

## Reburying History

### Backfilling at Aztec Ruins National Monument and the Power of Consultation

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**D**ialogues between national parks and associated Indian tribes are helping parks to understand and appreciate tribal concerns and thereby improve the quality of the management of their cultural and natural resources.

One outstanding example of the power of consultation is a collaboration taking place between the National Park Service (NPS) at Aztec Ruins National Monument—an Ancestral Pueblo site in northwest New Mexico, near the town of Aztec—and associated Southwestern American Indian tribes. In the following article, we will focus on two major projects involving consultation: the backfilling (i.e., the replacement of earth after an archeological excavation to prevent erosion of the site) of the park's West Ruin; and the repatriation of cultural items under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and their subsequent reburial.

It should be noted that consultative relationships have a relatively short history in the NPS. Chaco Culture National Historical Park—a larger NPS area to the south that is culturally, temporally, and geographically related to Aztec Ruins—began consulting with southwestern tribes in 1990. The park's initial efforts subsequently grew into regular twice-yearly meetings. Aztec Ruins staff attended some of these meetings, and frequently considered input that tribal representatives directed toward Chaco staff in similar actions planned at Aztec Ruins.

In 1997, the two parks officially began using the same American Indian consultation committee, because both areas share similar management issues and the same tribes are interested in both areas. As many as 25 southwestern tribes are invited to the meetings, including all the Pueblo tribes of New Mexico, the Hopi Tribe, the Navajo Nation, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and the Southern Ute Tribe. Some 30 representatives from as many as 15 different tribes have been known to attend a single meeting. Meetings provide an

important forum in which officials from both parks can present cultural and resource management issues, interpretive projects, and other concerns, and elicit tribal input.

The first plan presented to the committee was for the backfilling of the West Ruin—a 900-year-old multi-story building containing about 450 masonry rooms, which is the primary exhibit for the 65,000 visitors who come to Aztec Ruins annually.

When archeologist Earl Morris excavated much of the structure in the late teens and early 1920s, he found many rooms protected by an overburden of fill. Windblown dirt, collapsed roofs, wall fall, and other debris that had accumulated over centuries had served to protect most of the building from the deteriorating effects of weather. However, after Morris removed this stabilizing environment, he exposed the stone masonry and mud mortar to the effects of precipitation, freeze-thaw cycles, gravity, and differential fill levels between adjacent rooms. This exposure set into motion a continuing cycle of deterioration, stabilization, and repair by park workers—and deterioration beginning the cycle again.

In its 1989 General Management Plan, the park proposed to backfill portions of the site. This action would reduce the amount of exposed masonry and more effectively preserve the architecture. The project would take seven years or longer to complete, depending on funding.

However, backfilling portions of the structure would alter the appearance of and access to rooms, and be of concern and interest to many tribes. Through prior consultation, the park had learned that Aztec Ruins is a sacred ancestral site for many southwestern tribes, at which their ancestors are buried, and that they believe that the place is still inhabited by those ancestors. Several tribes mention Aztec Ruins in their migration stories, and specific clans trace their roots to the site. Some cite Aztec Ruins in particular ceremonies or regard it as the origin place for specific

ceremonies. Thus, consultation was essential, so that the tribes could learn about the project and provide input for the park's consideration.

In 1998, during the spring consultation meeting held in the town of Aztec, park staff presented the backfilling project to the Chaco Culture and Aztec Ruins American Indian Consultation Committee. The park distributed the draft Backfilling Plan to all the tribes on the committee for review. The plan described the rationale for backfilling, and indicated the targeted areas and their treatment. During the meeting, staff requested the tribal representatives' general concerns, and also focused on specific issues. One tribal representative echoed the sentiment voiced by tribal representatives at previous meetings about preferences that the park do nothing to preserve the site, and instead let the structure continue its cycle of deterioration and return to the earth. This sentiment arises from the Puebloan belief that all things, including buildings, have a life cycle that emerges from and moves back into the earth. Thus, preserving structures and artifacts frozen in time for future generations is not a desire common to Pueblo people. However, through previous consultation, the tribal representatives knew that preservation and maintenance were mandates of the National Park Service. Therefore, several tribal representatives indicated that reburial of portions of the structure, rather than continued wall repair, more closely corresponds with their belief that structures should return to the earth. Thus, from the perspective of some tribes the project was not in conflict with their beliefs.

One of the issues discussed involved the drainage path for the backfilled rooms. Surface water needed to be drained out of the rooms and away from the structure. To accomplish this, the park considered two options. The first option would route drains in the fill of each room so that the drains would travel subsurface and exit below the foundations of the walls, some two-to-four feet deep. The second option would route drains higher in the room fill, so that drains would pass through holes in walls where needed. The first option could disturb unexcavated deposits and possible burials. The second option would destroy original wall fabric in some places. The park presented the two options to the tribal representatives, who clearly preferred that the park avoid ground disturbance and breach walls where necessary. Based on the committee's input, the park abandoned the option of using deep drains and

designed more shallow drainage systems within rooms that used existing wall openings and required some penetration of walls.

The second plan, presented to the committee at a later meeting, involved inadvertent discoveries that might result from the backfilling. NAGPRA regulations require that agencies, in consultation with tribes, develop a plan of action regarding the treatment, recording, and disposition of any inadvertent discoveries or planned excavations that might result from any park action. The park asked for and considered tribal concerns in finalizing this plan.

At the same time that the park began the backfilling, it was in the process of repatriating the remains of 125 individuals and 176 associated funerary objects to the Pueblos of Acoma, Zuni, and Zia—a very important action for the park and the tribes. Consultation committee representatives had repeatedly expressed their desire that their ancestors who were being stored in boxes be returned to the earth as quickly as possible. Repatriation was the necessary step to allow this reburial to occur. After transferring custody of the items to the three tribes through repatriation, the park and the repatriating tribes worked closely together to accomplish the reburial at the park. Together, they developed a scope of work, and set a date for reburial. The park transported the remains from National Park Service repositories in Santa Fe and Tucson. One mild day in the winter of 1999, with the participation of religious and tribal leaders representing several tribes, the remains were finally re-interred. The park and the Pueblos of Acoma, Zuni, and Zia worked hard—together—to plan and accomplish this re-interment action.

The park learned during these projects that consultation is much more than a legal requirement. Indeed, productive consultation is a dialogue among individuals having varied personalities and diverse backgrounds, who work hard to achieve mutual understanding. Mistakes are made, disagreements arise, misunderstandings sometimes occur, and the process can consume more time than expected. But when the individuals continue to participate in an atmosphere of mutual respect, actions can be achieved that have far-reaching implications for the tribes and the care of the park.

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