

Why Are We Sacrificing Chaco?

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We are appalled at the current state of neglect and disrespect recently demonstrated in the management and protection of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Chaco is a UNCESO World Heritage Site on par with the great treasures of worldwide archaeology and a deeply significant site for descendent Pueblo and Navajo peoples.

First, we are disappointed by the BLM's recent auctioning of 843 acres within twenty miles of Chaco Canyon for oil and gas development despite protests of hundreds and concerns not only for archaeological resources, but the health of many living in nearby communities (http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/oil-gas-drilling-rights-near-chaco-canyon-sold-for-m/article_f7727a6c-9694-5116-bf39-7cf492dee240.html). All this, despite the BLM having neglected to conduct full analysis of health, environmental, and cultural impacts of oil and gas development it plans for the larger Mancos Shale region around Chaco Canyon.

Second, the *Santa Fe Reporter* recently printed a story (<http://www.sfreporter.com/santafe/article-12980-unearthed-but-unseen.html>) announcing the apparent decision by Chaco Culture National Historical Park Superintendent Michael Quijano-West to scrap a museum exhibit planned to open this spring. Chaco's visitor's center has been without artifacts for years, a deep loss that deprives visitors of the fascinating material objects of the Chaco Culture.

Among the countless objects that could be displayed to convey Chaco's grandeur to visitors are: intricately woven yucca sandals, ornaments of turquoise and jet, cylinder vessels that once held cacao imported from the tropics of Mexico, macaw feathers, shells from the shores of Mexico and California, and gaming pieces crafted of bone... to name just a small selection.

Yet, these objects remain stored – most not even on display! – in shut drawers of elite museums in New York City and Washington, D.C., where privileged access is granted only to a select few. Every time we lead tours of Chaco Canyon, someone remarks on the glaring absence of artifacts at the visitor's center. How can visitors be expected to fully appreciate and fight to protect Chaco when not a single artifact is on display?

It is deeply troubling as people caring about Chaco's history (and as taxpayers) that this project – which has been in planning and development for years and has cost nearly \$2 million dollars – would be so thoughtlessly abandoned. Furthermore, there have been countless hours of consultation between Native American tribes and the Park regarding the development of the museum – difficult conversations in which tribes invested a tremendous amount of time internally, eventually arriving at a collective agreement to move forward.

But, according to Superintendent Quijano-West, “this kind of an exhibit should have never been created to begin with...It’s unrealistic to expect us to do a New York City-style exhibit here” without the technology for climate control to protect the objects.

While Chaco Canyon is rather remote, the proposed museum is certainly not a “New York City-style exhibit.” This is 2017 – the technology for fully self-contained electric generation and power backup systems to ensure the required climate control is well established. With the proper contractor(s) and subsequent staff training, a solution should be possible for a few thousand dollars – a minor investment compared with the \$2 million already spent on the project, and a fraction of the cost of developing an entirely new exhibit, which the Park has stated to be its new plan.

Third, Chaco Culture National Historical Park has seen major budget and personnel cuts in recent years. Many of Chaco’s employees now must split their duties between Chaco and Aztec Ruins National Monument, 65 miles away and also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. From 2012-2016, Chaco has seen the following reductions of work time for various positions – Superintendent (75% reduction), Chief of Cultural Resources (20%), Chief of Natural Resources (80%), Chief of Interpretation (60%), and Chief of Facility Management (20-50%).

With energy development rapidly encroaching on Chaco’s fragile buildings, shrines, and ancient roads; an empty museum at the visitor’s center with nothing to show for its \$2 million price tag; and fewer dollars and personnel hours dedicated to managing this UNESCO World Heritage Site; the future for its sacred heritage and the great importance it holds in the hearts of so many looks dire indeed.