



Prehistoric Resources

RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

The prehistoric resources of Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area (NRA) helped establish the regional cultural chronology for the Northwestern Plains. For approximately 10,000 years, the Bighorn Canyon area was a natural corridor for travel and trade between the prairie, foothills, and mountains and basins. Trails in the area were part of a larger, complex prehistoric regional trail system which provided links to bison hunting grounds in the northern Bighorn Basin, as well as tool material resources in Yellowstone. The Bad Pass Trail, which runs north and south through the park, continued to be used and modified through historic times. Domestic sites in the area, including stone circles and rock shelters, were also used through historic times and document changes in social and ritual life

patterns. Reassessments of sites recorded in the late 1960s early 1970s are also being conducted to determine actual physical locations, update site significances for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, and make future management decisions. Site information is entered into a National Park Service database of archaeological resources intended to protect sites from collecting, vandalism, and unauthorized excavation or removal of artifacts.



Figure 2. Stone Circle site in southern Bighorn Canyon.



Figure 1. Route of the Bad Pass Trail.

Discussion

Since 2003, the number of known sites in Bighorn Canyon NRA has doubled. An updated inventory of prehistoric and historic cultural resources is being conducted 3,000 acres have been surveyed over 5 years. It is now estimated that there are over 2,000 archaeological sites in the park. The Pretty Creek Collection, which includes over 240,000 artifacts and is the only complete collection in the park, has been inventoried, cataloged, and curated. This collection is available and accessible for research. Archaeological resources of Bighorn Canyon NRA are also affected by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990; the Northern Arapahoe, Eastern Shoshone, Crow, and Northern Cheyenne have expressed interested in open communication with the park to proceed with NAGPRA consultations.



Figure 2. Diagram of Stone Circle site.

Status and Trend in Bighorn Canyon

Little archaeological work was conducted in Bighorn Canyon NRA after the 1960s and 1970s salvage surveys related to the construction of Yellowtail Dam. Archaeological assessments resumed in 2003 and include the documentation and curation of the backlog collection of salvage survey sites. New assessment techniques are used in surveys including geophysical subsurface surveys which help determine areas for excavation and understanding site

