

From Sacred Sites to Stealth Bombers

Bridging Cross-Cultural Boundaries

The Native American Interaction Program (NAIP) at the Nellis Air Force Base (NAFB) has completed its fifth year of interactive cultural consultations with 17 American Indian tribes and one Indian organization that represents Indian people throughout the southern Nevada area. Since 1995, Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) has managed and coordinated the NAIP for NAFB and its associated three-million-acre training range. This program combines science and culture in an effort to understand those who have gone before us. By embarking on this task, NAFB faces challenges that are in stark contrast to the day-to-day training mission of this distinct military installation. How does one convey to an Air Force Wing Commander that the Indian people believe that the air above NAFB is alive, and military jet crashes are caused when planes fly through pockets of spiritually dead air damaged from radiation originating from “angry rocks”? Such is an example of the diverging perspectives that emerge when the two worlds of the Air Force and the Indian people intersect.

Seventeen tribes and one Indian organization with demonstrated cultural and historic ties to the southern Nevada area were invited to participate in the NAIP. The program is comprised of Indian people of Southern Paiute (seven tribes), Western Shoshone (four tribes), Owens Valley Paiute (five tribes), and Mojave (one tribe) ethnic origin, as well as the Las Vegas Indian Center. Working with this many

groups could have been as challenging as breaking the military code of silence. However, this unique collection of tribal representatives has learned to work together to achieve their goals. For the past 10 years, these tribes located in Nevada, Arizona, California, and Utah have converged to work with several federal agencies. They now call themselves the Consolidated Group of Tribes and Organizations (CGTO).

By holding a large general meeting at NAFB in the spring of each year, tribal representatives from each of the 18 entities and NAFB personnel are able to come together and discuss the direction for the NAIP. At the conclusion of each meeting, the tribal representatives meet in a private executive session to formulate recommendations to the NAFB. This front-line program has led to the involvement of Indian people in

Location of the Nellis Air Force Range and associated Native American ethnic groups. Photo courtesy Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC).



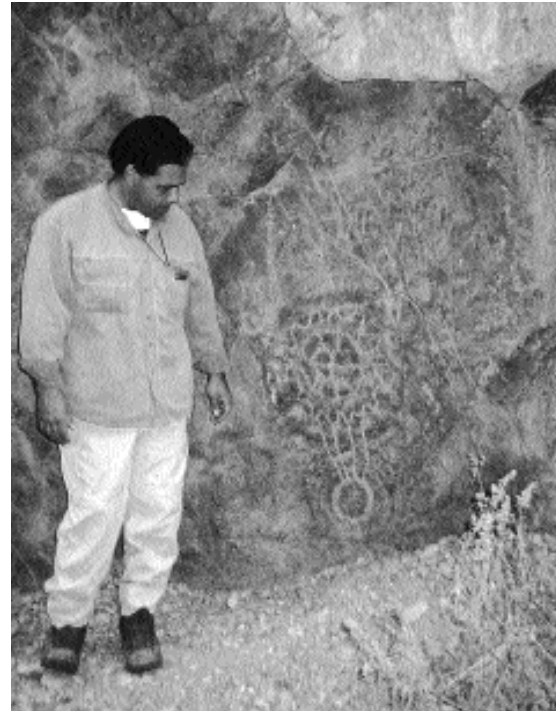
Southern Paiute representative discussing possible interpretations of rock art in Wellington Canyon. Photo courtesy SAIC.

the preparation of the NAFB Legislative Environmental Impact Statement for training range land renewal, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act consultations, and the review of numerous environmental reports. By working together, tribal representatives have made specific recommendations that have resulted in plans and actions that promote cultural and environmental stewardship of the lands comprising the Nellis Air Force Range (NAFR).

One of the first initiatives under the NAIP was to conduct a Native American ethnography project. The project was designed to include interviews of knowledgeable Indian elders and was driven by Executive Order 13007, which affirms identification, protection, and access to American Indian sacred sites located on federal lands. The Indian people maintain a holistic perspective of the world that must be considered when speaking of sacred sites. One Western Shoshone member offered up this summary:

It's important to understand the indigenous perspective of the world around us and our holistic way of thinking. As Indian people we are tied to the land, air, and water. All elements of the world, animate and inanimate, are functionally integrated. The water, air, rocks, plants, animals and people are connected. The change in one element changes the other elements. The significance of a sacred site can not be reduced to just the rock cliff with the petroglyphs. Its significance is interrelated with the creek within the canyon, the trout in the creek, the pinyon pine trees, the juniper, the bighorn sheep, the birds, and so on.

The information recorded served as the building blocks for a successful program that continues today. For example, one of the elders interviewed remembered when the airplanes originally started flying in the area. Another person remembered visiting the Stonewall Mountains on horseback after the land was withdrawn for military purposes in the 1940s. These individuals also shared information on the foods that were collected, the medicines that were used, and the ceremonies that were conducted in conjunction with the lands that currently encompass the NAFR. Efforts such as these are examples of the paramount initiative shown by NAFB in recognizing that Indian people need a forum to be able to come forward and communicate with federal agencies.



To expand on this project, each year NAFB funds small subgroups of tribal members, appointed by the CGTO, to visit various cultural resource areas on the NAFR. These site visits allow tribal representatives to access areas that have not been utilized by Indian people for more than 50 years. The tribal representatives are familiar with much of the land through stories and songs having been passed down from earlier generations. Tribal representatives are able to view the conditions of the cultural resource areas and offer suggestions on ways to protect and preserve the land. Indian people have a complex understanding of ecosystem management with deep religious overtones. By having the opportunity to visit these areas, tribal members have been able to offer prayers that in their view help to restore the natural balance of the area. At the conclusion of each trip, the participants prepare a report and recommendations to document their findings. The information gained may then be used as a basis for additional ethnographic studies and active Air Force land management and preservation efforts.

An example of this process occurred when an extensive ethnographic study was conducted on the Pintwater Cave and Wellington Canyon areas on the NAFR. A subgroup of Indian elders visited the Pintwater Cave area in January 1997, and a second group visited the Wellington Canyon area in February 1998. The sites were

documented as sacred sites and recommendations were made to the NAFB that the areas be protected from disturbance. These areas and their extensive rock art panels are viewed as being extremely important to the Indian people and a recommendation was made for additional ethnographic studies. NAFB responded to these recommendations by instituting measures to protect and preserve the locations and by issuing a contract for additional ethnographic work.

In October 1999, SAIC teamed with the University of Arizona, Tucson—Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology to conduct the ethnographic research. Indian elders and knowledgeable tribal representatives were brought to the field for interviews. Pintwater Cave is believed to have uses that may be associated with hunting, medicine, or prayer. The interviewees offered differing interpretations of the area with one member stating,

This is a power spot for vision seeking. This is definitely a medicine spot. I also believe this is a man's [medicine man] spot.

Another elder stated,

[They] came for different reasons; vision-seeking, wishing, [using] artifacts as payment for the wish. This cave has more power than the others.

Tribal representatives also offered varying interpretations of the rock art in Wellington Canyon, which consists of both petroglyphs and pictographs. One male elder stated that Wellington Canyon is a place of many religious drawings and thinks “most of them are thank-you kinds of drawings” made by those who offered thanks to the Spirit for success or good fortune. Another representative felt the place was used annually by Indian people for “doctoring purposes or where they gathered to test their powers against each other.” The results of these efforts provide NAFB with valuable information to assist in its land management and trust responsibility to the involved tribes and organizations in accordance with cultural and Native American regulations.

NAFB has also instituted a program whereby Native American monitors are employed to work with archeological field crews as surveys are conducted on the NAFR. The monitors have been trained to assist in the study efforts and are intimately involved in the fieldwork. Monitors often walk transects, flag sites, and record inter-

pretations. What may have been viewed as an adversarial relationship by some has actually led to a truly collaborative approach to archeology and the development of mutual friendships. These efforts have allowed NAFB and the archeological community to gain significant insight into Native American culture and beliefs.

During an archeological field sampling project conducted in 1999 in the Kawich Mountains on the northern reaches of the Nellis Range, Native American monitors identified an area that they described as an “adverse ceremonial area.” The monitors reported feeling something was “not quite right” as they viewed the area in question. Further investigation later revealed that an Indian family from a nearby area had indeed practiced bad medicine at this site, intending to cause great harm to others. The monitors offered a traditional prayer and appropriate offerings and have requested that a spiritual leader be brought to the location to restore balance to the area.

The CGTO may not be supportive of the complete mission of the NAFB due to environmental concerns, but they commend NAFB on its commitment to preserve and protect the numerous cultural resources the training range entails. Of the many cultures that exist in the United States, the culture of Native peoples is commonly overlooked and all too often forgotten. At the NAFB, government and Native American representatives have intertwined, leading to a revised realm of thinking that strives to unlock the mysteries of the past and preserve the cultural and spiritual landscape for tomorrow's generations.

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To commemorate Nevada Archaeology Week, May 13-19, 2001, a full-color poster titled “Native Americans and Archaeology” was prepared in honor of the Nellis AFB Native American Interaction Program. The poster depicts Native Americans participating in cultural resource management efforts on the Nellis Range.