



## American Indians & the Tower

American Indian people have long considered the Tower a place of spiritual and cultural importance. The sacred connection to this place continues today as part of centuries-old ancestral traditions.

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### A Sacred Place



Traditionally, indigenous cultures around the world have gathered at places of great natural beauty for ceremonial purposes. These sites, including the Tower, continue to have profound sacred significance to native peoples. Over twenty American Indian tribes have a cultural connection with the Tower. Among these are six distinct American Indian Nations that have a direct geographical connection to the Tower, meaning that they have lived in the area at some point in their history. These six nations are the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Crow, Kiowa, Lakota, and Shoshone.

The traditional religious practitioners among these groups continue to revere the sacred significance of the Tower and have stories and beliefs that explain its cultural importance. These stories are part of a larger oral tradition and cultural belief system.

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### Name of the Tower

Northern Plains Indians honor a towering rock formation that they consider sacred. They call the rocky tower Bear's Tipi, Grizzly Bear's Lodge, Bear Lodge Butte, Tree Rock and other related names. In 1875, Colonel Dodge led an expedition into the area. In his book titled, *The Black Hills*, Colonel Dodge explained, "the Indians call this shaft *The Bad God's Tower*, a name adopted with proper modification, by our surveyors." Dodge "modified the name to a better form of English, calling it Devils Tower." Evidence suggests that the initial translation was incorrect. The Indian words for the Tower should have been translated into "Bear Lodge" and not into "Bad God's Tower." In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt created Devils Tower National Monument, the first national monument.

Some Plains Indian tribes have objected to the name Devils Tower, considering it offensive to a site they regard as sacred. A monument name change would require legislation and congressional action. Though there is some precedence in the National Park Service for just such a change, Custer Battlefield National Monument is now Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and Mt. McKinley National Park is now Denali National Park, no such action has been taken.

## Traditional Ceremonial Use

American Indians use the Tower as a place of worship. Most of the ceremonies that take place are small groups or individuals, who have gathered for prayer, pipe ceremonies, the tying of prayer cloths, or vision quests. Group rituals also continue here, including sweat lodge and sun dance ceremonies. Devils Tower National Monument issues special use permits for these observances. The ceremonies that take place here require quiet and solitude. Please do not interfere with these rituals, as they are private religious functions, not public events.

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### Prayer Cloths



The brightly colored pieces of cloth that you find hanging in some of the trees along the Tower Trail and elsewhere in the Monument are referred to as prayer cloths, prayer bundles, prayer ribbons, prayer ties, and prayer flags. They are physical, symbolic representations of prayers and are here by American Indian people as part of their religious ceremonies. Please do not touch, take, or disturb these prayer cloths in any way. It is considered culturally insensitive to photograph these items and we request that you do not do so.

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### Voluntary Climbing Closure

Some traditional American Indians view the practice of climbing on the Tower as a disrespectful act. Because of the over 100 year climbing history at Devils Tower National Monument, the National Park Service considers climbing to be an acceptable recreational use. As a compromise between these two viewpoints, during the month of June there is a voluntary climbing closure. The National Park Service asks visitors to refrain from climbing on the Tower or scrambling in the boulders during June out of respect for this being a sacred place and for the large amount of ceremonial use during that month. Some Plains Indian people consider June to be the most sacred month as the summer solstice is traditionally a very important time. These contributed to the decision to use June as the month of the voluntary climbing closure.

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### Managing a Sacred Place

Devils Tower National Monument was established as our nation's first national monument because of its scientific and geological importance. Since that time, there has been a growing awareness of the Tower as a cultural resource. In 1978, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed, stressing the importance of access to sacred sites and protection of American Indian religious rights on public lands. In 1996, Executive Order No. 13007 reinforced the duty land managers have in accommodating American Indian ceremonial use on federally managed sacred sites. All of these contribute to management decisions here at the Tower.