

Contested Landscapes of Navajo Sacred Mountains

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Sacred mountains are integral to the Navajo worldview, yet their land use is often incongruous with their spiritual significance. Nearly all of the land of the six massifs that are deeply symbolic within Navajo origin stories is located beyond the Navajo Reservation on federal land. This paper compares Navajo symbolism to land use at Blanca Peak (CO), Mount Taylor (NM), San Francisco Peaks (AZ), Hesperus Mountain (CO), Huerfano Mountain (NM), and Gobernador Knob (NM). Each mountain has multicultural symbolism and land use that imprints several layers of meaning upon the peaks. Non-Navajo uses include transmission towers, ski areas, mineral development, and mountaineering, whereas Navajo use includes visits to collect plants and soil for ceremonies and to connect with spiritual powers. Public land management attempts to balance contrasting environmental perceptions, but competing resource demands and mountain aesthetics often create contested landscapes. Keywords: Navajo (Diné), mountains, sacred places, contested landscapes, public land management, American Southwest, environmental ethics.

On the way down the sacred mountain I meet a group of Navajo schoolchildren, chattering their way along the steep and forested path. Weary from the icy and snowy stretches of trail that took me to the summit of the San

Francisco Peaks, I stop to pass time with one of the adult leaders. His first words, "How far to heaven?" strike a chord with my purpose of climbing that day: to gain a better understanding of the landscape character and Navajo

symbolism associated with the mountain and to compare its land use with its cultural meaning. His name is Norman Jensen, and he is leading this group from Tuba City, Arizona, to visit each of the Navajo sacred mountains. He says most kids are unaware that there are sacred mountains, so they are starting with the basics of where the mountains are, how they deserve respect, and how people can connect to and appreciate their spiritual power. Their goal that day is not to reach the top, but rather to reach a point with a view toward Agassiz Peak, second-highest summit in the massif, and the ski area facilities that snake their way up the mountain. Here they will see first-hand the scale of development that is possible on a sacred mountain, yet still feel for themselves the spiritual power that remains. Norman and I finish chatting about the interpretations that are possible of a sacred mountain, and depart with mutual wishes to "walk in beauty," the Navajo phrase implying a complete and harmonious spiritual connection with the environment. But before each of us leaves the mountain that day we will see far

different visions expressed in the landscape of what constitutes walking in beauty.

Among the most ecologically diverse landscapes on Earth, mountains evoke emotions ranging from sheer terror to glorious inspiration. Billions connect to peaks in a spiritual way, finding them integral to their worldview and daily lives (Bernbaum 1990). High peaks also serve as multifaceted cultural symbols, representing everything from mineral resources to sacred beliefs, from recreation to community identity (Blake 1999a). Norman Jensen's group illustrates the potential individual and cultural significance of mountains to the Navajo or *Diné*, the People, the most populous reservation-based American Indian nation in the United States, who also occupy the reservation with the largest land area (Griffin-Pierce 2000). Within the Navajo homeland nearly all aspects of the natural world have cultural meaning, but mountains are especially significant in oral traditions and ceremonies, forming the cornerstone of a Navajo sacred geography (Reichard 1950; Jett 1992; Jett 2001). Navajo landforms are

deeply embedded in the image of the American Southwest, resulting in an increasing appreciation and awareness of sacred place symbolism (Byrkit 1992; Lloyd 1995), yet the land use of the Navajo sacred mountains is often incongruous with their symbolism. Furthermore, little understanding exists of the syncretic processes that bind people to the sacred peaks and how land use reflects the divergent attitudes that achieve landscape expression.

This article examines the contested landscapes of six Navajo sacred mountains by describing the Navajo symbolism, comparing secular and sacred land uses, and exploring several dimensions of land use conflicts. Concluding the article are visions of what the future could hold for the Navajo sacred mountains. By examining the six most deeply symbolic Navajo sacred mountains, rather than only the four that symbolize the outer limits of the Navajo homeland (e.g., Goodman 1982), a more complete and integrative view is possible of land use and landscape symbolism. Almost all of the land of the six mountains is located beyond the Navajo Reservation on federal land managed

by the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service, resulting in a distinctive set of multi-cultural symbols for these places and offering a case study for the power of sacred symbolism and mountain iconography to cross borders in the Southwest. A review of secondary literature sources explains Navajo symbolism, but fieldwork forms the central element of this study. The sacred mountain landscapes were intimately explored several times by foot over the past ten years. The land use information on public land maps was compared with first-hand observations, and discussions were held with land managers and the Navajo. While public visitation could be interpreted to diminish the perceived power of holy places, an understanding beyond the Navajo culture of the sacred mountains is necessary to ensure their proper respect and protection. Furthermore, specific and vulnerable sacred sites should be kept secret, but little objection exists to the discussion and knowledge of major sacred landmarks (Jett 1995).

The implications of this study run deep for southwestern land-

scape images, Navajo cultural identity, and the management of sacred mountains. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 mandates access to sacred places and the consideration of such sites in federal land-use directives (Kelley and Francis 1994; Jett 1995). A May 24, 1996 Presidential Executive Order further charges each federal agency with accommodating American Indian access to and ceremonial use of sacred sites and preserving the physical integrity of the sites. Seemingly clear directives may nevertheless be widely interpreted. Contested landscapes evolve when differing environmental ethics and cultural identities collide in places with deep meaning. Although the attitudes of any one culture may not be stereotyped into neatly defined packages, such as Navajos always supporting the option of least development or non-Indians always favoring mineral development, this article is mostly concerned with the relationship of sacred places to Navajo cultural identity, for the believers in Navajo religion perceive the greatest risk of loss in the spiritual power of these places (Jett

1995). To harm sacred land is a violation causing the loss of healing power and the ability of a mountain to restore harmony to Navajo lives (Michaelson 1995).

Navajo Sacred Mountains

More than repositories of spiritual power, mountains are elemental in Navajo prayers and chants (O'Bryan 1993) as well as the ceremonial Blessingway (Wyman 1970), Beautyway (Wyman 1957), and Mountainway (Wyman 1975). Mountains also create symbolic boundaries, repeat a favorable pattern of protection and well-being throughout *Diné Bikéyah*, the land of the Navajo, and embody powerful mnemonic devices to conjure the thoughts and lessons associated with places (McPherson 1992). Some Navajo places have a greater sanctity according to their prominence in Navajo events and the importance of their associated supernatural beings (Jett 1992). Mountains were the first places created in this world; thus here the Holy People are most evident or accessible to mortal pilgrims, and mountains connect people with their origin and anchor the correct pursuit of the Navajo

ways of life (Kelley and Francis 1994).

The significance of mountains to the Navajo is even more tangibly evident in the views of and from mountains as well as the collection of soil, stones, herbs, and water (Jett 1995). Mountain soil symbolizes the Earth's flesh (Jett 2001) and the mountain soil bundle (*dah nídilyééh*) carried by traditional Navajos represents the medicine bundle of First Man, out of which came all life (Gill 1981). Mountain products are collected by Navajo singers (medicine men) for ceremonial and healing use (Mayes and Lacy 1989); the spiritual power of stones from the sacred mountains was recognized in their use for the altar in the Crownpoint, New Mexico Catholic Mission (Guterson 1997). Singers make regular pilgrimages to the sacred mountains to rejuvenate the Blessing-way prayers (Jett 1992) and to pray for relief from drought (Marston 1996). Sacred mountains are not isolated places in the Navajo worldview; they draw additional significance from interrelations that are manifest in intervisibilities, the view of one sacred place from another. One

can only imagine the long-range vistas possible in the days before fossil fuel emissions — even in recent years I have seen landmarks 125 miles distant on the Colorado Plateau.

Six earthly mountains manifest the most significant places in the Navajo origin and worldview (O'Bryan 1993; Kelley and Francis 1994; Frey 1998; Linford 2000). Additionally, the Blessing-way ceremony, the backbone of Navajo religion and most revered ritual, has six important peaks (Wyman 1970). Four of these sacred mountains are aligned in cardinal directions on the boundaries of the historic core of Navajo settlement in the Southwest (*Dinétah*), supporting the Navajo sky and serving as the energy source for animate beings (Farella 1984). Two other sacred mountains, Huerfano Mountain and Gobernador Knob, are at the center of the homeland in New Mexico (Figure 1). The four cardinal mountains and their associated colors are Blanca Peak, Colorado, representing the white sky of sunrise to the east; Mount Taylor, New Mexico, deep blue as the midday sky in the south; San Francisco Peaks, Arizona, suffuse

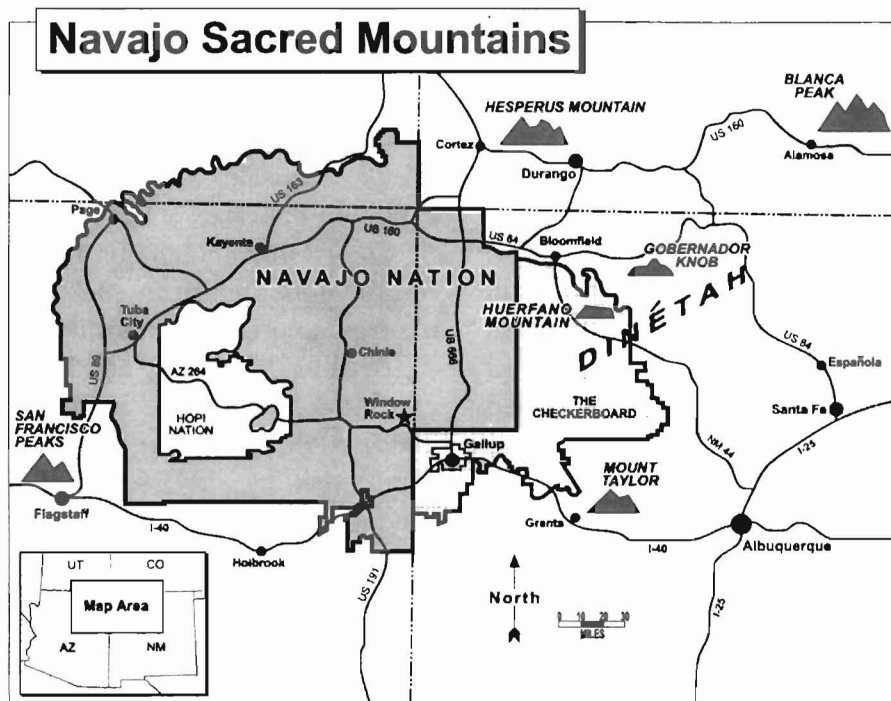


Figure 1: Navajo sacred mountains. Cartography by author.

with the yellow western sunset; and Hesperus Mountain, Colorado, black in the dark northern sky. Icons of the four cardinal mountains are widely projected on the Navajo seal and flag (Figure 2), yet the importance of the two central sacred mountains was also recently confirmed when the 1997 first edition of the "Diné Bikéyah" map failed to include them and Navajos urged their placement on the 1998 second edition (Lister 2000).

Although a consensus exists

today among the Navajo Nation and scholars of the Navajo regarding the six Navajo sacred mountains (Wyman 1970; Bingham and Bingham 1982; Brugge 1999a), other mountains are also accorded sacred status and some texts ascribe great symbolic status to a seventh peak, typically Hosta Butte in northwestern New Mexico (Matthews 1897; Zolbrod 1994; Frey 1998). It is likely that interpretations of the earthly mountains that manifest the mountains of Navajo origin



Figure 2: Navajo Nation seal with representations of fifty arrowheads for the fifty states, protective rainbow, sun rising in the east, horse, cow, sheep, corn, and the four sacred mountains. Clockwise from the top (east) the mountains are Blanca Peak, Mount Taylor, San Francisco Peaks, and Hesperus Mountain. Photo by the author, Ramah, New Mexico, August 1997.

stories could have shifted over time with Navajo migrations (Jett 1992). As the pressure of Spaniards and other American Indians moved the Navajo west and south from Dinétah, the greatest debate has focused on the sacred mountains of the east and north. Competing with Blanca Peak as the sacred mountain of the east are several New Mexico mountains, including Pelado Peak, Wheeler Peak, Abiquiu Peak, and Pedernal Peak. Even

as recently as 1950 a standard reference on the Navajo was only sure of the mountains in the west and south, noting that “Blanca Peak seems much too far north” (Reichard 1950: 453). This argument holds little water since relative cardinal distances make no difference in the identification of the western and southern peaks: Mount Taylor is only a few miles farther south than the San Francisco Peaks. The logic of Blanca Peak as the eastern mountain is

also apparent in the observation that Diné'tah is well northeast of the center of today's Navajo Reservation and that the great elevation and winter snow cover of Blanca Peak result in long-range visibility. Hesperus Mountain holds the same advantages over Perins Peak, a much lower summit in the La Plata Range that has been suggested as the sacred mountain of the north (Farella 1984).

Navajo Mountain Symbolism

The Navajo symbolism associated with each of the six mountains is described in the ceremonial sunwise order of the Navajo, moving from east to south to west to north, and then into the center

(Kelley and Francis 1994). A brief description of the land ownership and landscape character of each peak precedes a discussion of how the Navajo place names are associated with the landform and the Navajo symbolic characteristics for each mountain (Figure 3). The Navajo names are provided as repositories of symbolism in their own right. The Navajo enjoy using the names for places since speaking them brings goodness and the names are highly descriptive in a pictorial sense (Wilson 1995). Wide disparity exists in spelling Navajo names since the language is still rapidly evolving in its recent written form and has been subject to extensive bastardization by

COMMON NAME, LOCATION AND ELEVATION	NAVAJO DESCRIPTIVE NAME	NAVAJO CEREMONIAL NAME(S)	COLOR & DIRECTION	FASTENER TO EARTH	DECORATIONS	SUMMIT BIRD	SPIRITUAL DWELLERS
Blanca Peak (Sangre de Cristo Mtn., CO) 14,345'	Sianaa'jint (Mountain Belted with Black)	Yoolgail Dzin (White Shell Mountain) Jónnas'áí Dzil (Sun Mountain)	white (sunrise), east	lightning	white shells, white corn, dark clouds, male rain	Hasbidi (pigeon)	Rock Crystal Girl Rock Crystal Boy
Mt. Taylor (San Mateo Mtn., NM) 11,701'	Tsoodzil (Tongue Mountain)	Dool'izhili Dzil (Turquoise Mtn.); Nitsá Dzil (Rain Mtn.)	blue (midday sky), south	stone knife	turquoise, dark mist, female rain, animals	Dóli (mountain bluebird)	Yellow Corn Girl Turquoise Boy
San Francisco Peaks (AZ) 12,633'	Dook'o'oodzil (Never Thaws on Top)	Dichilidzil (Abalone Shell Mtn.); Dzil Ghá'nits'ili (Faultless Mtn.)	yellow (sunset clouds), west	sunbeam	abalone shell, animals, dark clouds, male rain, yellow corn	Tsilditsool (yellow warbler)	Yellow Corn Girl White Corn Boy
Hesperus Mountain (La Plata Mtn., CO) 13,232'	Dibé Ntsaa (Big Mountain Sheep)	Bááshzhini Dzil (Jer Mtn.); Dzil Bini Hólononi (Mtn. with a Mind)	black (night), north	rainbow	jet, dark mist, plants, animals, rare game	Ch'agii (red-winged blackbird)	Grasshopper Girl Pollen Boy
Huerfano Mountain (NM) 7,474'	Dzil Na'oodzil (Mountain Around Which People Move)	Yádi Dzil (Valuable Goods Mountain)	(no color), center	sunbeam	precious goods, dark clouds, male rain	summit left empty	Goods of Value Girl Goods of Value Boy
Gobernador Knob (NM) 7,585'	Ch'ool'i'i (Spruce Trees, Looking Out)	Ni'iz Dzil (Hard Goods Mountain)	(no color), center	rain	sacred jewels, pollen, dark mist, female rain	Choozhááhi (Bullock's oriole)	Girl Who Produces Jewels Boy Who Produces Jewels

Source: Compiled by the author based upon a consensus from various texts on the symbolism of Navajo sacred mountains.

Figure 3: Symbolism of six major Navajo sacred mountains. Source: Compiled by the author based upon a consensus from various texts on the symbolism of Navajo sacred mountains.

outsiders (Lister 2000). Nevertheless, place names are important indicators of cultural values (Jett 1997). Landform shapes, vegetation patterns, snow cover, wildlife, folklore, and intervisibilities each have a role in the place name symbolism of sacred mountains of the Navajo.

Blanca Peak

The highest point of the dominant massif at the northern end of Colorado's vast San Luis Valley, Blanca Peak (14,345 feet) is composed of sharp Precambrian granite ridges (Chronic 1980). One hundred years ago many observers thought Blanca the

highest in the entire Rocky Mountains (Borneman and Lampert 1998), an understandable error given its local relief exceeding 6,400 feet and the summit's primacy in the airy and jagged Sangre de Cristo Mountains that extend through south-central Colorado and north-central New Mexico. Blanca is the meeting point of the private Sangre de Cristo Land Grant, San Isabel National Forest (of the Arkansas River watershed), and Rio Grande National Forest (of the Rio Grande watershed) (Smith 1999). *Blanca* refers to the white covering of snow that covers the summit through much of the year



Figure 4: Blanca Peak massif in a northerly view from south of Fort Garland, Colorado. Left to right the three highest summits at the center of the massif are Little Bear Peak (14,037 feet), Blanca Peak (14,345 feet), and Hamilton Peak (13,658 feet). On the far right is Mount Lindsey (14,042 feet). Photo by author, August 1995.

(Bright 1993). The Navajo descriptive name, *Sisnaajini*, means dark horizontal belt or mountain belted with black (Matthews 1897), likely a reference to the darker forested area between the upper and lower treeline (Figure 4). Also sacred to the Jicarilla Apache, the peak is positioned at the dawn of each day where it symbolizes Navajo reproduction and was the first sacred mountain created by First Man and First Woman in this world (Van Valkenburgh 1999). A bolt of lightning fastens the peak to earth, and the summit is decorated with white shells, white corn, dark clouds, and male rain (a heavy downpour), certain-

ly fitting symbolism given the violent summer thunderstorms atop this massif. Pigeons and the deities Rock Crystal Girl and Rock Crystal Boy inhabit the summit (Reichard 1950; Wyman 1967; Locke 1992).

Mount Taylor

Mount Taylor (11,301 feet) crowns the San Mateo Mountains, the highest range in northwestern New Mexico. The peaks of the massif outline the eroded rim of a tremendous volcanic caldera that formed between four and two million years ago (Chronic 1987). Within Cibola National Forest, the mountain towers 5,600 feet above the much



Figure 5: Mount Taylor (11,301 feet) and the San Mateo Mountains in a northeasterly view from McCartys, New Mexico. Interstate 40 passes through the foreground. Photo by the author, February 1994.

more recent lava flows of El Malpais (Figure 5). Tsoodzil, the Navajo descriptive name, has been interpreted to mean big, tall mountain (Pearce 1965; Julyan 1996) or great mountain (Matthews 1897), but more often to mean tongue mountain (Linford 2000), possibly deriving from the Blessingway portrayal of the mountain as the tongue of the inner form of earth (Wyman 1970). Alternatively, the tongue reference could be to the shape of timberline on the west side of the peak (Wilson 1995) or, more plausibly when viewed from above, to how the El Malpais lava flows extend outward from the massif like a tongue (Levy 1998). Also sacred to several Pueblo Indian cultures, the English name commemorates President Zachary Taylor of Mexican-American War fame (Blake 1999b).

As the sacred mountain of the south, the peak is fastened to the earth with a stone knife, decorated with turquoise, dark mist, female (light) rain, and various animals (Wyman 1967). Bluebirds, Turquoise Boy, and Yellow Corn Girl dwell on the summit. In the past the mountain was also

the home of *Yé'itsoh*, the wicked big monster chief of the Enemy Gods, who terrified the Navajo homeland by eating the Diné. The Hero Twins, Monster Slayer and Born for Water, killed the monster on the summit, the blood flowing down to coagulate as the lava flows and the decapitated head thrown to the northeast to become Cabezon Peak (Reichard 1950; Linford 2000).

San Francisco Peaks

Similar to the San Mateo Mountains, the San Francisco Peaks are the remains of a composite volcano that erupted from 1.8 to .4 million years ago (Breed 1985) that were then sculpted by glaciation and later erosion into individual peaks (Chronic 1983). The tallest is Humphreys Peak (12,633 feet), highest in Arizona, followed by Agassiz Peak and Fremont Peak (Figure 6). The 5,600 feet local relief of the massif assisted C. Hart Merriam in developing the life zone concept during his 1889 biological survey. In local lore and Coconino National Forest literature the mountain is strongly associated with the Hopi, even more so than with the Navajo. To the Hopi this

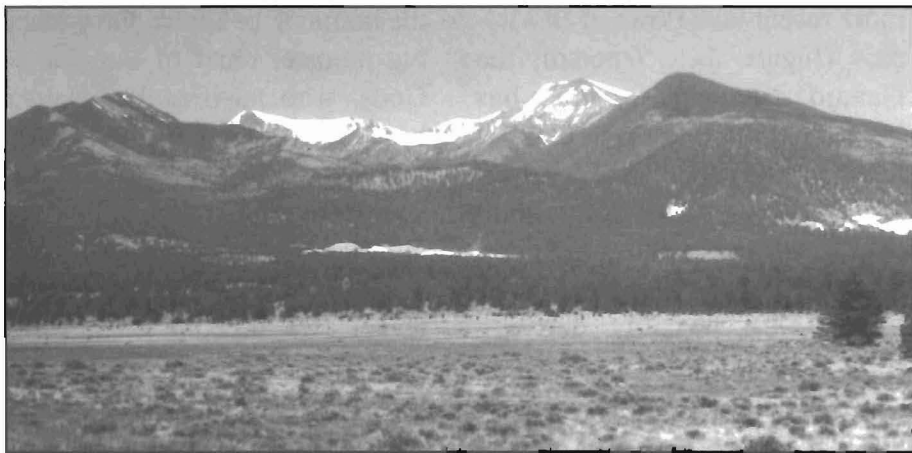


Figure 6: *The San Francisco Peaks in a westerly view from Sunset Crater National Monument. From left to right the highest visible summits are Doyle Peak (11,460 feet), Agassiz Peak (12,356 feet), Humphreys Peak (12,633 feet), and Rees Peak (11,474 feet). Fremont Peak (11,969 feet) is hidden from view behind Doyle, and Aubineau Peak (11,838 feet) is hidden behind Rees. The White Vulcan Pumice Mine is the white slash visible in the center foreground. Photo by the author, June 1999.*

is the home of the kachinas, who take the form of rain to visit the Hopi cornfields. The Kachina Peaks Wilderness at the heart of the caldera takes its name from association with the Hopi, likely due to the proximity of the Hopi Reservation, the visibility of the Hopi Buttes and Hopi Reservation from the summit, and the popularity of kachina doll icons, all of which may seem more concrete to outsiders than the Navajo symbolism of the sacred mountain of the west.

The Spanish name for the mountain could have originated

as early as 1539 with Fray Marcos de Niza (Linford 2000), although alternative theories suggest that Franciscan missionaries at Hopi in the early seventeenth century named the massif in honor of the founder of their order (Granger 1960). Geologist G.K. Gilbert named the highest summit in 1873 for his one-time superior officer, Brig. Gen. A.A. Humphreys (Granger 1960). The Navajo descriptive name, *Dook'o'oslííd*, has been translated as light shines from it, a reference to the symbolic abalone shell decorations (Wyman 1970),

but more often it is said to mean never thaws on top, a reference to the perennial snows near the summit (Wilson 1995; Linford 2000). In vernacular use the massif is most frequently called San Francisco Peaks, rather than using the individual summit names, and in Flagstaff it may simply be called "the mountain" (Cline 1985). Fastened to earth with a sunbeam, the sacred mountain of the west is adorned with abalone shells, black clouds, yellow corn, male rain, and animals, and inhabited by yellow warblers, White Corn Boy, and Yellow Corn Girl (Wyman 1967).

Hesperus Mountain

On the southwestern margins of Colorado's San Juan Mountains, the La Plata Range was formed when sedimentary rocks of late Paleozoic and Mesozoic age were intruded by irregularly shaped laccolithic masses of Tertiary igneous rocks (Baars 1992). At the northwestern margin of the La Platas, Hesperus Mountain (13,232 feet) is the highest point of the range, rising 6,200 feet above the nearby community of Mancos, Colorado. Within the San Juan National Forest, the La

Platas take their name from Spanish silver discoveries in the region, and Hesperus is named for the western evening star (Bright 1993). *Dibé Ntsaa*, the Navajo descriptive name, may refer to an abundance of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (Wyman 1970) or the mountain range's snow-covered resemblance to a flock of sheep when viewed from afar (Wilson 1995). The name could also refer to the physical form of the peak as the broad horizontal bands of igneous rock are fractured and ribbed in a manner reminiscent of curving sheep horns (Figure 7).

As the dark sacred mountain of the north, Hesperus has an association with fear or evil (Baars 1995). In the northern La Platas is Island Lake, thought to be the place of emergence of the people into this world and the place where spirits of the dead pass down to a lower world (Van Valkenburgh 1999). If a Navajo singer seeks for evil to befall anyone, the death of an enemy for example, this is the place to go (Brugge 1999a). The peak is fastened to Earth with a rainbow; the curving bands of rock on the peak may also symbolize a rainbow.

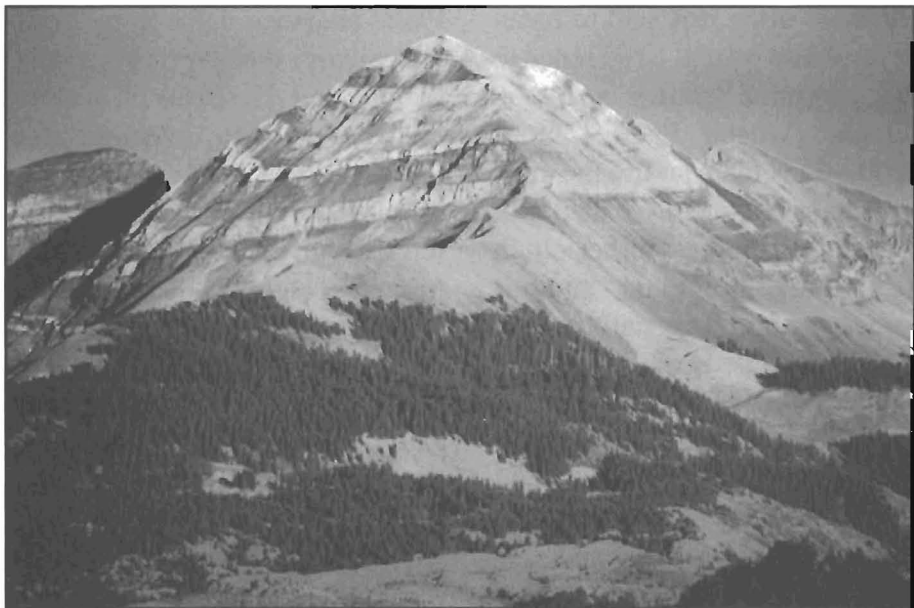


Figure 7: *Hesperus Mountain (13,232 feet) in a southeasterly view from the West Mancos Overlook in San Juan National Forest. Photo by the author, September 2000.*

Hesperus is decorated with jet, dark mist, plants, and rare game, and is inhabited by blackbirds, Grasshopper Girl, and Pollen Boy (Wyman 1967).

Huerfano Mountain

Dinétah, representing the powerful symbolic concept of a sacred original homeland, accords great significance to Gobernador Knob and Huerfano Mountain, even though they are less well known than the higher cardinal sacred mountains and are absent from the Navajo seal.

The lowest of the six sacred mountains at 7,474 feet, Huerfano Mountain is a crumbling mesa of Tertiary sandstone (Baars 1995), yet its cupola-like crags and steep walls dominate the country south of Bloomfield, New Mexico and the San Juan River (Van Valkenburgh 1999). Taking a Spanish name for its isolation like an orphan, Huerfano has one long arm extending east and another south, with distinctive horizontal bands of uniform color that cause it to appear roughly similar on all sides (Fig-



Figure 8: Huerfano Mountain (7,474 feet) in a northerly view from the Navajo community of Dzil Ná'oodilii along New Mexico highway 44. Transmission towers crown the mesa and oil field equipment dots the sagebrush plains. Photo by the author, September 2000.

ure 8). The Navajo descriptive name, *Dzil Ná'oodilii*, or mountain around which people move, refers either to this similar appearance from all sides (Julyan 1996) or to the movement of people around this sacred central summit (Wyman 1970; Wilson 1995). This sacred place is within the checkerboard portion of the Navajo Reservation, a patchwork of federal, state, Navajo, and private land ownership on the eastern rim of the reservation resulting from the granting of alternate sections of land to railroads, then the allotment of some lands to the

Navajo, then the restoration of some land to the public domain, then later land exchanges (Trimble 1993). Huerfano is the only one of the six peaks to have any portion of its massif, the northernmost and highest summit in this case, located on the Navajo Reservation, a fact omitted from a definitive work on Navajo sacred places (Kelley and Francis 1994: 114). The Bureau of Land Management oversees the southern portion of the mesa.

As the home of First Man and First Woman, Huerfano once harbored an old hogan and fence

occupied by these deities (Brugge 1999b). Eventually this was also the home of Changing Woman, the most trusted Navajo deity. The path she ran during the first Navajo puberty ceremony has been visible at Huerfano, along with the place where she conducted the first wedding ceremony and the potholes atop the sandstone where she bathed her Hero Twin offspring (Kelley and Francis 1994). Fastened to earth with sunbeams and decorated with precious goods, dark clouds, and male rain, this is also the home of Goods of Value Boy and Goods of Value Girl (Locke 1992). The shape of the mesa inspired the female or round-roof

form of hogan, the traditional Navajo house type that is frequently observed today on the reservation.

Gobernador Knob

Gobernador Knob rises as a sandstone knob-like protrusion from Laguna Seca Mesa on the Bureau of Land Management land located just west of Carson National Forest and the Jicarilla Apache Indian Reservation. The elevation is 7,585 feet, and the local relief ranges from about 200 feet above the mesa to 900 feet above the surrounding plain (Figure 9). The Spanish name for governor may have been transferred in association with Gober-

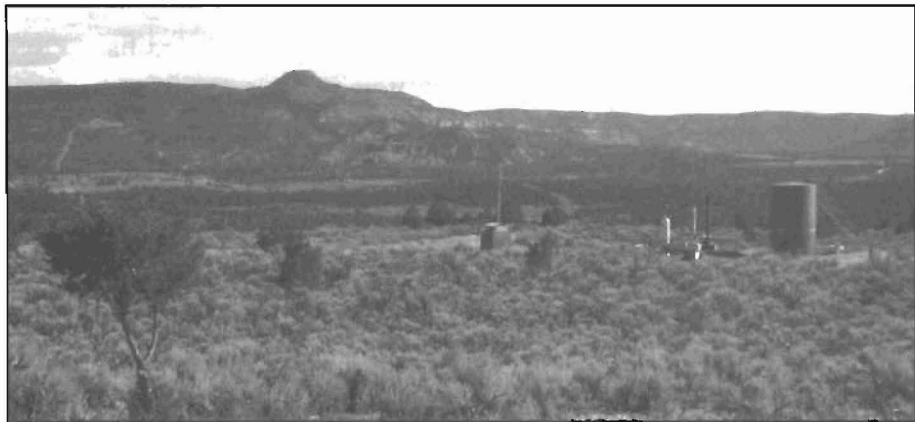


Figure 9: *Gobernador Knob (7,585 feet) on Laguna Seca Mesa in a southeasterly view from near U.S. highway 64. Natural gas wellhead facilities are visible in the right foreground. Photo by the author, September 2000.*

nador Canyon or could have been given in reference to its commanding position at the head of the canyon (Julyan 1996). The Navajo descriptive name, Chúolíf, is also subject to various interpretations. It may refer in part to spruce trees or to a lookout. The vantage point association is fitting given the commanding view north, west, and south. The spruce reference is at first puzzling given the absence of such conifers in this piñon-juniper woodland, but it could refer to the intervisibility with the Chuska Mountains on the western edge of the state, that have a descriptive name meaning white spruce (Wyman 1970). As the birthplace of Changing Woman and the Hero Twins, Gobernador Knob is symbolic of goodness for the Navajo (Gill 1981; Farella 1984). The summit is symbolically decorated with jewels, pollen, dark mist, and female rain; orioles, Girl Who Produces Jewels, and Boy Who Produces Jewels live at the top. The shape of the knob inspired an earlier form of the hogan, the male or forked-stick style (Wyman 1970).

Contested Peaks

Contrasting land uses evidence the underlying environmental ethics, those attitudes about appropriate human-environment interactions that shape everything from the landscapes of oil and gas well drilling to sacred places. Although not all Navajo sacred mountains embody incongruities between Navajo symbolism and the land use by others, each has the potential because of the land ownership pattern and the sharply differing attitudes toward mountains that exist among today's society. Blanca Peak and Mount Taylor have featured the least conflict in recent times, but each of the contested landscapes is examined below in sunwise order. At times, such as in the case of the San Francisco Peaks, land use conflicts may actually result in improved relationships between Navajos and non-Indians, but in many cases they lead to adverse relationships (Brugge 1999b). Under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Navajos have complained of too many interrogations over herb gathering, rudeness toward medicine men, lack of access to sacred sites, ski

and mineral resource developments, non-Indian drinking and carousing, and the use of exotic plant materials in fire re-seeding efforts. Yet it is a misconception to equate Navajo values with complete preservation. Wilderness designations, for example, do not appeal to many Navajos because the rules prohibit the motorized access that many older Navajos need; thus wilderness can be seen as favoring certain recreationists over traditional users (Kelley and Francis 1994).

Infamous for its poor access by vehicle or foot and remotely located with respect to the Navajo Reservation, Blanca Peak receives less visitation by Navajos than any of the six sacred mountains. On the other hand, for climbing enthusiasts of Colorado's Fourteeners, those summits exceeding 14,000 feet, the Blanca massif is a mecca for access to Little Bear Peak (14,037 feet), Ellingwood Peak (14,042 feet), and Blanca Peak (Borneman and Lampert 1998). Nearby Mount Lindsey (14,042 feet) also qualifies as a Fourteener, yet the rugged nature and long distance for climbing any of these summits keeps public visitation

and secular-sacred conflicts at a minimum.

Mount Taylor, conversely, affords far better access on a network of well maintained gravel roads and hiking trails. Hunting, hiking, wildlife viewing, scenic driving, and the gathering of firewood, spring water, piñon nuts, and Christmas trees result in year-round visitation by people of all cultures (Parent 1992). These uses are, however, relatively infrequent, low-elevation, and dispersed, thus they cause little conflict with Navajo prayer pilgrimages or gathering activities. Evidence of ceremonial use by American Indians exists near the summit, but Pueblo visitation is more frequent than Navajo. The Mount Taylor Winter Quadrathlon has the potential to engender far greater concerns, yet few contentious issues have arisen. Run each February since 1984, the quadrathlon has become one of the premier winter extreme sports events in the West. Over 500 contestants race from Grants (6,420 feet) to the summit (11,301 feet) and back by bicycle, foot, cross-country skis, and snowshoes. But with few structures placed on the mountain

and the intense use limited to a short period in winter when the fragile alpine environment is covered with snow, Cibola National Forest has received no complaints of inappropriate use. At Mount Taylor, while non-Indian and Navajo uses are by no means identical, they bear enough resemblance to each other to result in a smooth integration of environmental ethics, with the Navajo beliefs clearly of great significance in the management (Blake 1999b).

The San Francisco Peaks have experienced the greatest land use controversies of any of the six Navajo sacred mountains. For American Indians, not just the summit is sacred; the Coconino National Forest (1999) recognizes the entire slopes of the massif, including the cinder hills, water seeps, and sinkholes, have extremely significant religious and cultural values to native peoples. American Indians visit the peaks in conjunction with ceremonial activities for spruce bough and woodcutting, herb gathering, and blessings; the Navajo even hold a grazing permit, unused in the last few years, for a tract at the northeastern base

of the massif.

The secular uses of the peaks historically focused on grazing, logging, and mining for cinder and pumice. The proximity of the high summits to rapidly growing Flagstaff has resulted in accelerated demands for mountain water. The creeks do not normally run in the high Inner Basin, even when surrounded with melting snowcapped peaks. Flagstaff mines over 400 million gallons of water each year from the Inner Basin with a complex system of deep wells and pipelines (Breed 1985). The 1876 fire in the Inner Basin that burned many Englemann spruce may have reduced the natural streamflow and compounded the shortage of surface water exiting the basin (Granger 1960). Merriam's work on vertical zonation still inspires other research as tracts of the mountain are frequently set aside for study permits on paleobotany and vegetation ecology, especially fire succession. Scenic driving, commercial filming, weddings, transmission towers (e.g., for cell phones), and hiking constitute additional land use (Sandusky 1999).

The ascent of Humphreys is popular for its state high-point elevation, biome transitions, and outstanding views of such features as the Painted Desert, Navajo Mountain, Echo Cliffs, Kaibab Plateau, Grand Canyon, and Oak Creek Canyon. Humphreys was highlighted in the August 1999 issue of *Backpacker* magazine as one of eight great U.S. hikes (Harlin 1999) and further featured for its high altitude challenge to flatlanders (Morris 1999). A consequence of the hiking popularity has been the closure of the route up Agassiz from May to October to protect the endemic and endangered San Francisco Peaks groundsel, and also to avoid disturbing American Indian ceremonial shrines. In terms of controversy, however, these activities pale in comparison to skiing and mining.

The Arizona Snowbowl ski operations on the west slope of the peaks commenced in 1938, long before consultations with American Indians on sacred mountain land use were contemplated. Arizona's population boom and the popularity of outdoor recreation resulted in a major expansion project in the

late 1970s, bringing the project to a total of two lodges, 32 trails, and five lifts, the highest of which reaches 11,500 feet on Agassiz Peak. In 1997 the Snowbowl proposed a revision to their operating permit from Coconino National Forest to add another sixty-six acres of trails and a major chairlift, but this time opposition comments from American Indians and environmentalists resulted in a ruling requiring a new Environmental Impact Statement at the resort's expense. As yet, this has not been completed, but the existing operations still leave an indelible imprint on the peaks throughout the year (Figure 10). The longest chairlift operates throughout the summer to carry sightseers and hikers high on Agassiz, contributing to the ski area's sense of incongruity compared with the solitude and spiritual aspects of Navajo symbolism.

A glaring mining scar at the eastern foot of the San Francisco Peaks generated the greatest outcry in recent years over sacred mountain land use decisions. Tufflite operated the 90-acre White Vulcan Pumice Mine (7,500 feet) for over fifty years



Figure 10: Humphreys Peak frames the shortest of the chair lifts at the Arizona Snowbowl, the Aspen Double Chairlift. Photo by the author, June 1999.

under the provisions of the 1872 Mining Act before their 1998 proposal to expand the mine by an additional thirty acres galvanized opposition to the mine, uniting every American Indian nation in Arizona and many Flagstaff residents in a common cause. The pumice had been sold for horticultural products and the manufacturing of stonewashed jeans. The vast majority of the thousands of public comments received by the Forest Service opposed the mine expansion (McLeod 2000). The Forest Service responded to Tufflite's request by proposing a 20-year

mineral withdrawal of 74,380 acres surrounding the Kachina Peaks Wilderness. Support for the proposal came from diverse quarters, including Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who called the mine "a sacrilege" (McLeod 2000), the Sierra Club, who said the "mine is like tearing up the Sistine Chapel to get at the dirt" (Mockler 1999), a student at Northern Arizona University, who said "these mountains transform our days, they help us transcend the mundane" (Randazzo 1999), and American Indians, who viewed continued mining as "inappropriate uses that have

severe impacts on traditional practices and beliefs" (Coconino 1999). In August 2000 an agreement was reached between the federal government and Tufflite that would relinquish all mining claims and guarantee full restoration of the mine for a payment to Tufflite of \$1 million. Subsequently, the federal government approved the mineral withdrawal in October 2000, and the reclamation of the White Vulcan Mine began in February 2001.

In the case of pumice mining on the San Francisco Peaks, concerns over aesthetics and sacrilege were common themes uniting Navajos, other American Indians, and other Arizona residents. The unique geology of the peaks, plus their endangered species, wildlife, non-motorized recreation opportunities, and role as a peak of identity for the community of Flagstaff each contributed to creating an intolerance of the mine by broad segments of society. The quotation that the Peaks are the "dominant, deeply meaningful fact in our environment" (Cline 1985, 11) could fit the Navajo environmental ethics of sacred mountains, yet it was given in reference to Flagstaff

residents. Like Mount Taylor, the sacredness of the San Francisco Peaks is well known by non-Indians, and this has made cooperative management easier to achieve. The Forest Service now routinely contacts all Southwest American Indian nations for input on major forest actions, such as recreation development or timber cuts. Mount Taylor and the San Francisco Peaks receive attention from more than one indigenous nation, but notices pertaining the La Plata Range primarily interest the Navajo, rather than the closer Ute Mountain or Southern Ute nations. Within the La Platas, it is Hesperus in particular that holds interest for the Navajo. In the late 1990s, the San Juan National Forest received a request from a Navajo group that wanted to operate an outfitter service for Navajos who seek access to the upper reaches of Hesperus for ceremonies. This group wanted to build some high-elevation structures that would support the outfitter service, but the Forest Service turned down the request since no other outfitters are allowed to maintain private facilities in this area (Kelly 2000).

There is little Navajo visitation at the actual summit of Hesperus Mountain because of the difficult access. The long dirt road from the town of Mancos to the Sharkstooth Trailhead is easy driving until the road deteriorates in the last one and one-half miles. From the trailhead the northwest face of Hesperus is stunning in its height (a sheer 2000 feet face), and from here the approximately horizontal bands of igneous intrusions accentuate the mass and beauty of the peak. Ceremonial visitors would rarely climb to the summit because a person can be on the base of the mountain after a relatively easy three-quarter mile walk on the West Mancos Trail, whereas to ascend higher involves descending the trail for another mile, then leaving the trail for a tedious undulating bushwhack through a dense forest choked with fallen trees, a scramble over a loose talus field, and an extremely steep and long ridge ascent. Being in connection with the mountain is most important to Navajo ceremonial use, not necessarily summiting, and collecting ceremonial soil or plants would, of course, typically best be done at lower elevations

below the rocky summit cone. The highest evidence of Navajo ceremonial use on Hesperus is a rocky shrine site at about 11,600 feet in an area of extensive bighorn sheep scat.

Even though it is the highest point of the La Plata Range, Hesperus Mountain still receives relatively light recreational use because of its remote access from the nearby cities of Cortez and Durango and its lack of a summit trail. This would seem to offer a quiet place for Navajo visits, but the West Mancos hiking trail, although officially closed to motorized vehicles, still shows signs of frequent off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, probably motorcycles based upon the tire tracks. Extensive damage to the trail has occurred in wet areas and where obstacles across the trail, such as down trees, have been bypassed with new OHV routes cut through the forest. The noise from OHVs on this trail at the foot of Hesperus is extremely intrusive to any contemplative recreation or ceremonial activity. OHV use is allowed nearby in the San Juan National Forest on the Aspen Trail, but the proximity of this recreation trail to the sacred

mountain — within a mile — still results in audible OHV noise on Hesperus.

Even though Huerfano Mountain is a significant landmark on a well-worn traveler's route, by the 1930s it had been climbed by few white men (Van Valkenburgh 1999). In recent decades, however, and without Navajo consultation, at least twelve major transmission towers have been erected in dense clusters on the south extension of the mesa. A Bureau of Land Management proposal in 1967 to develop the eastern arm

of the mesa with campground and picnic facilities set in motion the events that led to an eventual land transfer (Linford 2000). The Navajo requested a study by anthropologist David M. Brugge of the proposed development's impact on the spiritual significance of the mesa. His report noted the importance of Huerfano and the other sacred mountains for the mountain soil bundle, Blessingway ceremony, and other songs and prayers (Brugge 1999b). This report and Navajo opposition to the development

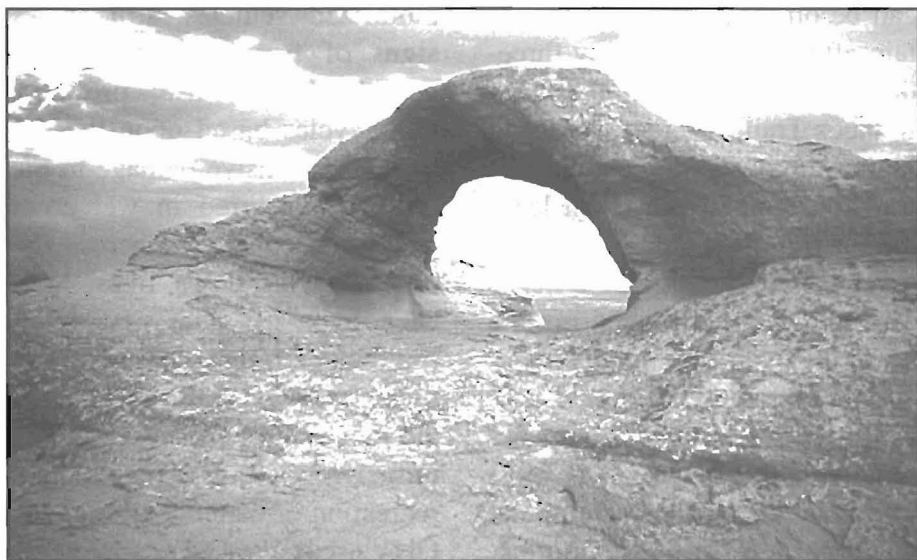


Figure 11: On the Navajo portion of Huerfano Mountain this arch frames a southeasterly view. The eastern arm of the mesa harbors many distinctive landforms, ecological niches, and Navajo shrines. The opening of this arch is only about two feet high. Photo by the author, July 1996.

led to a land exchange, with the Navajo gaining ownership of the northern tip and eastern arm of the mesa that contains the high point and many distinctive features and shrine sites (Figure 11).

The land transfer did not permanently resolve all issues associated with the contested landscape of Huerfano Mountain. A rough but serviceable road still provides access up the southern wing of the mesa to the communication towers. From here it is only a short walk to the highest point of the mesa — to Navajo land — and its superb 360-degree views. On one summer evening visit to the mesa I found a raucous gathering of non-Indians at the high point, gleefully throwing their empty beer cans off the summit. Even without such boors, the transmission towers and road are permanent reminders of secular intrusions on a sacred world. The checkerboard pattern of land ownership around Huerfano constantly results in conflicting yet contiguous land uses. A 1991 proposal to establish an asbestos dump five miles east of Huerfano in Blanco Canyon resulted in vigorous protest from the Navajo, who

managed to defeat the scheme by emphasizing the importance of the intervisibilities between Huerfano and Gobernador Knob (Kelley and Francis, 1994; Linford 2000).

The visible imprint of Navajo symbolism on the landscape is greatest at Gobernador Knob, the least known and visited by outsiders of the six sacred mountains. Many small caches of pottery shards dot the top of the knob, and at the exact summit are ceremonially arranged stones, shards, and, recalling the symbolic association of the knob with the forked-stick hogan style, a crooked piece of wood (Figure 12). Pottery shards and other remains of ancient Navajo and Pueblo Indian use are found throughout the vicinity of the knob (Linford 2000), with an especially dense concentration of shards on the mesa within one-half mile east from the knob. The knob's remote location and difficult access result in extremely infrequent recreational use, and although the Navajo use is light, the arrangement of the objects at the summit does nevertheless change from time to time.

Ironically, this remote and rel-

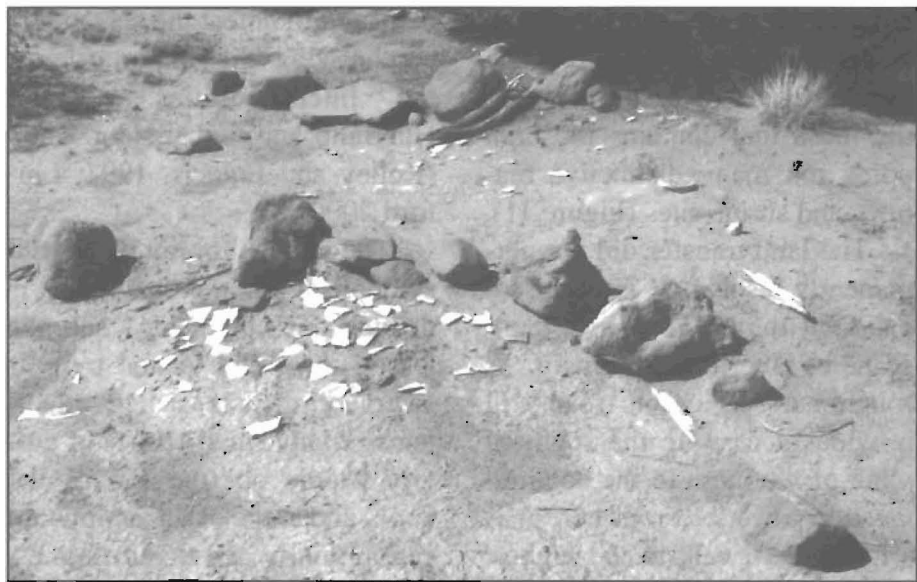


Figure 12: Summit of Gobernador Knob with ceremonially arranged pottery shards, stones, and forked stick. The summit benchmark is located in the right center of photo. Photo by author, September 2000.

atively small sacred summit is currently the most threatened with outside interference by new gas well drilling in the San Juan Basin. Natural gas wells, booster stations, and access roads have long been visible and audible on the plain below Gobernador Knob, but the latest round of development significantly increases the density of development and encroaches much closer to the summit on Laguna Seca Mesa. These new wells result in the clearing and leveling of the forest and construction of well-

head and pipeline facilities, along with the concomitant noise and traffic of drilling and production activities. Clearly incompatible with the Navajo use of Gobernador Knob, once again efforts were made to emphasize the need to show respect of American Indian beliefs by not allowing the gas wells in close proximity to the knob (Brugge 1999b). In 1999 and 2000, however, new gas wells were developed within one-half mile of Gobernador Knob, changing the character of the surrounding area and bringing



Figure 13: Northwestern view of natural gas booster station, wells, and access roads within one-half mile of Gobernador Knob. Photo by the author, September 2000.

incongruous land uses within close range (Figure 13).

Contested Visions

The ideology of the American Southwest and Navajo sacred mountain symbolism are closely related. First, the location in Colorado of two of the six sacred mountains in this study further affirms the inclusion of southern Colorado in vernacular definitions of the region. Second, the power of the sacred peaks indicates that mountains and mesas are as much a part of the regional landform iconography as the deserts, canyons, and buttes that are more frequently touted in

popular media. The visible imprint of Navajo symbolism may rest lightly on the land, but the sacred meanings are deeply etched into the regional character. Third, sacred power knows no borders. The stakeholders in decisions affecting these sacred mountains include Navajos, other American Indians, and multitudes of others who value the peaks for everything from spiritual renewal to recreation to mineral resources. The projection of the symbolism associated with these mountains far beyond their immediate area is a reminder of how symbolism transcends political boundaries and shapes

regional constructs.

Land use is diagnostic of differing environmental perceptions. Ceremonial use by traditional Navajos, for example, reflects place-specific attitudes that are deeply interwoven with a worldview, tradition, and cultural identity. The preservation of a mountain in response to development threats, such as at the San Francisco Peaks, reflects aesthetics and a need for places of spiritual renewal. Resource extraction reflects how distant interests still control the dominant perceptions of many public lands. Federal land management policy is typically driven by a multiple use ethic, the greatest good for the greatest number. Navajo symbolism has at times been considered in management plans, but without receiving top priority. Development often wins out unless a majority, including non-Indians, asserts an appreciation for the special character of sacred mountains. But the lack of convergence toward a preservation ethic at Huerfano Mountain or Gobernador Knob indicates the multicultural effort to end mining on the San Francisco Peaks is more a byproduct of aesthetics and rela-

tive location (close to an urban area) than respect for Navajo symbolism.

Sacred places derive significance from their position within the larger culturally constructed landscape, so no sacred mountain should symbolically be severed from the surrounding land (Kelley and Francis 1994). The controversial pumice mining low on the flanks of the San Francisco Peaks, the pottery shards near Gobernador Knob, and the important intervisibilities between sacred mountains all argue for sacred power including the entire massif and surrounding area rather than only the upper peak. Strangely, distance from the cultural landscape of the Navajo Reservation is often inversely related to the degree a sacred mountain landscape is contested. Gobernador Knob and the San Francisco Peaks are each distinctly separated from the reservation and have experienced land uses incongruous with sacred values. Huerfano Mountain is the closest to the reservation, and it has also been a contested landscape. Mount Taylor and Hesperus Mountain have had lesser degrees of incongruous

land uses, whereas Blanca Peak, farthest of all from the reservation, has experienced the least controversy. Access seems at least as reliable a predictor of contested landscapes as political boundaries or spatial correlations.

Although traditional Navajos most closely affiliate themselves with the sacred mountains, the importance of these peaks remains strong throughout Navajo culture. The official Diné education curriculum has a section on Diné Bikéyah/Geography in which many of the objectives relating to origins, physical environment, and vocabulary relate to the six sacred mountains. Additionally, the impetus for the 1997 production of the comprehensive "Diné Bikéyah" map was the need of Navajo schools for a map that included sacred places to stimulate discussions about these names and places (Lister 2000). Indeed, better awareness of the sacred mountains by more Navajos would likely lead to better representation of Navajo values in public land management. Federal ownership of sacred mountains often provides an appropriate public land management directive. The balanced approach

to development and preservation of the U.S. Forest Service has resulted in mixed success on the San Francisco Peaks and Hesperus Mountain with regard to contested landscape issues. The multicultural and many-faceted significance of the four cardinal mountains, however, essentially mandates a management agency with a multiple use ethic. Conversely, it seems far more appropriate to transfer the entirety of Gobernador Knob and Huerfano Mountain from the Bureau of Land Management to the Navajo Nation. The spiritual significance of Gobernador and Huerfano is almost solely Navajo; therefore, little opposition on aesthetic or symbolic grounds could be expected. Furthermore, one less gas well and an official buffer around Gobernador Knob, and the relocation of the communication towers at Huerfano Mountain, seem insignificant costs compared to the power of sacred mountains. The comparison of land uses and Navajo symbolism indicates that new borders and land use policies can and should be created to mediate between sacred mountain symbolism and contested landscapes.

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