

Montana opinion: Thoughts on what makes a place holy

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Recently, gatherings have been held at both Chief Mountain near Glacier National Park and the Sweet Grass Hills in northcentral Montana by individual Blackfeet tribal members and their non-native allies to support the protection of these places from potential oil, gas and mineral development.

A Great Falls Tribune article Sept. 27 also described a new alliance of nonprofits to protect the Badger-Two Medicine area within the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

In each of these instances, the promoters described these places as either “sacred” or “holy.” But what do they mean when they use these words?

Unfortunately, in newspaper articles people describe places important to American Indians as sacred and often their descriptions seem so generic that they border on meaningless. It is difficult to understand why people consider certain places sacred, especially when they are a mountain or a hill.

What makes a place sacred or holy? We know that humans have revered natural places for millennia. Religious scholars state that human reverence for a place can be boiled down to two reasons: 1) The place is the home, birthplace or burial place of a sacred or holy being; or 2) the place is a shrine created for an important deceased human or significant event, such as a battle or massacre.

Because the Blackfeet are the longest-known residents of this place we now call Montana, they have numerous places across the landscape that fall into one of these two categories. And although the Blackfeet respect the natural world, they do not believe that all places fall into the extra-special category of “sacred” or “holy” — only certain places. Each of these special places or sacred places has a complex history, a story and often specific religious rituals, songs and taboos.

Chief Mountain or Ninaastako, for example, is the home of Thunder or Ksiitsikómiipi'kssii, a supernatural being “sacred” or “holy” to the Blackfeet. The Thunder holds an important position within the hierarchy of sacred beings revered by the Blackfeet because it has power over various natural phenomena, such as lightning and rain.

Thunder's return each spring from its annual migration south was an important time for the Blackfeet. At this time, the Blackfeet hold their Thunder pipe ceremonies, observing the beginning of a new year and the renewal of life on the dry arid prairies.

After a long, difficult winter, the Thunder provided the essential ingredient that historically allowed the Blackfeet to live a rich productive life on the plains — rain. With rain came thick abundant grasses for the bison and other animals, large bushes full of berries, medicinal plants and lodgepole pine trees for tipis.

Thunder and rain helped produce all of the principal foods of the Blackfeet. Without rain the Blackfeet would have no food, medicines or tools. In addition, lightning helped create fires that provided the ecological balance necessary for continued plant growth both on the prairies and in the mountains.

What makes Chief Mountain a sacred place? The answer is easy. It is the home of a supernatural being. It

is the home of Ksiitsikómiipi'kssii or Thunder, a sacred being who literally brings life to the prairies. Communication with Thunder through ceremonies and protection and reverence for the home of Thunder are essential. And similar to Mount Sinai of the Old Testament, certain taboos about human presence, human activity and behavior exist that ensure reverent conduct while in Chief Mountain's presence.

Why should we care?

Just as the Bible, Torah or Koran are sacred texts rendering religious stories of places, people and events of the past, the physical landscape of Montana is also a "sacred text" providing the Blackfeet a complete story of their religion, their history and their relationship with the natural world. The destruction of the ancient Blackfeet landscape can be seen as a destruction of their sacred text.

This is why individual Blackfeet, along with their non-native allies, are working together to protect Chief Mountain, the Sweet Grass Hills, the Badger-Two Medicine and other areas from future development.

Why call a place sacred?

Sacred is sometimes the most uncomplicated word to use when describing a complicated history of human connection to the landscape.

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