formal market: that is, hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering to obtain food, medicine, and utilitarian materials” through “socially embedded practices” that “simultaneously rely on and reinforce social networks”. Subsistence, then, is important for both material and cultural survival, which underscores the potentially adverse impacts that park restrictions may exert on native communities.

Both subsistence and religious activities are ways that native people put their relationships with parklands into practice. As Camus (1955: 88) suggested, “sense of place is not just something that people know and feel, it is something that

people do”. Protecting tribal relationships with these places requires much more than the preservation of scenic views and interpretation of history. At the same time, tribal use of national parks is not simply another form of recreation typically associated with parks. In a study of tribal use of federal lands, Salish-Kootenai contested agency assumptions that they were engaged in “outdoor recreation” (Flood and McAvoy 2007). Similarly, based on his research of Nez Perce use of federal lands, Kawamura (2004) suggests that the binary categories of subsistence and recreation are not particularly useful, as hunting, fishing, and gathering cannot be reduced to just material sources of nutrition or simply contributions to cultural identity. Many scholars thus argue for a more complex and integrated view of tribal relationships with federal lands. Goodman (2000), for instance, claims that exercise of off-reservation reserved rights to hunt and fish are important to Native Americans for subsistence, political, identity, and cultural reasons, and that such activities also provide a mechanism to transmit traditional knowledge to the next generation in the context of a long history with a particular place.

Given the significance of particular park landscapes to native peoples, it should come as no surprise that these groups generally desire the “fullest protection possible for their cultural resources found beyond the bounds of tribal reservations” (Stoffle et al. 1997: 229). But while American Indians tend to support preservation of parklands, this support differs substantially from Anglo-Americans, especially as it relates to the purposes and benefits of protection (Sadler 1989; McDonald and McAvoy 1996; Stoffle et al. 1997). For example, many park managers continue to see natural and cultural resource management as separate and distinct (Howell 1994; Toupal 2003), in contrast to many indigenous perspectives which see “no strict separation between biophysical, human, and supernatural worlds” (Escobar 2001: 151). Effectively addressing native claims to park resources thus requires an integration of the material and cultural, both in our understanding of native relationships with parklands as well as in policy and management. The case study presented below, which focuses on Blackfeet relationships with Glacier National Park, provides insights into how parks might be reconceptualised to accommodate native cultural and material practices.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACKFEET AND GLACIER NATIONAL PARK

The Blackfeet are part of a larger group of people called the Nitsitapii, whose historic territory extended from the Saskatchewan River in the north, south to the source of the Missouri River (Jackson 2000). Archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence suggests that the Nitsitapii have inhabited this region for thousands of years (Goddard 1994; Reeves and Peacock 2001). The Blackfeet now largely reside on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, just east of Glacier National Park, and south of the Canadian border.

The first ‘official’ boundaries of Blackfeet territory were drawn by the Lame Bull Treaty of 1855. Subsequent federal actions further reduced the amount of Blackfeet land. Smallpox epidemics, military skirmishes, and the extermination of the buffalo, all contributed to a drastic population loss amongst the Blackfeet. The loss of the buffalo in 1883 led to a series of starvation winters, where the routine delay and frequent failure of the government to deliver rations guaranteed by the Lame Bull Treaty led to the deaths of over one-quarter of the tribe (Foley 1974; Rosier 1999). To garner funds for food and basic supplies, the tribe then began to sell pieces of their remaining land to the federal government. In 1895, they sold 800,000 acres west of the current reservation; lands that would form the eastern half of Glacier National Park in 1910.

The following Blackfeet rights were guaranteed in the language of the 1895 Agreement:

Provided, That said Indians shall have, and do hereby reserve to themselves, the right to go upon any portion of the lands hereby conveyed so long as the same shall remain public lands of the United States, and to cut and remove therefrom wood and timber for agency and school purposes, and for their personal uses for houses, fences and all other domestic purposes: *And provided further*, That the said Indians hereby reserve and retain the right to hunt upon said lands and to fish in the streams thereof so long as the same shall remain public lands of the United States under and in accordance with the provisions of the game and fish laws of the State of Montana (Kappler 1904: 606).

In 1932, a US District Court decided that these reserved rights were extinguished upon designation of the national park, arguing that the land in question ceased to be “public land” once it had become a national park and was no longer “subject to sale or other disposal under general law” (Ashby 1985: 54). The court also claimed that the “Blackfeet had failed to establish the extent to which they used the reserved privileges from 1895 to 1910” and had therefore forfeited these rights (Ashby 1985: 50).

Blackfeet claims to reserved rights within Glacier National Park resurfaced in the courts in 1973, when Blackfeet tribal member Woodrow Kipp refused to pay the park entrance fee citing a right to freely access the parkland based upon the 1895 Agreement. Judge Donald Smith ruled in favour of Kipp, arguing there was no reason to believe that the Blackfeet leaders of 1895 understood their rights to be in jeopardy as long as the land remained a part of the United States (Ashby 1985). A few weeks later, three tribal members challenged prohibitions against other reserved rights by firing a gun, fishing in a closed area, and cutting a limb from a tree. Despite his previous ruling in favour of Kipp, Judge Smith ruled against the other three Blackfeet, citing the 1932 decision (Presti 2005). The right of free entry into the park remains intact. The substance of Blackfeet claims to lost treaty rights is more fully explored elsewhere (e.g., Ashby 1985; Kipp 2002; Presti 2005).

RESEARCH METHODS

To further understand the relationship of the Blackfeet with Glacier National Park, the first author conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 Blackfeet, while living on the reservation during the summer of 2007. An interview guide was utilised to ensure the comparability of data across the sample while also allowing participants to raise issues that were not anticipated by the researcher. Interview questions focused on Blackfeet relationships with the Glacier landscape, the ways that Blackfeet use and benefit from that landscape, views on the national park and park policies, and recommendations for future management and policy. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Permission for conducting interviews was gained through the Tribal Historic Preservation Office.

The goal of sampling was to understand a diversity of Blackfeet views and practices. An extensive list of potential interviewees was generated and interviewees were then selected purposefully from this list to represent a range of perspectives. Of the 28 Blackfeet interviewed, 20 were male and eight female; 11 were between the ages of 20 and 39 years, 11 were between the ages of 40 and 59 years, and six were 60 years or older; 13 lived in communities near or adjacent to the park, and 15 lived farther from the park; seven claimed to benefit economically from the park, three claimed to be negatively impacted economically by the park, and 18 described no economic relationship with the park; and 15 could be characterised as more traditional in their Blackfeet cultural beliefs and practices, and 13 as less traditional.

Data analysis included coding interview transcripts through the identification of themes, writing analysis memos, and developing theoretical schematics, or models of relationships between significant themes. Quotes were chosen for inclusion in this article because they represent ideas, findings, and patterns present in the data set as whole, rather than individual, unique views. Wherever there was substantial disagreement or diversity in Blackfeet views and practices, we have indicated that below.

RESULTS

Cultural identity, on-site practice, and the significance of “the mountains”

When Blackfeet talked about the east side of Glacier National Park, they referred to the area simply as “the mountains”. They described the mountains as “part of the homeland”, a place of “great significance”, “very sacred”, and “the Backbone of the World”. As one man conveyed, “They’re in our ceremonies, they’re in our stories, they’re in our language. They have everything to do with Blackfeet religion or [being] Blackfeet. So they play a major part in our culture.” For most interviewees, “the mountains” were a fundamental symbol of Blackfeet identity. As this tribal leader explained:

Actually, the mountains have always been a part of our lives...I don’t care where you go in the United States or

even in the world, for us, as Blackfeet or Piikani people, these mountains always represent that... You talk about Glacier, you can't exclude the Blackfeet. You can't, because Glacier *is* the Blackfeet.

Other interviewees echoed this sentiment, stating that the mountains are "part of who I am", that they "were given to us by the Creator", and that "Blackfeet *belong* to the mountains".

Many Blackfeet talked about the power and protection the mountains provided, both in past and present times. As this man explained, "Whenever trouble came to our people, whenever there was uncertainty, the men would go [to the mountains]... because they needed to hear from the Creator, they wanted to know, 'How do we get out of this?'" When asked about the significance of the mountains, this young man said:

What one of my elders told me when I was real young, at dark we'd be out in the country, and we'd be scared, and the background would be just mountains all over. And the first place we'd try to run is away from the mountains. And he'd always tell us, 'No, if you're ever scared, go *to* the mountains.'

For many Blackfeet, cultural ties to the mountains were part of the past and the future. As this man suggested, "We realize the land is still a part of us. One way or another, it's always going to be there for us". A Blackfeet elder conveyed a similar sentiment, saying "the tie is even stronger today than it was before, because that's our last refuge".

Many interviewees explained that their identity as Blackfeet people compels them to engage with this landscape through particular on-site practices, such as hunting, gathering medicinal plants and minerals, berry picking, storytelling, and performing spiritual ceremonies and rituals. As one man explained, "When I go up there [to the mountains]... You get that feeling like this is a part of you, and you have something to *do* up here." Another tribal member said that such practices were an inherent part of being Blackfeet, "like a sixth sense... the Blackfeet aspect of it. And that is to use the land and to practice what my ancestors had always done. And it's just a natural thing for me to do, and I enjoy it."

Blackfeet described diverse material, cultural, and spiritual benefits of such practices. One man described how "The practice of hunting in a lot of ways, it's something you do as a Blackfeet. And it's important to you for, not just for what it provides you, but for its tradition, for linking you with the past." A woman described how berry picking not only preserves cultural knowledge necessary to properly locate, harvest, and prepare berries, but also provides an opportunity to recount family histories, teach cultural insights, strengthen important kinship ties, as well as to simply recreate. Blackfeet descriptions of the link between identity, practice, and the mountains emphasise the importance of actively engaging with the landscape to affirm one's cultural identity.

Practices are often explicitly linked to specific sites, to the extent that the same practice in a different location may

embody different meanings. This Blackfeet suggested that some locations are not immediately available for spiritual practice and that a progression is necessary before approaching particular sites:

Chief Mountain is a spiritual place. You have to be worthy to go up to Chief Mountain. See, I'm starting over here on [place name]. That's a long way away, a long way. But in time, in time when the old ones think that I'm ready, then I'll be able to go to Chief Mountain.

Similarly, material resources may be imbued with particular properties due to their physical location. As this woman described:

One of the things that my family did was they gathered... I have a sister who still does, she's an herbalist. And so collecting some of the plants that grow in alpine areas are some of the most powerful, just because of where they are and their survival.

Place is also significant to practice because of the role specific sites play as repositories of shared memories, familial history, and cultural knowledge. The Blackfeet have interacted with the mountains for many generations such that certain places have accrued specific meaning and significance and, as this Blackfeet described, "the place names that are in that area always have some kind of lesson".

While most hunting, gathering, and spiritual practices currently occur outside the park for reasons described below, the cultural significance of the park landscape to Blackfeet and the importance of place to practice suggest that other locations are not equivalent substitutes.

Coping with restriction

As in many other national parks, tribal practices in Glacier have been restricted by policies that either disallow certain activities (e.g., hunting) or require special permits for certain activities (e.g., gathering). This woman spoke about the loss of access to resources in the park that the tribe historically used:

You can't just go do the things that you did back in the day that were appropriate to your religion and your growth as a Blackfeet person. You know, like collecting the plants that we use, the animals that we used for food, and some that just really had significance, that we would never touch.

The park contains unique plants and other materials significant to the Blackfeet, and gathering practices continue secretly in some locales within the park (Reeves and Peacock 2001). As one woman explained, "there are things that we use that are all in there. We have to sneak [in] to get them. I have to go up there and steal what rightfully belongs to us... And why should we be deprived of everything that really belonged to us?" None of the Blackfeet interviewed discussed

the permitting system for gathering in the park; instead, most suggested that gathering was forbidden.

Most Blackfeet described a range of negative effects that a lack of access to park resources had on the tribe. For example, the inability to engage in specific practices can result in lost knowledge. As this woman stated:

When we got in the summertime about now, we'd go up into the mountains over on that side to gather roots, and my mother took care of that. And those were roots for if we had colds. She knew what they looked like, she knew by their smell, and after a while we knew what to look for... I couldn't go in there and show you now; I don't remember, it's been so long.

Her remark emphasises the way in which on-site material practice is critical to the maintenance of cultural knowledge. Many older Blackfeet were concerned that the inability to engage in particular practices threatened cultural relationships with the landscape. As this elder explained:

We're going to lose future generations that will say, 'I respect those mountains just the way my grandfather and grandmother respected them.' Or, 'I value them the way they valued them.' Because if not, it's just, okay, they're just there, you know. Eventually they'll just drive by and not even take a second thought as to why the mountains are there, what the significance of them is.

Even when practices are not explicitly prohibited by policy they still may be constrained by park management. For example, the potential for interruption by park visitors or staff effectively prohibits many Blackfeet from using sacred sites in the park. Many Blackfeet felt “prohibited” from praying, fasting for visions, and trying to obtain spiritual guidance. As this man described:

You'll notice that there are people who go and conduct fasts on Chief Mountain. But they don't do it on [place name] Mountain or any of those other mountains [in the park]. Why? Because Indians feel that that place is, that Glacier National Park is a barrier to them doing that kind of thing. I often wonder what would happen if somebody did do that. But we're prohibited, or at least in our own minds, from doing that. Would they really welcome us doing that?

Blackfeet suggested that lack of access to spiritual sites within the park has had an adverse effect on the overall spiritual and social well-being of the tribe, as this man illustrated:

There's something that's been lost. The kids here, they used to go through their vision quest, their transition to life. And the opportunity for going up into those mountains and doing that has been shut off... The opportunity for the spiritual foundation of our people has been thrown off.

While the park does not officially prohibit Blackfeet spiritual practices, an emphasis on more typical recreation opportunities may impede those Blackfeet who are interested in accessing sacred sites.

Some interviewees expressed a sense that on-site practices were necessary both for maintaining the health of Blackfeet relationships with the mountains and for the well-being of the mountains themselves. As this woman described:

I think the park misses the people... There's a belief in being a part of the land that if you, well, it's like this: when I go picking sweetgrass—and it's difficult because they don't grow in a big bunch, you can't just pick a bunch of grass and walk off, it's like here and there and there and there—one of them, when you're looking, will call you. It will shine a certain way, and you have a responsibility to pick that. If you don't, you're turning away the gift of the Creator, and so it may not grow again. The same way with what happens in the park. The land is getting to the place it doesn't know us anymore, because it's like people are turning away their gifts. And the things that need to be harvested are not being harvested. So the park misses us as much as we miss the park.

Because of the importance of on-site practices to maintaining Blackfeet cultural identity and preserving certain kinds of relationships with the landscape, lack of access to the mountains was described as “traumatizing”, “degrading”, and “alienating”. In addition, restricting practices such as hunting and gathering meant that Blackfeet were unable to obtain direct material benefits from park resources. For many Blackfeet, these resources represent a potential source of subsistence in the face of poverty on the reservation. As this man recalled:

Last year when I didn't have a job, I didn't have any way to support my family, I hunted every day, and not once did I get a single elk, because they stayed in the park. I was bound and determined to get an elk, and I almost went in the park and shot one. I probably could have had a pretty good case in court. I mean, my family was starving, and that's my aboriginal right.

This reference to an “aboriginal right” explicitly highlights the simultaneously cultural and political nature of many Blackfeet claims to the park landscape. On-site practices in the park, then, are viewed by many Blackfeet as culturally appropriate (even culturally required) and legally legitimate.

From historical dispossession to contemporary exclusion

The loss of access to park resources is situated within a long history of dispossession and a largely antagonistic relationship between the tribe and the federal government. When asked about their relationship with the mountains, many Blackfeet described the hardships and injustices linked to the establishment of the national park and contested current

interpretations of the 1895 Agreement. One woman specifically discussed the “starvation winters” of 1883 through 1885, suggesting that the federal government “literally starved us for our park”, taking advantage of Blackfeet when “We were weak. We needed food. We needed money.” Other Blackfeet suggested that the government deceived the illiterate Blackfeet leaders in the written terms of the 1895 Agreement. Some tribal members claimed that the land was not sold, but “forcibly taken” even though “it might look like on paper that both parties agreed”. Many argued that the original agreement was a lease, not a sale, saying that “The government doesn’t own it. They took it, they leased it. And the lease is up. The lease has been up for a good ten years now I think.” The Blackfeet also contested the accuracy of the park boundary, again suggesting duplicity on the part of the federal government saying “the line was moved way down” and that the boundary is actually “peak to peak”.

Taken together, the Blackfeet historical narrative describing park establishment includes the following claims: 1) the tribe did not willingly sell the land; 2) the Blackfeet retained subsistence rights in the 1895 Agreement; 3) federal jurisdiction ended with the expiration of a lease; and 4) the current park boundary is inaccurate. Despite the passage of over a century, stories surrounding these claims are still “being told in the living room of the family home here in Browning [on the Blackfeet Reservation]”. Blackfeet relationships with the national park institution are thus framed within this historical context linking the NPS to a broader history of dispossession by the federal government. One tribal member remarked that it was often difficult to tell if “it’s the Park Service [Blackfeet] are mad at, or just the government”.

Tensions between the Blackfeet and NPS are exacerbated by a number of other issues. Many interviewees felt that employment with the NPS was restricted to “servant jobs” as “toilet rangers”. Others felt they would “never get a shot with them” and that “you will not be a part of that organisation if you’re a Blackfeet”.

Blackfeet also contested NPS interpretation of their history in the area, suggesting that staff and park literature conveyed a sense that “the park just kind of, boom, appeared, and we were just there on the side”. They argued that contemporary Blackfeet relationships with the park were ignored and that publications suggested that “they were here, but now they’re gone”.

Many Blackfeet also felt unwelcome within the park, stating that it was a “hassle” and “intimidating” to get into the park. Some Blackfeet suggested that park staff discriminated against and monitored Blackfeet visitors in inappropriate ways, saying that park staff were “watching” for reservation residents, “patrolling all the time”, “looking for Indians to be drinking”, “scared of the Blackfeet”, and “trying to sneak up on Indians”. One man said park staff “react to the presence of Indians as if we’re going to destroy things. [As if] we’re going to hunt the animals to extinction.” Blackfeet protested that they were being treated as “outsiders rather than the original inhabitants”. Park prohibitions against on-site practices are

compounded by a sense that the NPS is hostile to Blackfeet needs and concerns.

Preservation of hope and the potential for cultural renewal

Despite the negative impacts that many Blackfeet described, most interviewees still expressed considerable support for the conservation mandate and accomplishments of Glacier National Park. Interviewees supported the park’s mission to preserve nature, valued its conservation achievements, and believed that the park should be managed with these goals as a priority. Blackfeet described the park’s “beauty” and “majestic value”, arguing that “it protects the trees. It protects the fish, the wildlife, the water”. One man explained how “we’re always going to be able to look up there and not see it spotted with houses”. No one wanted to see the park “developed”: as one man said, “you’ve got to keep it intact”. Support for the park, however, often reflected the bittersweet feelings of the Blackfeet toward Glacier. As one woman said, “I’m glad for the park because it’s preserved. But yet there’s sadness there too. We got ripped off on it so bad.”

At the same time, protection of the Glacier landscape preserves past cultural connections to the mountains and the potential for future cultural renewal. As one man explained, “It’s about what we had once. It’s about keeping that area just as good as we’ve known it to be from the past, to today, into the future.” In protecting the landscape both ecologically and aesthetically, the park has preserved the possibility of recreating what many Blackfeet feel are authentic cultural relationships through appropriate on-site practices. The potential role of the park is even more important in the context of historical Blackfeet dispossession of land and culture. Many Blackfeet see Glacier National Park as the “last refuge”, both practically and symbolically. As this elder remarked, “The buffalo are gone. Our way of life is gone. But maybe there’s hope because those mountains are still there.”

Blackfeet views on moving forward

Blackfeet support for the park is situated within a distinct tribal worldview and cultural identity and a specific history of loss and dispossession. Thus, while the park’s preservation mandate had widespread support, so did a reinstatement of “treaty rights”. As this man explained: “I have strong feelings [in favour of] a park... And the only thing that we’re getting at is that we do have treaty rights up there. So I wouldn’t mind if the park held onto it for the rest of my life... That is a park where it belongs.” The definition of “treaty rights” varied across interviewees, but focused on gathering material resources important to Blackfeet well-being, which most saw as compatible with the preservation mandate of the park. While some suggested that such resource use would be sustainable: “They should let them go back and do some hunting, not kill too many animals, just enough to get food”, others acknowledged the difficulty with accommodating

Blackfeet needs: “You can’t have some tourist going up to the park in the summertime and driving alongside the road and seeing Indians picking plants.”

Blackfeet expressed a range of views on who should own and manage parklands in the future. While some Blackfeet argued that the land should be “returned” to the Blackfeet as “tribal” land and others suggested it should be “given back” “but run as a park”, most Blackfeet instead wanted greater inclusion and influence in park management and decision making. These Blackfeet were concerned that the tribe currently lacked the capacity and resources to effectively manage the park on their own. As one Blackfeet remarked, “If that was just given to us, I think it would be mismanaged. Honestly, we’d have a hard time right now.” Another interviewee reluctantly said that “we don’t have the capability to take care of it like it should be”. Another suggested that the NPS would “do a better job than the tribe could”. Some Blackfeet were fearful that if the tribe was granted a larger managerial role and failed, they would never receive a similar opportunity again.

Interviewees were nearly unanimous in their desire for “more interaction”, improved “cooperation and communication”, and a “positive relationship” with the NPS. They expressed a desire for meaningful “conversations” rather than “just having a meeting”. Many Blackfeet acknowledged that both sides needed to work on this relationship, as illustrated by this young man’s comment:

The park thinks the tribe’s a bunch of idiots, won’t listen to them. The tribe thinks that the park is a bunch of pompous jerks. And so they don’t cooperate with them. And really what the park needs to be able to do is be a little more pliable. And the tribe needs to be a little more knowledgeable.

Younger Blackfeet in particular emphasised a need for increased Blackfeet initiative in approaching the park. As one young man remarked:

I think once that next generation comes to be, and they’ve been taught the way we’ve always been taught before the 1900s, I think then we’ll be ready to maybe think about taking back over the park, because we’ll have responsible people in there who actually care about their own people and their own history, culture, and heritage, enough to look at that as more than just a piece of land that we lost, and look at it more as a place that’s been our home since forever.

Tribal capacity to play a greater role in park management is explicitly linked here to cultural knowledge and practices associated with the era prior to dispossession. Similar to the way in which undeveloped parklands symbolise hope because they recall the past, some Blackfeet suggest that a reintegration of historic knowledge and practice into contemporary Blackfeet society can build the tribe’s capacity to more effectively engage with the NPS about the management of Glacier.

CONCLUSION

In this study, Blackfeet suggested that tribal relationships with the park landscape are sustained through on-site practices that provide material, cultural, and spiritual benefits. For the Blackfeet, such benefits are interwoven and inseparable. The prohibition and regulation of many historic practices within park boundaries inhibits the realisation of these benefits, and fuels tensions between the tribe and the park, especially in the context of a history of dispossession, animosity toward the federal government, and high rate of poverty on the reservation. Alongside this loss, however, flows an undercurrent of hope, as the undeveloped, ecologically-intact landscape of Glacier National Park is also evocative of an ancestral past. Thus, for many Blackfeet, the national park itself has preserved the potential for cultural reclamation and renewal.

As Adams and Hutton (2007) suggest, the creation of protected areas is “inherently political”. Local residents often characterise their relationship with nearby protected lands in terms of “lost ancestral resources” (Robbins 2004). This study suggests that native use of federal lands may also be overtly political, particularly where such practices are either restricted or prohibited by agency policies. Native struggles for specific park resources, then, become one of the ways that tribes exercise and maintain ongoing claims to parklands and their resources. Blackfeet conflict with Glacier is also a struggle over meanings, symbols, and representation (e.g., who decides the purpose and meaning of the park and how Blackfeet relationships, both historic and contemporary, are represented in official park materials); over historical and contemporary injustice (e.g., how dispossession of land should be addressed); and over the ability to engage in practices that affirm and restore one’s cultural identity (e.g., whether and under what conditions the tribe can access material resources and cultural sites). Blackfeet efforts to shape and influence decision-making processes in Glacier are thus embedded in a broader struggle for tribal self-determination, sovereignty, and identity.

Efforts to reform park policies in ways that allow for on-site practices must contend with entrenched assumptions that human use of park resources is inherently harmful and should be resisted. Howell (1994: 130) described the dominant NPS view as: “nature is the museum; humans are curators, docents, or patrons, but they are not part of the exhibits”. As this study illustrates, tribal values associated with the parkland do not simply reside in the landscape; they are realised through specific practices in specific places. When such practices are prohibited, the cultural values that the NPS claims to protect instead remain ‘locked’ in the landscape, at risk of vanishing over time, as the cultural knowledge required to ‘unlock’ these values is not passed on to younger Blackfeet. On-site practices not only realise specific values and benefits, they preserve the knowledge necessary to continue those practices over time.

Despite increased sensitivity to native perspectives and needs, notions of how nature ought to look, both figuratively and practically, continue to influence protected area policies and practices (Neumann 1998). Resource use and nature

preservation are spatially separate and distinct in most protected area models (with resource use envisioned as occurring outside of park boundaries). The desire to preserve nature ‘untouched’ combined with the view that resource use is inherently harmful, means that there is often very little space (both practically and conceptually) for ‘sustainable’ use of parklands. The assumption that resource use is unsustainable contrasts markedly with a common Blackfeet belief that tribal use of park resources will not degrade or damage the Glacier environment. These conflicting views are reflected in NPS policy which states that “the traditional management distinction between natural and cultural resources may be inapplicable where ethnographic resources are concerned” (NPS 1998: 160). This policy statement not only suggests the need to conceptually integrate cultural and natural resources in the context of native peoples and parks, it also hints at some divisions within the agency concerning indigenous rights and practices and the spatial distinctions described above. Like all government agencies, the NPS is not monolithic. Tribes attempting to reclaim rights and access to resources will likely find allies within the NPS who can help identify opportunities to make change.

There are several specific changes to policy and management practice that the Blackfeet and other tribes might pursue, outlined by both the Blackfeet interviewed for this study and the literature on indigenous people and protected areas.

Reinstatement of reserved treaty rights to hunt, fish, and gather

Because parks have preserved many native species, they provide unique opportunities for traditional on-site material practices (Ruppert 2003). According to McAvoy et al. (2003: 101), “To the extent possible, traditional practices like hunting, fishing, gathering, and access to sacred and traditional sites should be allowed.” Regaining hunting rights would likely require judicial action, as hunting is largely prohibited in national parks in the lower 48 states. However, specific rights to fish and to gather could be negotiated by parks and tribes. Similar to the arrangement between the Southern Paiute and the NPS, Glacier National Park could cede authority to the Blackfeet to oversee specific aspects of the permitting process for gathering. Such a system could potentially address prohibitions on revealing specific sites to non-tribal members, the reluctance of many Blackfeet to seek permits from a federal agency they associate with historical dispossession and injustice, and the lack of understanding within the tribe regarding Glacier’s permitting system.

Voluntary closure of cultural sites to allow for spiritual practices

The Blackfeet could pursue changes to park policy to instate a voluntary ban on visitor use of certain peaks and other spiritual sites during specific months of the year. NPS policy at Devil’s Tower National Monument requests that visitors refrain from climbing Devil’s Tower in June. Climber compliance, however,

is strictly voluntary. Given the case law related to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993), restrictions on visitor use of sacred sites to accommodate Blackfeet practices would also need to be voluntary (Nie 2008).

Co-management or joint management of parklands

According to McAvoy et al. (2003: 86), “simply consulting with tribes” where the agency “retains all the power, is not going to work. Managers must be willing to share power...” Nie (2008) argues that part of the problem is that tribes are only asked to respond to agency proposals; they are rarely involved in meaningful ways in crafting management proposals. According to Nie (2008: 602), co-management differs substantially from current consultation practices since it involves “the sharing of resource management goals and responsibilities between tribes and federal agencies”, including collaboratively setting and implementing goals and objectives, regular meetings with tribal and agency officials, special processes for consideration of tribal proposals, and tribal inclusion on agency interdisciplinary planning teams. Nie (2008) argues that tribal co-management differs from other types of co-management because tribes are sovereign governments. So, rather than one of many stakeholders to consult with, tribal-park relations should be construed as government-to-government negotiations.

Co-management, which is also known as joint management, can also involve the transfer of title and ownership of parklands to indigenous communities in exchange for permanent status as a national park or protected area. In Australia, for example, formal ownership of some national parks was returned to aboriginal communities as part of a national process to address indigenous land claims and provide restitution for past harms. While aboriginal groups now own some parkland, a governmental land management agency is typically contracted, or leased, the land to manage (Reid et al. 2004; Ross et al. 2009). The government agency and the aboriginal group are equal partners on a decision-making board to determine management actions and policies. But even in Australia, where joint management has been in practice for decades, profound challenges have emerged. For aboriginal owners, rigid government requirements and Western-style meetings and decision-making processes can present significant barriers to participation (Fraser et al. 2007). Government agencies and aboriginal owners have different objectives, different approaches to the sharing and endorsement of knowledge, and different expectations about economic benefits (Scherl 2005). Different knowledge systems have been challenging to integrate, particularly since, as Berkes (2009: 169) suggests, “many scientists and government managers do not trust local knowledge”. But, there is some evidence that, over time, through recognition, respect, and acceptance of established uses and rights, these differences can become shared priorities (Lijebblad et al. 2009). Ideally, joint management (and the attendant commitment to equitable and participatory decision making) serves as a vehicle for mutual learning and cross-

cultural capacity building for both indigenous groups and government agencies.

Co-management proposals will be most successful if they include resources to build Blackfeet tribal capacity to engage with Glacier National Park, especially given Blackfeet concerns that they currently lack the capacity to effectively manage park resources. While the NPS has the legal authority to co-manage parks with tribal governments, all US cases of co-management between tribes and federal agencies to date have been ordered by judges, the President, or Congress, indicating unwillingness on the part of the agencies to share power (Nie 2008). Ideally, the Blackfeet and other tribes will be able to negotiate directly with park superintendents, although they may need to appeal to the courts, Congress, or the executive branch.

Legal designations within Glacier National Park

The Blackfeet might also be able to insert special provisions into legislative designations for parklands. For example, legislation to designate wilderness in Glacier National Park could include stipulations for tribal involvement in management decisions and return some of the rights reserved in the 1895 treaty. It may seem contradictory to utilise wilderness designation to secure tribal rights to access park resources, but interestingly, several wilderness laws have included such provisions [see Nie (2008) for examples].

The significance of many national park landscapes to Native American peoples, particularly given historic dispossession and loss, is profound. While the NPS has improved its consideration of native needs and values through policy statements and management decisions (Keller and Turek 1998), there remain significant gaps. These gaps are highlighted by recent resolutions endorsed by the World Conservation Congress (IUCN 2009) and the World Parks Congress (Brosius 2004) that emphasise the rights of indigenous peoples to participate in decision making regarding territorial lands. This recent emphasis on indigenous concerns in international conservation reflects a paradigmatic shift in protected area management that has yet to be truly embraced within US national parks. In order to more effectively address Native American concerns, the NPS will need to consider new approaches to park-tribal relations. Some of these include: the integration of cultural and natural resource management, conceptualising sustainable use as compatible with nature preservation, and sharing power with tribes through co-management and joint permitting systems. For the Blackfeet, and possibly many other tribes, cultural renewal and self-determination depend, in part, on a different, more collaborative, relationship with nearby national park lands.

Notes

1. Pub. L. 95-341. 92 Stat. 469. http://www.nps.gov/history/local-law/fhpl_indianrelfreact.pdf. Accessed on March 21, 2011.
2. Pub. L. 103-141. 107 Stat. 1488. <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d103:H.R.1308>. Accessed on September 11, 2012.

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