

Before the Wilderness: Native Peoples and Yellowstone

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Intro

- Nineteen heavily-armed explorers, settlers and prospectors journeyed through the region in 1870, resulting in the first official Yellowstone expedition
- Conversation around the campfire that night led to the proposal of setting the area aside as a great National Park, with no private ownership
- Encounter with local Crow hunters that same day also raised questions about the purpose of the expedition
 - Other Native American groups (Bannock and Shoshone) likely also encountered the Washburn explorers on their journey
- Never before had a group of explorers spent such a lengthy amount of time in the region
- This expedition marked a potential changing of the landscape and its resources for the local Native American peoples
- The Washburn exploration party spotted Indian camps on multiple occasions
 - Relied on pre-existing Indian trails and blazed their own path through thick timber
 - Discovered abandoned tepee, game run, and stacks of lodge poles
- Dismissed evidence of Indians as 'vanished' and the wilderness 'pristine'
- Believed Indians would steer clear of geysers, attributing it to 'Satan'
- Ignored sources of first information from Native tribes and evidence of Indian camps in geyser basins

Yellowstone's Cultural Landscape Before the Historic Era

- Evidence of human use of the land in Yellowstone dates back to the end of the last Ice Age

- Changes in climate and the environment, along with cumulative human impact, caused the extinction of ancient species such as mammoth, horse, camel, and bison

- Subsistence patterns developed around the hunting of smaller game, fish, birds, and gathering of plants, roots, berries, legumes, etc. which continued until the late nineteenth century

- People also from the eastern and western slopes of the Rocky Mountains, as well as from distant locales, utilized and traded items in and around the area

- Obsidian Cliff in the park is littered with quarries and native-made pottery residues, showing the importance of the material and the potential for far reaching trade

- Yellowstone attracted both distant travelers and indigenous groups due to its many geysers and fumaroles and held spiritual and cultural importance.

- Native peoples believed that Yellowstone's thermal features possessed spiritual powers and many still attribute special healing properties to the hot mineral waters. They also left small offerings beside or within the springs, a practice that likely dates back thousands of years.

- Yellowstone's naturally hot water and steam also provided a unique resource for cooking and cleaning and for treating certain materials to make them more pliable.

- Many native peoples went to the geyser basins to pray and Yellowstone's high mountain peaks often served as important vision quest sites for various groups over long periods

- Fire was a major tool used to shape and manipulate the environment of pre-Colonized North America

- Intentionally lit fires served multiple purposes, ranging from creating savannas favored by ungulates, to clearing campsites, and controlling insect pests

- The use of fire also reduced the risk of massive wildfires like those that plague western forests today

- Native peoples hunted certain animals and took measures to control and augment certain species
- Foraging and harvesting food plants and the rudimentary cultivation or elimination of certain shrubs and tubers created human-dependent species
- In the past century, some of these unwatched plants have become locally extinct, or diminished to small, neglected colonies

The Undiscovered Peoples of Yellowstone

- Many peoples inhabited and maintained the Yellowstone area before its “discovery” in 1870, including members of the Eastern and Northern Shoshone
 - These peoples were loosely associated and distinguished themselves by the temporary and long-term ecological adaptations that particular families and bands made
- By the end of the fifteenth century, the Shoshone were firmly established in the region, and acquired horses from Comanche relatives in the early eighteenth century
- This new culture of equestrian plains nomadism was soon driven back by other plains groups into the mountains, where the Shoshone developed a hybrid culture based on buffalo hunting and older patterns of alpine and subalpine hunting, fishing and gathering
- The seasonal migrations of the equestrian Shoshone followed the movements of game animals, salmon runs and important plant ripening
- Intertribal gatherings such as the fur-trade rendezvous in the 1820s-30s and late summer camas harvests in Idaho and Montana took place, which broke down into smaller bands in late autumn and headed toward the mountains for winter
- Shoshone and Bannock mixed and camped together often in the Rocky Mountains and Plains
 - These two tribes were difficult for non-Indians to distinguish

- The mixed communities primarily moved around by horse
 - Had more contact with non-Indians and built up strong resentment against settlers
- One group, the Tukudeka, did not adopt the horse and stayed mostly in the mountain areas
 - They traded, hunted, and intermarried with other Shoshone & Bannock
- Compared to their more numerous & powerful relatives, Tokedeka were seen as impoverished hermits
 - They relied on dogs for transportation, were armed with bows and arrows, and mostly lived peacefully and contentedly
- The Sheep Eaters traveled in small groups and relied on the pursuit of deer, elk, and bighorn sheep for sustenance, supplemented with various plant foods and other small game.
- The Mountain Crow, the largest of the three subdivisions, were also regular visitors in the area, visiting to hunt, gather plants, pasture their horses, and seek spiritual help.
 - The Crow forebears may have discovered the area as early as 500 years ago, and began making use of it regularly a few centuries down the line.
- By the time of early 19th-century trading, the Crow had come to be known as the "Rocky Mountain Indians"
- The Crow people relied heavily on the mountains, as exemplified by a speech given by the noted chief, Arapooash.
 - The Great Spirit placed the Crow country in an ideal location with the snowy mountains and sunny plains providing all of the necessary resources for the people to survive.
 - The Crow differentiated themselves from other tribes due to their frequent proximity to the Yellowstone area, as it served as one of their primary commissaries.

- In the late eighteenth century, equestrian plains tribes, like the Blackfeet, began to travel to the future park to hunt beaver, or even to steal the caches of American trappers to then sell to British traders.
- Other intermontane groups, such as the Nez Perce, Salish, Kalispel, and Coeur d'Alene, also travelled through Yellowstone on their way to buffalo grounds and trading centers.
- As western tribes were forced to settle on reservations, the only groups left combining Yellowstone into their frequent travels were the Shoshone, Bannock, and Crow.
- Pre-18th century, there were approximately 8,000 Shoshone and Mountain Crow peoples living in the Yellowstone area
 - By the 19th century, the populations had decreased significantly due to disease and conflict with other tribes
 - Despite population decline, Yellowstone area was still used by Shoshone, Bannock, and other western tribes competing for shrinking buffalo herds and elk herds
 - Crow peoples used the Yellowstone River as refuge from Sioux
- Increasingly heavily armed Sioux made it difficult for the Mountain Crow to hunt buffalo on the plains, so they turned to Yellowstone as a source of food

The Reservation Era

- The United States recognized native rights to the Yellowstone area in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, with several tribes setting geographic parameters of future land cession agreements and a secure guarantee of American rights to travel across Indian lands.
- The eastern third of the future park area was part of the Crow nation, while the northern section was included in the Blackfeet's tribal lands and the western section was recognized as belonging to the Shoshone.

- In 1868, the Crow and Shoshone negotiated treaties with the United States that allowed for occupation and development of most of the present-day national park.

- The Eastern Shoshone negotiated with the US to create a "permanent" reservation in the Wind River valley, and another for the Bannock and Shoshone in southeastern Idaho in 1869.

- Although a similar agreement was made for the Northern Shoshones, Bannacks, and Sheepeaters in 1875, it was not ratified. However, executive order established a small reservation on the Lemhi River in 1875.

- Two ratified treaties stipulated that all tribal members had the right to hunt unoccupied areas of the US, including the future Yellowstone park area.

- Approx. 200 Tukudeka were estimated to inhabit the Yellowstone area.

- Trappers rarely ventured into the park area and only a handful ever recorded their experiences.

- The creation of the national park in 1872 increased native use of the area.

- Large and small bands of Crow entered the northern portion of the park on the same trail previously used by the Washburn expedition in 1870.

- Shoshone, Bannock and other groups from Idaho, Montana and Wyoming made frequent trips to the new park to hunt, gather, take the waters, and visit relatives.

- In the late 19th century, Yellowstone National Park was a game-rich environment that Native Americans increasingly used

- The dwindling buffalo population was mainly caused by extensive hunting by white hunters.

- Government officials first began to express concern over native use of the park in the late 1870s.

- The Bureau of Indian Affairs attempted to limit the native tribes' rights to the off-reservation land.

- At a meeting with the Crow in August 1873, the government treaty commissioners realized that the tribe still considered Yellowstone and the surrounding area to be part of their homeland.

- The Crow relied heavily on the Yellowstone region for subsistence, regularly hunting and collecting plants there.

- Their agent complained in 1877 that the Crow had no regard for the restraints of civilization.

- Miners diminished game in the western side of the reservation, leading to the decline of Crow use of the northeastern portion of Yellowstone.

- Commercial and native hunting put a strain on the remaining game animals, resulting in the near extinction of the buffalo - causing the Crow to become almost solely dependent on the Agency ration.

- With the death of Blackfoot, the Crow were weak and disunited, leading to their cession of the western fifth of their reservation in 1880.

- The Tukudeka remained in Yellowstone until 1879.

- Equestrian Shoshone used the park on a seasonal basis and the death of Blackfoot weaned their ability to present a united voice.

- Mining camps eliminated important hunting and gathering areas but the southeastern portion of the park still harbored a wealth of plant and animal resources.

- Bands from Wind River, Fort Hall, and Lemhi reservations visited the park until the end of the century.

- Increased Tourism and new settlements outside the park caused an encroachment on native use of the park

Discussion Questions

- How did Native Americans interact with and shape the landscape of Yellowstone before it became a national park?
- What were the impacts of contact between Native Americans and Euro-American settlers on Yellowstone's ecosystem?
- In what ways did Native Americans use the resources and landscapes of Yellowstone before it became a national park?
- To what extent do Native American knowledge and traditions influence current management practices in Yellowstone?
- What were the consequences of Yellowstone becoming a national park on the relationship between Native American cultures and the landscape?
- How did Western notions of conservation shape the history and management of Yellowstone? -
- What current challenges does the ongoing recognition and protection of Yellowstone's Native American cultural heritage present today?