



# ***After the Smoke Clears: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Assessing the Effect of Range Fires on Traditional Cultural Properties.***

**Project #  
07-370**

## **Background:**

During the summer of 2006 two large fires, the Tracer Fire and the Old Chicago Fire, damaged over 17,000 acres of grasslands and mixed shrub land at Wyoming Army National Guard's Camp Guernsey Training Area, in Platte County, Wyoming. In addition to affecting military training activities and impacting the natural ecosystem, the fires burned across hundreds of previously documented cultural resources.

Standard federal agency fire damage assessment procedures generally require archaeologists to survey areas burned by range fires, identify and evaluate archaeological and historic sites in the area of effect, and assess the effects of the fire on historic properties. These procedures are adequate for most archaeological properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) under Criterion D (have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history).

Considering the effects of fire and fire-fighting activities on other types of cultural resources, such as sacred sites and Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs), is more complex. The standard procedures may not be as effective for assessing damage to sites considered by American Indian tribal representatives to be sacred or valued for their traditional cultural importance.

TCPs differ from archaeological properties in the criteria that make them culturally significant or eligible for the NRHP. TCPs are eligible for the NRHP not because of their research potential but because of their association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community. They are often key to a group's history or important for maintaining the cultural identity of the community. Native American TCPs take many forms. They can cover entire landscapes or be confined to a specific location. For example, the sandbars along the Northern Rio Grande in New Mexico are considered TCPs because they have been used for ritual purposes by members of Sandia Pueblo for centuries. Landscapes where sacred plants are collected can also be considered TCPs. Localized outcrops of hematite (red ocher), gathered by Native Americans and used in ceremonies for millennia, are typically regarded as sacred. A rock shelter may be considered a TCP if it contains rock art that indicates a god or spirit resided there or if ancestral burials are present. Rock art itself may be a TCP if recognized by an American Indian group as having high artistic value or sacred qualities. These properties are

intricately tied to communities and, as such, damage to them is best assessed by community members. This difference dictates that adequate procedures should be developed to assess fire damage to TCPs.

## **Objective:**

The objective of this project is to develop a set of guidelines for assessing fire damage to identified TCPs and develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for military installations to follow before, during, and after TCPs have been impacted by fires.

## **Summary of Approach:**

We followed a six step process to complete the objective of this project. The first step was to collect and synthesize existing data on fire and fire impacts. Next, we organized a symposium where Native Americans associated with TCPs worked with archaeologists and land managers to determine proper damage assessment methods. The data gleaned from the symposium was then synthesized into a draft SOP. The fourth step included review of the draft SOP by symposium participants. The fifth step in the project was to revise the SOP based on input from tribal members, archaeologists, and land managers. The sixth step was the creation and distribution of the final document to Legacy program, tribal members, and land management agencies that participated.

## **Benefit:**

This project aims to provide DoD land managers with a cross-cultural approach for planning for, managing and assessing damage to American Indian sacred sites and TCPs impacted by range fires. Fire damage assessment processes are usually developed as reactive steps following range fires. We believe that a proactive approach where standard procedures are developed and in place prior to the need will result in fire damage assessments of Native American sacred sites and TCPs being completed in a cost-effective, timely, and culturally sensitive manner. Further, protecting traditional cultural sites prior to and during fires and assessing post-fire damage are issues that will continue to increase as more TCPs are recorded on DoD lands and as arid conditions persist across parts of the country. Therefore, this project benefits the DoD by creating SOPs that can be used across military services by any installation that has TCPs under its jurisdiction. The military also benefits in this project from the support of the Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management. These federal agencies and specifically the individuals who volunteered

to support this project are knowledgeable about range fire issues. Their participation enhanced the final product.

### **Accomplishments:**

The discussions during the symposium brought forward a number of important issues and differences in cultural perspectives.

It was quickly apparent that land managers and Native Americans have different perceptions of fire. Native American representatives noted that protection of cultural resources from fire should be a priority, but not at all costs. For example, human attempts to control fire were seen as acts of arrogance that often result in more damage than necessary. Multiple individuals stated that it was better to let a fire burn than to inadvertently damage a site while trying to stop it.

The dichotomy between the attitudes of many federal land managers and tribes was further evidenced in their basic concept of fire. Tribal members indicated that fire is not bad. It is a part of the natural order. It should be embraced as an agent of change and not viewed as an agent of destruction.

The Native American participants also made it clear that the SOP would be incomplete if it did not have three parts: Pre-fire, Fire, and Post-fire. Although a post-fire damage assessment was the focus of the meeting, it was evident that prevention and planning were fundamental to the overall process.

#### **Suggested Pre-fire Measures:**

- Planning to avoid potential damage to TCP resources.
- Fuel should be reduced around rock art panels.
- Fire retardant fabric should be available to cover and protect the rock art in a range fire situation.
- Use of controlled burns as a preventative tool.
- Installations should develop fire-specific zones: A) areas where no fire suppression activities should take place; B) zones where no heavy equipment is allowed but where hand tools are permitted, and C) zones where there are no fire suppression restrictions in place.

#### **Suggested Measures During a Fire:**

- Qualified Native American representatives should be notified and dispatched to the fire.
- Tribal Representatives should be consulted on and monitor fire suppression activities. (For example, the tribal representatives suggested that chemical retardants or suppression aids should not be used in the area of rock art.)

#### **Suggested Post-fire Measures:**

- Once the fire is completely contained, a damage assessment should be completed.
- Damage assessments and any rehabilitation plans for TCPs should include consultation with qualified tribal representatives.
- Consultation would consist of a formal consultation meeting including field visits to the affected TCPs.

The overall consensus was that consultation with tribes is necessary for all aspects of TCP management, including issues related to fires. Consultation should occur prior to a fire for planning purposes, during a fire for preservation purposes, and after wildfire incidents for damage evaluation. TCPs are associated with cultural practices of a living community and are often important for maintaining the cultural identity of the community. Land managers must take this relationship seriously and embrace consultation in fire management decisions.

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