

# “Between a Rock and a Hard Place”: Rock Climbing and Traditional Cultural Properties

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## Abstract

*Is rock climbing a right? Some rock climbers would seem to think so when asked not to climb at certain times out of respect toward Native American sacred rock formations that now happen to be on public lands and have the status of traditional cultural properties (TCPs). Regarding self-limiting climbing access, climbers are often sympathetic to a Native American community's TCP links or to those of other Native Americans, such as Alaska Natives or Native Hawaiians. Climbers have made accommodations to Native American requests. And they have honored those of federal land-managing agencies for the same reason of showing respect to Native Americans for their beliefs by not climbing. However, there is a precept in the climbing community of an individual climber's right to climb as spiritual activity. This paper examines climbers' perspectives regarding their TCP relations and reviews two promising alternatives to more contentious forms of problem resolution on climbing access.*

## Introduction

David Brower, the famous environmentalist and the most well known of Sierra Club members, made the first ascent of Shiprock in New Mexico in 1939. It was a technically challenging rock climb, ranking as one of the more difficult climbing accomplishments of its day. The ascent has been said, perhaps apocryphally and presumably by some Native Americans, to have rendered Shiprock spiritually inert, dead, for the Navajo people (McPherson 1992; Roberts 1998). Shiprock's imposing visage is found on the Navajo Nation reservation in northwestern New Mexico, on land held in tribal trust by the federal government.

Two years prior to Brower's historic accomplishment, a team of rock climbers ascended Devils Tower (Mateo Tipi or the Bear's Lodge) in northeast Wyoming, an equally imposing monolith and featured attraction at Devils Tower National Monument. The historic ascents of Shiprock and Devils Tower by non-Indians demarcate a crossing-of-paths with Native Americans regarding this activity as more climbers became aware to the seemingly limitless possibility of ascents of other equally imposing monoliths and formations that stand on both Native American and public lands. It also alerted Native Americans to a new kind of threat to places they hold culturally and historically important or sacred. Some see rock climbing as an intrusion into their tribal autonomy and as having an adverse impact on cultural integrity.

Ensuing decades brought the ascents of the imposing Totem Pole, Spider Rock and El Capitan on Navajo land and Baboquivari on Tohono O'odham land, in addition to countless ascents of other culturally significant formations on public land. The growth in popularity of *sport climbing* during the 1980s and 1990s and into the present has led some Native American communities to intensify their opposition on the basis that it is tantamount to disrespect and desecration to their sacred sites.

Climbers on the other hand view the very same rock formations as media to test their technical skills and endurance abilities via a legitimate recreational activity, which some even consider to be a spiritual one as well. The activity of course requires direct access.

Such differing perspectives and perceptions about rock formations have, on occasion, led to negotiations and sometimes to conflicts and litigation over access. And while climbing on tribal lands is not always prohibited by the tribes themselves, a much more complex picture emerges when access is sought to designated traditional cultural properties (TCPs) (Parker and King 1987; King 2003) that are within, not Indian lands, but rather state or federal public lands. Please note that traditional cultural properties are ethnographic resources that are eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places. An ethnographic resource is a site to which cultural meaning has been attributed, the knowledge of which has been passed down

between successive generations as part of a group's cultural heritage and social identity.

In the early 1960s, the Navajo Tribal Council formally prohibited climbing on the Totem Pole and Spider Rock, and by 1970 Shiprock was included in the climbing ban. Many traditional cultural properties located off of the reservation, that is, on public land, such as those in the Valley of the Gods and Canyonlands country in particular and across the Colorado Plateau in general, were left open to recreational or other visitor-use activities. The distinction in land use between tribal and public highlights cultural differences that are grounded in religion, history, and the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. The public debate over climbing access is often couched in an either-or conflict between climbers and Indians (Roberts 1998; McLeod 2001). This either/or representation oversimplifies a complex and varied ethnographic situation.

Much has been reported on Native American opposition to extractive industries, other commercial enterprises and recreational access to traditional cultural properties on public lands such as the ones mentioned above. Far less is known about Native American accommodations to non-Indian TCP users, or of the rock climbing community's perceptions of the reasons for climbing restrictions and varying attitudes toward accommodation. While Native Americans often perceive climbing on traditional cultural properties as disrespectful, and as desecration of their sacred sites, this is not always the case. Nor is it the case that Native Americans categorically oppose access by non-Indian outsiders to traditional cultural properties they define as sacred. For instance, the Navajo grazing permit holder to the land near Shiprock regularly grants climbers permission to climb the rock. I found in my research that recreational rock climbers strongly object to the characterization of their activity as being disrespectful or as the desecration of another culture's religion. In fact, it is only a minority of climbers who knowingly climb against the wishes of Native American communities.

What emerges from this research is that climbers are often torn between two competing value systems. By one, climbers say they value

Native American cultures in a general, if often romantic sense, but by another, climbers also highly value their individual right to climb, especially on public lands. They do not see their climbing activity as being substantially different than that of Native Americans with regard to their reverence for the land. For instance, some climbers say they make a personal connection to the environment that is not too dissimilar to what they perceive is a Native American person's predisposition toward topophilia. In many ways climbers express being caught in a double-bind, a Catch-22, or as one climber put it, "between a rock and a hard place." Climb? Or show deference by not climbing? That is the question.

## Methods

This article presents an overview of the contemporary rock climbing community, one often viewed as at best insensitive to and at worst disrespectful of Native Americans, with regard to TCP access. The rhetorical and politicized context of TCP access disputes has often characterized the climbing community in an unflattering manner. An example of this can be viewed in the film *In the Light of Reverence*. And while it may be true that some vocal and adversarial climbers have helped to perpetuate this unflattering perspective, my research suggests that most climbers are willing to compromise. They desire to be respectful of others and wish to make accommodations to the cultural and spiritual needs of Native American communities. From an applied anthropological perspective, this research may on first blush appear antithetical to the goals of advocacy and land-use rights negotiations in favor of Native American communities. Yet, in terms of evidence-based evaluation and fostering good-will mediation, I think that this research offers a largely overlooked perspective of TCP access issues, and it does so in a manner that moves beyond the facile either-or, good-bad, and Native American-climber rhetoric.

This article stems from extensive interviews with sixteen climbers. The interviews were conducted at Devils Tower National Monument and Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming and Red Rocks State Park in Nevada. They took place during the summers of 2004 and 2005 with less formal discussions conducted with climbers at

Red River Gorge in Kentucky and the New River Gorge in West Virginia during the summer of 2001. Interviews with ten climbers from Durango, Colorado, supplemented the main research. Interviews varied from 20 minutes to two hours in length. To cross-check these data I spoke informally with approximately 30 other climbers in various climbing areas to check my understanding of what I had learned in the in-depth interviews. Lastly, I consulted with several individuals and climber-activists who have been instrumental in negotiating climbing access to certain Native American traditional cultural properties. As the Native American perspective has already been documented (Jostad, McAvoy and McDonald 1996; McDonald and McAvoy 1996; McPherson 1992; Redmond 1996), I did not seek Native American interviews. Supplemental background derives from several web sites, such as those of Devils Tower National Monument, the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the Access Fund, and various environmental assessments, environmental impact statements, newspaper articles, climber magazines, the archives of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the *Federal Register*.

### Project Background

The published literature is expanding with regard to TCP access on public lands and their management, and land claims with competing recreational or commercial interests. The literature derives from research in law (Burton 2002; Gonzalez 1996; Trope 1996; Wilkinson 1988), cultural preservation (Jenkins et al. 1996) history (Gulliford 2000), forest management (Dustin et al. 2002), and anthropology (King 2003; Ortiz 1996). Much of it focuses on a handful of seminal cases in the United States such as Taos Blue Lake (Bodine 1978), Devils Tower (Dustin et al. 2002), the Bighorn Medicine Wheel (Price 1994), Mount Shasta (McLeod 2001), Mount Graham (Carmichael et al. 1994), the San Francisco Peaks (Carmean 2002) among a few others (please also refer to *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Winter 1996 issue). Much of the published work examines, for instance, legal challenges, indigenous cultural perspectives, American Indian Religious Freedom Act (Moore 1991), the

Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, or Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). However, my work here focuses on the climbing community's mixed reaction to what is often legally their constitutional right of access to public lands.

As recreational rock climbing continues to expand in popularity, and as climbers seek out and develop new climbing areas, in hindsight it was only a matter of time that climbers' land-use activities abutted Native American ones. And while the vast majority of climbers obey climbing restrictions on tribal lands, there are fewer competing access restrictions on public lands. Land managers have a difficult task in mediating land-use claims and priorities. Of interest to all parties for negotiation purposes are laws related to traditional cultural properties such as Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, *Bulletin 38* of the National Register of Historic Places, and the First Amendment of the Constitution (Grimm 1997) among others. Together they provide guidance in assisting in the mediation of competing-use claims. The idea of climbers' promoting grassroots efforts is a viable alternative to governmental or legal intervention. The idea is to mediate use by introducing cross-cultural education and thus hopefully appreciation to achieve climbers' access. That approach has proven fruitful in resolving differences between differential land-use perceptions and practices.

Two case studies, those of Devils Tower in Wyoming and Cave Rock in Nevada provide contrasting and illuminating examples that have led to very different outcomes. Devils Tower offers a good lesson regarding the National Park Service's efforts in mediating a conflict that arose among climbers, tourists, and various Plains Indian communities who believe lands there to be sacred. While the land-use conflict encompassed more than the climbing community, it is the climbing community that I focus on here. In 1993, the Dakota Summit V Resolution (Number 93-11) states the following with reference to climbing:

WHEREAS, the Dakota, Lakota, Nakota spiritual teaching has always included the MEDICINE WHEEL in Wyoming, DEVILS

TOWER in Wyoming, BEAR BUTTE in South Dakota, and HARNEY PEAK in South Dakota, as primary and significant sites to our religion, and ...

WHEREAS, the Devils Tower has been subjected to similar damage from an onslaught of rock climbers and now has hundreds of steel pins pounded into the face of this sacred site, and ...

WHEREAS, these sites and many others are vital to the continuation of our traditional beliefs and values, and ...

WHEREAS, it is our legacy to protect these sites for future generations, so they too, may be able to enjoy these holy places for prayer and revitalization of Mother Earth, now ...

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that this assembly does not support efforts by Federal Land Managers to allow further destruction to these sacred sites by tourists, hikers or rock climbers (Dakota Summit 2004).

Beginning in the late 1970s several Plains Indian communities made it clear to the National Park Service (NPS) that they wished to resume holding ceremonies at or near Devils Tower, including an annual sun dance. As climbing visitation increased in the 1980s the National Park Service began drafting a climbing management plan in 1992. By then, the National Park Service was aware of Native American discontent with climbing and other tourist activities at the tower. A draft climbing management plan was opened for a public comment period that included six public meetings. As a result, the National Park Service first proposed a ban on commercial or guided climbing for the month of June, but this was contested by rock climbers and found to be unconstitutional. The National Park Service then proposed a voluntary closure for June for all non-Indian climbers and that has since been adopted. These climbers are informed upon NPS registration of Native American religious practices, that their recreational climbing activities disturbs such practices, and they are encouraged to show their respect by avoiding

climbing during the month of June. While the National Park Service was sued over this measure as well, the courts upheld this accommodation for Native American interests. The voluntary closure has proven acceptable with an estimated 80 percent drop in climbing during the month of June (<http://www.nps.gov/deto/climbing.htm>. Accessed February 16, 2004).

A very different result was reached in the Cave Rock dispute that pitted recreational climbers against the United States Forest Service, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU), and the Washoe Tribe. Here climbers believe that they have been the target of the LTBMU for limiting their access since hikers, picnickers, fishers, and other recreational users have not been so affected (<http://www.achp.gov/casearchive/casesum01NV.html>. Accessed May 4, 2004).

In 1996, the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit determined that Cave Rock was eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, and the Nevada state historic preservation officer (SHPO) concurred in a formal determination of eligibility on October 23, 1998. After a public comment period, discussion, negotiation, attempts at compromise, an environmental impact statement, the development of a Forest Service climbing plan, and Nevada state court appeals, Cave Rock was placed permanently off limits to climbers on January 28, 2005, allowing the Forest Service to implement its management plan. As climbing had not occurred here until the mid-1980s, later than other recreational uses, climbing was singled out as not having a historic presence or significance at Cave Rock and therefore did not justify protection under the National Historic Preservation Act. Climbers and the Access Fund, a non-profit climbing advocacy group, are contesting the court's decision by Judge Howard D. McKibben of the Federal District of Nevada as unconstitutional. The basis is that the government (LTBMU) and the court are favoring the Washoe religion, a violation, they say, of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. As of this writing, the Access Fund has appealed Judge McKibben's decision to a higher court.

## Voices of the Climbing Community

I now turn to the words of climbers who have an interest in TCP/sacred site claims. Their words express the frustrations, complications but also the accommodations that permeate land-access issues from their cultural perspective.

While certainly not a homogenous community, rock climbers do share some demographic and perceptual characteristics. For one, climbers I interviewed on the whole tend not to practice one particular religion, nor are they a dedicated church-going group. These climbers are predominately male (18–45), Caucasian and middle to upper-middle class. They are largely college educated, professionals, lean significantly toward liberal ideas and political positions and think of themselves as sensitive to the environment. Their self-defined environmentalist stance comes closest to describing their stated connection to and identification with what they perceive to be a Native American reverence of nature. There is a belief among some climbers that climbing offers a direct link to nature that is often equated or compared with what they think of as the basis of Native American spirituality. These points are evidenced in an ethical framework that values individual initiative, self-reliance, mental and physical strength, personal responsibility, and respect for *rock* as a non-renewable and precious resource.

Because of their self-identification with Native American's sensitivity to the environment and spirituality, some climbers are defensive and offended when Native Americans or those who sympathize with their position say that climbing is an act of desecration. At Cave Rock, for instance, one Washoe elder said that "It's a sacred site and we don't want people climbing on it and desecrating the rock. It's a place of meditation" (DeLong 2003). Some climbers counter by saying that in fact they help maintain the sacredness of the site in the face of assaults by other resource users. One simultaneously hears voices of respect but also of contempt for this Washoe community's demands for exclusive access. For instance, one climber stated that

removing the climbers from Cave Rock is like taking away the only chance of it ever being kept sacred. Climbers cleaned up Cave Rock

and have been doing so for a very long time ... As any climber knows, the public is dirty and we've been cleaning up after them for years. Cave Rock will turn to an area full of bud cans if climbers are banned. I've never once seen a person from the tribe pick up trash, tail lights, cigarette butts, etc. ... that aren't left behind by climbers (Petition On Line 2004).

Or, as another climber views things, the accusation that climbing is singled out as an act of desecration is responded to as

Politics man politics. Man you know what happened? Some words were exchanged between an ol' fellow climber and a Washoe Tribe member ... which in turn created some static and brought up some useless controversy. Get over it; do what's best for the cave. Oh, are the holes [highway tunnels] in the cave sacred too? I was just wondering if the cars that honk their horns while driving through interrupt sacred practices (Petition On Line 2004).

Another climber takes offense at being excluded from Cave Rock because of gender. She finds the gender bias disturbing, antithetical to American civil liberties and problematic because she finds the Forest Service has taken away her ability to practice her "religion." She states that since the decision of the Forest Service is to ban all climbing and remove all of the bolts at Cave Rock this

might be one of the last times I'm allowed to climb there. Why? Because I'm a woman, and my very presence in the Cave is disturbing to a group of people, the Washoe Indians, who see my climbing there as a desecration ... Of course, the Forest Service couldn't put up a sign that says, "No girls allowed." ... So instead, the Forest Service proposes ... to close Cave Rock to all climbers. But wait, since when did the Forest Service have jurisdiction to determine what public areas should be closed to aid in the practice of a specific religion? ... To me climbing is a religion, and if I am on public land I should be allowed to wear a cross, say a prayer or climb a rock. ... (Rives 2003: 20–21).

While these sentiments may not represent a majority of climbers, they do rise up in the climbing community. This is especially so when climbers think that their activities are misunderstood or misrepresented and when they perceive themselves as the unfair target of decisions by land managers who single out climbing while ignoring the impacts of other recreational activities. What is a common perspective among climbers with whom I spoke is that there is a substantial amount of stated respect for Native American TCP claims. In many cases that respect is based on the individual's sense that climbing could or should be considered a sacred, religious, meditative, and pious act, not merely an athletic one. Rather than being classified primarily as recreation, some climbers make an argument not too dissimilar from the various Native American communities who claim a sacred connection to a location. For instance,

I respect Native American ancient ways and traditions. I am very fortunate to have met a Kiowa medicine man who leads sweat lodges. I have been to countless sweats over the last few years and have developed a deep respect for the old ways. But I am also a climber. For me, going to places like Cave Rock is a sacred ceremony. It is not just gymnastics. It is a place where modern man can go to get in touch with the old ways ... to be a warrior, to observe the beauty and seasonal changes of the natural world, and to honor and respect the powers that created such beautiful places as Cave Rock. I hope the Washoe can understand our modern efforts to connect with the natural world, and that we, climbers, can come to understand the subtle appreciation and respect for the wonders of the natural world that the elders of these ancient ways have always had (Petition On Line 2004).

Another stated that

I feel it's our right to climb, for sure, but as conscientious people, we need to at least understand and respect the wishes of those who see value in the rock besides sick [very difficult] lines [named routes or paths up the rock] (LaGasse 2004: 12).

Among those I spoke with, the sentiment

that climbing is itself a spiritual activity seems to be somewhat common. For example, climbers say that

to me, climbing is my religion. When I climb I feel a sense of oneness with the rock. It is the most natural way that I have to get in touch with the sacred.

Another climber put it this way:

Climbing is a spiritual activity. It's my religion. I am connected to nature like no other thing that I do.

One person argued that he experienced something spiritual in a way that felt similar to Native Americans. He said that

by placing Devils Tower off limits to climbers means that I am being excluded from my church. I don't understand how the Park Service can tell me that I can't experience my "church" but that the Indians can. Don't get me wrong, I respect their need to have their ceremonies at the Tower. And I can live with the June voluntary closure on climbing. It just makes me mad to think that my experience is viewed as less important.

Another climber suggested that he thought that many climbers

go to Devils Tower because it is a sort of rite of passage for them. When they come from Minnesota or other Midwestern places Devils Tower represents a huge step up in challenge and commitment. It is a rite of passage because it is a way for them to test themselves, prove themselves.

Still another kind of response was articulated by some of the climbers with whom I spoke, who were aware of the historical, political, and overall mistreatment that Indian peoples have endured at the hands of the United States government and business interests. But they are also climbers who value their sport as part of their lives and who are conflicted over what they view as a difficult-to-resolve contradiction. One put it this way:

Climbing is a way of life for me. I love it. I can't live without it. If someone were to tell

me that access to my local climbing area was going to be closed down due to it being a Native American sacred site I'd be really bummed by that. I don't know what I'd do. I hope that I never have to face that one. I know other climbers have had to. I guess that my respect for Indian culture and beliefs are strong. I just don't know what I'd do. I guess you could say that I'd be stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Another climber stated that

my belief is that it is important for climbers to not be hypocrites. If a tribe has a long history in an area then a sacred rock is more important than my weekend climbing. Would I like it? Definitely not!

Still another climber articulated that

access issues in relation to sacred rocks puts me in a difficult position: I don't want to "dis" another culture's beliefs but nor do I want to give up my climbing. And if a sacred place is on public land then I have a right to do it. That's a hard question.

Many climbers cite the constitutionally mandated separation of religion and state for why restricting climber access because of Native American religion is legally problematic. While climbers continue to climb Devils Tower in large numbers during the months of May, July, and August, there has been a significant drop in climbing activity during the voluntary closure during the month of June as an accommodation by climbers to Plains Indians because of their religious practices. It is an accommodation not demanded by law, but is fostered by a cross-cultural awareness, conscientiousness and education (Dustin et al. 2002). And while the voluntary closure is imperfect in the sense that Plains Indian communities still must tolerate climbers, and climbers agree to forego climbing during a prime climbing season, the solution is also successful in that two very different user groups are being accommodated to greater or lesser degrees.

The negotiations, outcomes and ongoing management of Devils Tower and Cave Rock do not exhaust the possible methods and outcomes

of the TCP-climber access divide. I think that the climber's narratives recounted above suggest a ripe third option of climbers reaching out proactively to Native American communities to explain their sport and to negotiate and accommodate access. This third option is demonstrated in the following two examples that promise a potentially more fruitful dialogue for generating mutually satisfying accommodations resulting from direct and open communication between affected communities and cultures.

### **Two Climber-Initiated Approaches Seeking Accommodation**

In 2004 an Access Fund representative introduced a proposal to be negotiated with resident extended families of the Monument Valley community and Tribal Park on the Navajo Nation Reservation. Six discussions with the tribal park superintendent and two community meetings with elders were held to explain climbing culture to the Navajo residents of the park and to present an economic development and access plan to benefit these residents and grazing permit holders. The proposal was intended to boost tourism income and to tightly regulate climber access via a TCP permit system to such spectacular rock formations like the Totem Pole. The permitting system, use of local guide services, and access oversight were to reside in the community's hands. The Access Fund proposal was overwhelmingly accepted by Monument Valley residents with representatives of 12 families in agreement and two against. Nevertheless, the proposal eventually fell through when Navajos who live outside the Monument Valley community voted against the proposal. Their stated reason for rejecting it was that climbing would be an invasion of privacy.

Notably, rejection did not specifically relate to the sacredness of the rock formations, although presumably their sacredness did factor into some of those deciding against. Others close to the negotiations said the proposal was rejected because of differences over the permitting system and the allocation of new adventure tourist income. And while the formations in Monument Valley are considered sacred many of the residents were still willing to compromise and to allow limited and regulated climbing

access. Part of the reason for some Navajo families agreeing to the proposal was that these very same sacred rock towers have long been commercialized via television and print advertising, used as movie backdrops, climbed on for the 1970s Clint Eastwood film *The Eiger Sanction*, and commoditized as tourist attractions in a more general economic sense.

A second example comes from the Lost Rocks formation in Humboldt County in northern California where a local climber sought out and fostered negotiations with officials of the local Wintu and Yurok Tribes and with National Park Service personnel at Redwood National Park. His forthright approach all concerned has generated open discussion and the start of negotiation and accommodation. Examples of successful dialogue thus far include the name change of a rock named by climbers and listed in a guide book that Yurok elders found offensive, the "Crack House." This climber formed the Bigfoot Country Climbers Association (BCCA) and formalized his contacts with tribal and NPS representatives alike presenting an informational meeting regarding climbing culture. To that end he visited the Yurok Cultural Committee comprised of Yurok elders and discussed climbing on NPS land that is culturally important to the tribe. Most recently BCCA members have continued their dialogue on access issues, hiking trails, signage, and the like.

Climbers of the area have never climbed on Split Rock, out of respect for the Yurok, understanding that it is culturally significant to them, even though it is the largest seacliff in California on public land. They plan to dialogue further regarding removal of bolts, which are ring-like metal devices that climbers hammer into the rock face as permanent fixtures to attach ropes and gear as climbing aids when ascending and descending, from Natural Bridge on Wintu land. Currently there is a voluntary closure in effect since Natural Bridge is a particularly important historic Wintu traditional cultural property, recognized as a 19th-century massacre site of the Wintu tribe as well as a sacred site. The Access Fund provided a grant to erect a sign at Natural Bridge to convey to the public the significance of the site and the voluntary climbing closure in effect. BCCA discussions are also underway with

the Wiyot community about similar Native American concerns.

This insightful climber's approach to finding common ground is reflected in his climbing philosophy when he told me that

I climb for the holistic experience. The place is crucial. ... I firmly believe that some places should not be climbed, and that it is not a right but a privilege and responsibility [to climb].

## Discussion

The narratives speak to an internal competition of values that many climbers experience when faced with Native American TCP access issues. This research can be summarized as follows. First, in the most general sense, climbers are open to making accommodations to other cultures' traditional needs. This is not to say that such accommodation is always 100 percent. Rather, it appears that the climbing community is willing to negotiate to strike a balance between their own and others' needs. A second generalization is cultural in that climbers often view their recreational activity as a spiritual rather than merely a sporting or athletic activity. This finding was surprising to me because few if any other adventure recreational pursuits, such as skiing, kayaking, mountaineering, and canyoneering, are thought of in quite this manner to my knowledge. And while my data are highly subjective, it appears that many of the climbers I spoke with considered climbing a spiritual activity. Third, climbers' voices make clear that they are bound by a set of ethical principles that is grounded in respect for nature and Native peoples. Lastly, climbers, as staunch individualists, are sensitive to perceptions of fairness. If they sense that they are being discriminated against, being treated unfairly by land managers or the courts, and being deprived of their perceived constitutional rights, they are reluctant to accommodate, empathize or sympathize with Native American land-use needs.

Climber access to Native American TCPs, including sacred sites, raises significant questions regarding constitutional, religious, cultural and historic-preservation issues, not to mention the definition of *traditional cultural*



*property* itself. As the journalist Rick Curtis has articulated, the “sacred site or climbers’ right” controversy strikes at the heart of the citizen’s right to recreate on public (state and federal) land versus the restricted use and preservation of locations deemed historically and culturally important or sacred by Native Americans. The issue is contentious because not only are there legal implications, but ethical and moral questions as well. Given the wide range of use-interest it does appear that TCP-user compromise, dialogue, and negotiation offer the best way to deal with the various concerns of interested parties. This is so because the zero-sum, win-lose game where either a Native American community takes all or the climbing community takes all implicitly ignores one set of values for another. What works for mutual accommodation is the positive-sum, win-win game where each side understands and acknowledges the values of the other.

This research also raises questions as to the conventional definition of TCP. According to Thomas King (2003), one of the architects of the National Historic Preservation Act and the TCP definition, traditional cultural properties share the five attributes of spiritual power, customary practice, explanatory stories, therapeutic qualities, and remembrances related to social identity. He states that “Not all traditional cultural properties reflect all five; probably a few do. But every TCP reflects at least one” (King 2003: 100). As King’s definition reflects a gold standard regarding TCP negotiations, to what extent does this open the door for the climbing community to use the TCP definition to their benefit in securing access in future negotiations? In my experience, climbers seem to approach climbing areas with the attributes of practice, stories, and perhaps spiritual power in mind. That use does not have the same degree of historical depth as Native American communities do, but who is to say what constitutes cultural authenticity? How are we to define culture? On the other hand, how do we ascertain the significance and meaning of the climbers’ statements that they perceive spiritual significance in the act of climbing? Are climbers consciously or unconsciously adopting a spiritual discourse as a strategy and as a way to legitimize their activities? If unconsciously, is this discourse a product of 19th-

century romantic ideas of nature and indigenous peoples in harmony with nature? Does the climbing community represent a “genuine” or “spurious” culture? I offer no answers or conclusions to these questions but suggest that they will more than likely need to be addressed in future TCP access negotiations.

Land managers are in an unenviable position. With whom do they side in an access controversy? Where do their responsibilities lie? To what extent do operating procedures or laws determine an appropriate response? Which cultural value or historical ethic receives priority? How is this decided? Legal regulations offer the bedrock for making decisions regarding access, but mutual respect and cross-cultural education and understanding provide a humane way to address what is at best a difficult and emotion laden experience.

Applied anthropologists are also in a delicate position, if as advocates of specific cultures or communities they must take a stand or support a side. How do we make ethically informed choices? Applied advocacy can be bolstered through the understanding and appreciation of both cultures in conflict, not only the one for whom they advocate. For anthropologists, who customarily advocate for Native American rights, and those of other indigenous peoples, this paper suggests that compromise is a useful and tenable strategy when it comes to TCP/sacred sites negotiations.

## **Conclusion**

The days are long since gone when climbers such as David Brower or actors like Clint Eastwood could scale rocks on public, private, and Indian reservation land at will. Rock climbers, like other public-land users and interest groups, must contend at times with the fractious competition over a scarce or culturally significant resource. In this case, on the one hand, traditional cultural properties are a finite and non-renewable cultural resource to Native American communities. On the other hand, climbing areas are held in esteem in that climbing is often treated in a spiritual sense. Accommodation, cross-cultural education and mutual respect must be central to current and future access discussions. The Lost Rocks case study, for instance, offers an encouraging example where

these fundamental principles are currently being used to a positive conclusion. Neither climbers nor indigenous communities can afford to view their position as primary or exclusive, because legal, cultural, historical and ethical issues confound attempts at prioritizing legitimate if conflicting claims to access.

If we consider the examples of the Monument Valley and Lost Rocks negotiations, the periodic voluntary climbing ban at Devils Tower, and the voices of climbers recounted above, combined they suggest a diverse and generally less confrontational and more accommodating picture than is frequently assumed to be the norm. Both the Native American communities and the climbing community appear willing to talk and compromise. And symbolic of these findings, according to one climber's statement that

there are many more crags than I have time to visit or climb. If one of those crags is taken out of circulation, then so be it. It's a small price to pay. It's a big country, history hasn't been kind to Indians, I think stopping climbing at one area is a small price to pay for doing the right thing.

In the end, cross-cultural tolerance gained through education about the reasons, desires, history, and culture of those who hold countervailing positions to their own can lead the way in TCP access to climbing on public lands. ○

## Notes

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