

Ethnography

RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

Yellowstone's location at the convergence of the Great Plains, Great Basin, and Plateau Indian cultures means that many tribes have a traditional connection to the land and its resources (Fig. 1). For thousands of years before the park was established, it was a place where Indians hunted, fished, gathered plants, quarried obsidian, and used the thermal waters for religious and medicinal purposes. Yellowstone's ethnographic resources are the natural and cultural features that are integral to how a group of people identifies itself. They include sites, plant and animal species, and objects associated with routine or ceremonial activities, migration routes, or the group's history that have an importance distinct from that recognized by other people. Federal law requires the National Park Service to consult with Yellowstone's associated tribes on a government-to-government basis on decisions about American Indian resources that are held "in trust" by the U.S. government.



Nez Perce tribal members in traditional regalia ride along the Firehole River during a memorial ceremony in 2004.

Trends in Yellowstone

Documentation of ethnographic resources and issues is relatively new at Yellowstone. The park's ethnography program, which has been in place since 2000, has two major components: facilitating ethnographic research for use in park planning, resource management, and interpretation; and maintaining effective relationships with the park's associated tribes so that their perspectives can be considered in park management decisions. The first tribes to request association came forward in 1996; by 2003, 26 tribes were formally associated with Yellowstone.

Since 2002, park managers have met periodically with tribal representatives to exchange information about ethnographic resources. The tribes have requested to participate in resource management and decision-making, to conduct ceremonies and other events in the park, and to collect plants and minerals for traditional uses. They are most concerned about the management of bison that leave the park; many of these tribes' ancestors depended on bison for physical and spiritual sustenance and continue to see their survival as tribes as linked to that of the bison.

Discussion

Yellowstone is one of five pilot sites for the National Park Service's Ethnographic Resources Inventory database. As a result of research and consultation with the tribes, the database contains information about more than 400 ethnographic resources in Yellowstone. More is being learned about Greater Yellowstone's ethnographic resources through 11 research contracts with historians, anthropologists, and tribes. A videotape and report documenting the uses and cultural significance of wickiups in what is now Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and Shoshone and Bridger-Teton national forests will be used to support tribal recommendations on wickiup preservation. Tribal representatives have also been involved in discussions about how to interpret the Yellowstone segment of the Nez Perce National Historic Trail and the associated sites and events of the 1877 Nez Perce War for park visitors.

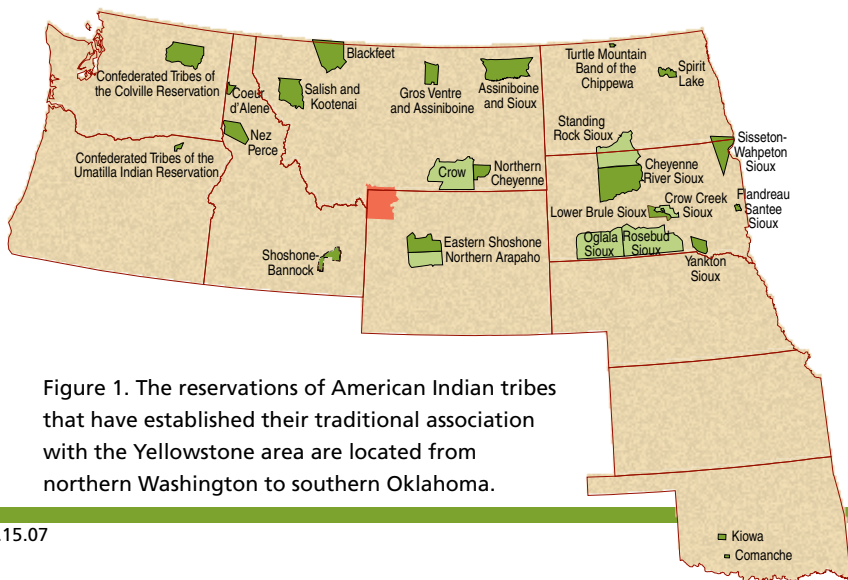


Figure 1. The reservations of American Indian tribes that have established their traditional association with the Yellowstone area are located from northern Washington to southern Oklahoma.