

Cultural Monuments in the Four Corners:  
Sacred Land in a Changing World

The Four Corners region of the American Southwest, where the states of Utah, New Mexico, Colorado and Arizona meet, is a landscape of myth and spiritual power. To the traditional native people living here in their ancestral homelands, the sacred landscape and the physical landscape are one. The land's connection to the people is strong. Writer Barry Lopez describes this connection as the "country of the mind...for some people, what they are is not finished at the skin, but continues with the reach of the senses out onto the land. If the land is summarily disfigured or reorganized, it causes them psychological pain."

As people of different cultures have come to live in the area, other perceptions of this land have begun to overshadow the indigenous worldview. Newcomers brought a more rational, scientific approach to the land: at first, seeing it as a worthless desert, barren and inhospitable, but today recognizing the economic opportunities that exploitation of the land offers. Such a view breaks the intangible connection between person and sacred place. We can see it broken in the continuing encroachment of urban and industrial activities into the mountain peaks and desert canyons sacred to the Navajo, Hopi, and other indigenous southwestern cultures, and in the destruction of places important to traditional ceremonies and beliefs.

This march of technological progress now forces us to face difficult questions: Of the tangible and intangible elements of the land, what will be sacrificed for material gain and what will be preserved? Can the historic preservation movement help us to decide?

Historic preservation in the Four Corners is a focal point of the dichotomy between land as sacred and land as commodity. The designation of specific monuments is based on scientific and legal criteria about archaeological and historical significance that are unrelated to the perception of the land as an undivided sacred entity. The traditional indigenous perception in the southwest sees "islands" of preservation as no less sacred than the landscape surrounding them--the holy San Francisco Peaks do not end where the Snow Bowl ski area begins. The intangible connections that bind a place to its surroundings and to the hearts of those who understand it can be damaged by the insistence on administrative boundaries created by a bureaucracy, boundaries which justify uses in one place regardless of the effect on the landscape as a whole.

This separation of place from setting sometimes occurs even through the act of historic preservation. To the indigenous people, southwestern ruins in parks and monuments are more than physical artifacts of a time gone by. The ruins of Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon, Hovenweep, and Canyon de Chelley have important places in the creation myths of the area's native people. Stories of the migration of the people in ancient times refer to these places and to the lessons learned there. Certain places now inside national parks and monuments are still used for gathering the feathers of eagles and the branches of spruce for use in ceremonial dances and healing rituals. High places in the mountains are still visited as the sites of visions and communication with the spirits. The land is a living entity, full of power and energy.

This spiritual landscape refers to the relationship inherent in the forms of the land that gives rise to an awareness of the sacred. But this awareness is not always strengthened by the act of designating a monument simply on the basis of its archaeological or scientific value, and in some cases, may actually be threatened by the design or management of monuments.

The controversy over the treatment of Rainbow Bridge National Monument in southern Utah illustrates this danger. The controversy centered around religious freedom, water resource development, and National Park Service management of the monument. To traditional Navajos living in the Rainbow Bridge area, this huge rock-arch of sandstone spanning a canyon is the home of holy people to whom requests for rain and community well-being are directed. With the creation of Glen Canyon dam and the subsequent flooding of the Rainbow Bridge canyon, many of the places associated with these religious beliefs were covered with water, drowning the home of these holy spirits and making it impossible for certain ceremonies to continue.

At the same time, the Park Service allowed concessionaires to run a tour boat service to take visitors to the Bridge. Both of these actions were perceived as encroachments into an area of spiritual importance to Navajo people who held Rainbow Bridge sacred, and were challenged unsuccessfully in a 1977 court case on the basis of the First Amendment and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. What the Park Service saw as a duty to provide for public enjoyment of the monument resulted in a conflict with traditional religious beliefs held by the Navajo who felt that tourists who came with little understanding of the sacred nature of the place created a barrier to the continual sacred stewardship the native people give to this area.

The court found, however, that it would be unconstitutional to establish prohibitions on tour boat use of the area for the purpose of respecting the religious character of the monument. (Although the court agreed that the flooding of the canyon was a burden on the religious freedom of the Navajos, it held that the state's interest in developing the Upper Colorado River water system outweighed that burden and therefore was allowed under the First Amendment).

The separate reality of sacred land cannot be integrated into our national consciousness simply through the designation of ruins as national parks and monuments. There is a need for a broader standard for historic preservation--to include natural settings as well as the built environment--and an accompanying shift in our way of thinking about the values of the intangible sacred landscape. A common language must also be developed to allow traditional native people and non-native people to define sacred land in a way that fits both worlds, and to describe how changes in the physical landscape affect sacred places and those who are connected to them through personal use or cultural heritage.

The call for a broader definition of historical preservation--one that includes the reality of sacred lands--must be coupled with the power to implement measures that protect the intangible values and traditional ways of life related to these lands. But can this happen without a shift in our way of thinking about the value of sacred land to our society as well as its value to the traditional cultures it grows from? For such a shift to take place, new methods of resolving disputes and encouraging dialogues between representatives of different beliefs must be developed and made available to decision makers in the fields of public land and cultural resource management.

In the historic preservation process, disputes are inevitable. Generally, they arise over who owns the land, who controls resources, what is worth saving and what must be sacrificed. When both parties work through negotiation or confrontation to seek a compromise, they often fail to see that there are some situations in which there can be no compromise as a solution.

The Sacred Land Foundation is working to develop an acceptance among federal land management agencies that there are some conflicts that cannot be resolved through compromise, and that the preservation of sacred sites is one of them. Our work seeks to encourage recognition of the need for accommodation of differences and the protection of sacred lands.

The principles involved in land-based theologies are deeply held and intransigent, and often communication between two sides is hampered by the inability to translate beliefs into the language of bureaucracy. These conflicts are difficult to deal with and it is often tempting to leave such difficult issues up to the courts or to police powers to control. In doing so, preservationists abrogate their responsibility to help different cultures communicate with each other and to connect the past with the present.

A successful accommodation approach to resolving sacred land preservation issues involves a three-stage process. The first is to redefine the negotiation process. In standard practice, the emphasis is on using objective criteria that are defined by those who see land as a resource to be developed or property to be owned. While defining criteria is an essential aspect of the process, true cross-cultural communication must involve criteria that reflect mutual experiences with the land. In sharing these experiences, we can develop a common ground upon which trust can be based.

A successful negotiation will first focus on the process. All sides must participate in defining the problems to be solved, the terminology to be used, and the methods of communication. This foundation must be created before the actual issue itself can be addressed.

The second stage consists of a series of meetings, seminars and exchanges, the sole purpose of which is to learn about the similarities and differences of the participants, to raise the consciousness of all involved, and to create a common language upon which to base negotiations.

The third stage is the negotiation itself, a sharing of experiences, beliefs, and concerns on both sides. Rather than resorting to the courts, or ending in open conflict if negotiations fail to produce an agreement, the accommodation system continues past the point where the parties can no longer agree on one solution to the problem. The goal of the accommodation process is to find ways to live with the dispute, to agree to disagree, and to maintain some form of accommodation to the differences which affect the individual lives and cultural heritage of those involved.

If dialogues could be encouraged through this process, new ways of thinking about these issues and new answers might emerge. Instead of seeing the cultural and historical resources of the Four Corners as isolated sites, we could view them as connected pieces of a larger whole. The sacred landscape would no longer be seen apart from the physical landscape, but could be acknowledged as part of the cultural

heritage of the Four Corners region. Borrowing from the United Nation's Biosphere Reserve Program concept, this new view of preservation would include "core areas" to form the foundation of a cultural-biosphere reserve. In the Four Corners, these core areas could include Chaco Canyon National Historic Park and Mesa Verde and Grand Canyon World Heritage Parks, as well as traditional native American communities of the Navajo, Hopi, and Pueblo people. This new view of preservation would also include land surrounding the core areas, and outside the existing boundaries of preservation. In these lands, traditional ways of life could be maintained and reclamation of areas injured by past energy development, overgrazing, and inappropriate recreational and urban expansion could be encouraged, providing employment and research opportunities and improving the local economy.

If we broadened our idea of what historic preservation means in the Four Corners region, the idea of "monument" could take a more active place in the region's economic and cultural development. Monuments embracing the sacred landscape would remind us not only of the historic value of what has come before, but of the importance of an enduring belief in sacred land.

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COLORADO

NEW MEXICO

UTAH

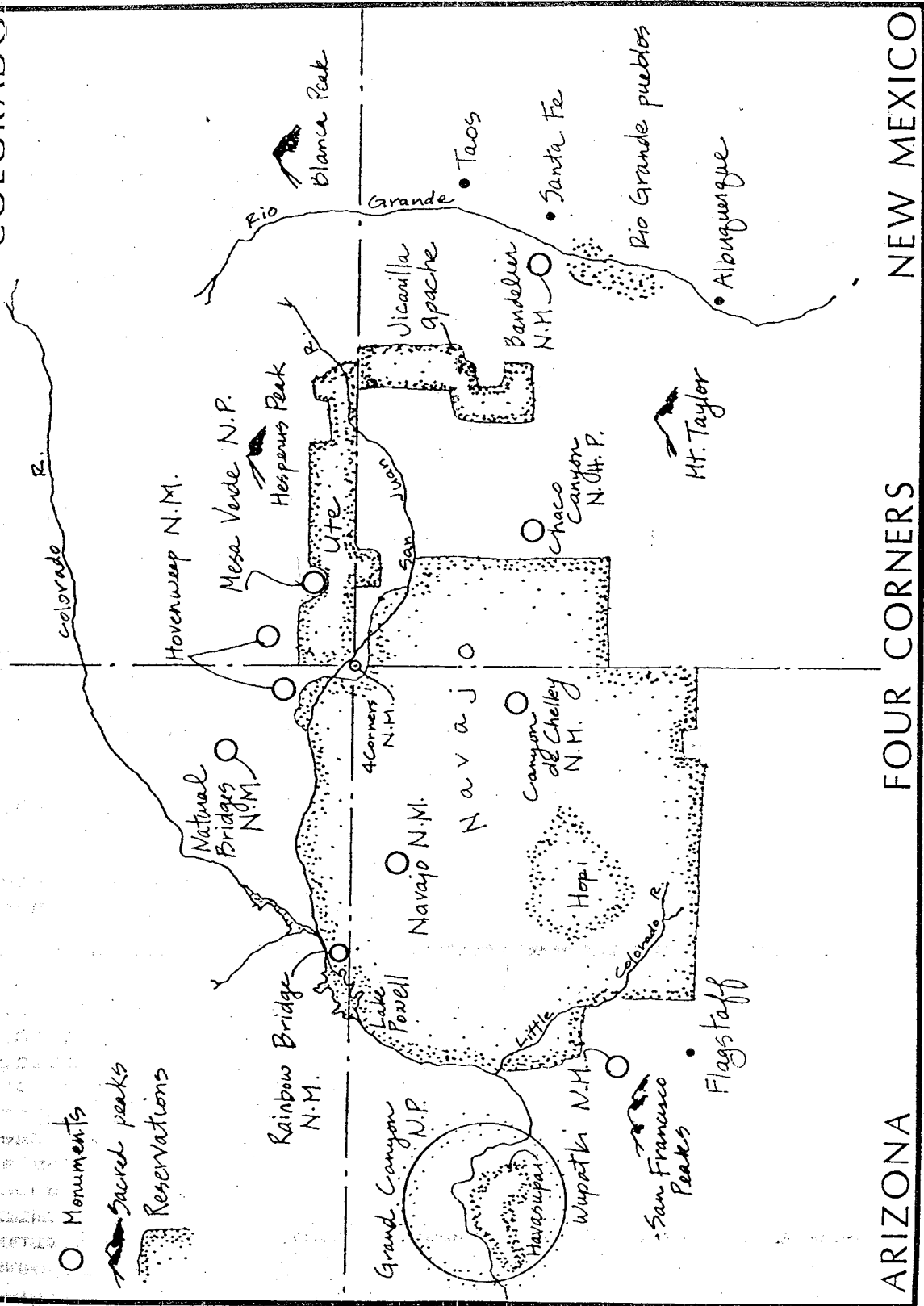
FOUR CORNERS

ARIZONA

○ Monuments

▲ Sacred peaks

▭ Reservations



Cultural Monuments in the Four Corners:  
Sacred Land in a Changing World

SUMMARY

The Four Corners region of the American Southwest, where the states of New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and Arizona meet, is home to a cultural and historic legacy unique in the nation. Native American villages high atop Arizona's Third Mesa are the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in the U.S. More archaeological sites exist in this region than in any other part of the country. Pueblo and Navajo cultures continue to inhabit a landscape where all forms of nature are sacred.

During the 1980's, recognition of this legacy has grown throughout the world, but although many successful preservation efforts are underway, the challenge of protecting this cultural heritage has never been greater. Today, national parks and tribal monuments of the Southwest maintain a sense of sacred land by preserving the ancient homes of indigenous cultures. But these protected areas stand side by side with coal mines, power plants, uranium mills, and reservoirs that have drowned sacred canyons. Cities grow and expand into areas of archaeological significance, bringing residents and visitors onto lands of traditional religious use.

In the midst of it all, native Americans struggle to preserve sacred springs and mountain peaks and maintain traditional ceremonies for bringing rain, health and harmony to the world. Theirs is a different worldview, unlike the Western legal system that governs historic preservation. It is a perception of the world often overlooked or misunderstood when decisions are made that affect parks and the lands surrounding them.

Existing methods of protection must be adapted to preserve the Southwest's cultural heritage of sacred land. The Biosphere Reserve Program and the World Heritage Program, both assisted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are two examples of programs that could replace existing "islands" of preservation with "centers" extending outward and encompassing the sacred landscape. As historic preservation takes on a broader meaning in this region, national monuments can be created to include traditional sacred areas. Economic development in this region must be in harmony with traditional beliefs and ways of life of the indigenous people.

Monumentos Culturales en los "Cuatro Rincones":  
Tierra Sagrada en un Mundo Cambiante

SUMARIO

La región de los "Cuatro Rincones" del Sudoeste de los Estados Unidos, donde se juntan New Mexico, Utah, Colorado y Arizona, es el hogar de un legado único cultural e histórico en la nación. Los aldeas de la gente indígena que están colocadas encima de la "Tercer Mesa" de Arizona son los establecimientos más antiguos y continuamente habitados en los EE UU. Mas sitios arqueológicos existen en esta region que en cualquier otra parte del país. Las culturas Pueblo y Navajo siguen viviendo en una tierra donde todas las formas de la naturaleza son sagradas.

Durante la década de los 80, más y más gente en el mundo reconoce este legado, pero aunque muchos prosperos esfuerzos de conservación ya están en camino, el reto de proteger esta herencia nunca a sido tan grande. Actualmente, parques nacionales y monumentos tribales del Sudoeste mantienen un sentido de tierra sagrada al conservar los hogares antiguos de las culturas indígenas. Pero estas áreas protegidas, al lado de las minas de carbón y uranio, plantas de energía y depósitos de agua que inundan cañones sagrados. El desarrollo y la expansión de ciudades en áreas de importancia arqueológico atraen residentes y turistas a estas tierras de tradición religiosa.

En medio de todo esto, la gente indígena (Pueblo y Navajo) luchan por conservar manantiales sagrados y cumbres, y mantener ceremonias tradicionales para traer la lluvia, salud y armonía. Su modo de ver el mundo es diferente al del anglo cuyo systema legal gobierna la conservación histórica. Esta percepción del mundo es frecuentemente ignorada o malentendida cuando se hacen decisiones que afectan a los parques y a las tierras que los rodean.

Los metodos existentes de protección deben ser reformados para conservar el legado cultural del Sudoeste y su tierra sagrada. El Biosphere Reserve Program y el World Heritage Program, ambos apoyados por la organización de educación, ciencia, y cultura de las naciones unidas, (UNESCO), son dos ejemplos de programas que pueden reemplazar actuales "islas" de conservación con regiones integradas que abarquen los terrenos sagrados. En esta región, la conservación histórica puede adquirir un significado más amplio, y se pueden crear monumentos nacionales que incluyan las áreas sagradas tradicionales. El desarrollo económica de estas tierras debe estar en armonía con las creencias tradicionales y modos de vida de los pueblos indígenas.