



Navajo Cultural Connections to the Southern Utah Landscape

by Richard M. Begay,
Tribal Historic Preservation Officer,
Navajo Nation



00:00 – 00:20
(Part 1)

Hello! My name is Richard Begay. I'm the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Navajo Nation. I'm recording this for the 25th anniversary event for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. I'm here to talk about the Navajo Cultural connections to the southern Utah landscape.

00:24 – 01:00

The origins of the Navajo people have been debated by archaeologists, ethnographers, and others since the 1800s without much input from the People themselves. The People have been pigeonholed into a small territory set between the “four sacred mountains,” with little attention being given to the greater cultural landscape of the Navajo. These four mountains are Mount Blanca in Colorado, Mount Taylor in New Mexico, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, and Hesperus Mountain in Colorado. The map of our world is much larger.

01:01 – 01:57

The Navajo worldview offers a glimpse of life beyond the Four Mountains and provides a mechanism to explore Navajo connections with other parts of the Southwest, such as the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The area encompassed by this monument is part of cultural map of the Navajo people. The Monument's rugged and beautiful landscape comprises canyons, forests, and mesas. It is surrounded by mountains, and various places within the monument have Navajo names that have survived in our oral traditions— for instance, *Tsé Ligaii Deez'a* for Deer Springs Point, *Tsé Bee Nidisgaii*, the area around the Head of the Rocks Overlook, and *Dzil Bini Ligaii* is a general reference to the Monument. *Dzil* refers to the mesas and rugged terrain of the Monument, and *Ligaii* is for the outcrops of white rock throughout the monument.

01:58 – 02:26

These *Dzil*, these mountains, delineate the earthly and cosmic realm of the Navajo people. Mountains are knowledge keepers, and they provide Navajo people--all people--with all the items needed for us to live: water, plants, animals, air, and other resources. Mountains can teach us and protect us. We address mountains as *Dzil Asdzaan shima*, the Mountain Woman, my mother.

02:27 – 03:27

In the past, many Navajo people migrated to the mountains in the summer to access pasture for their livestock and to enjoy the cooler weather. Elders and medicine people take “retired” ceremonial items back to the mountains, and they go to the mountains to collect water and plants for ceremonial use. Hunters return bones and other parts of deer, elk, and other game animals to the mountains so they may once again become part of the landscape and regenerate. In a sense, our knowledge of the world is vested in ceremonial items, and our teachings about wildlife stay with the remains of animals, so taking them back to the mountains allows the knowledge to stay in place where we live, to stay with us as Navajos.



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Looking out from the high points of the Monument, as we see the tops of the mountains that surround us, we are reminded that our cultural knowledge surrounds us, and that we belong here.

03:28 – 04:23

In Navajo ceremonial and cultural lifeways, the Mountain Mother is intertwined with *Tó Yisdzaan Asdzaan shíma*, Water Woman, and these two are often named together in prayers and songs. Water in all its forms--lakes, streams, rivers, springs, mist--is our mother. As you drive through the Navajo Nation, you will notice signs that simply say *Tó éi iina*, water is life, and indeed it is. We see the traces of water everywhere--in the plants, the wildlife, insects, and birds. In the Monument, the canyons and arroyos that run to *Tooh*, or *Bitsiis Ninee*, the Colorado River, along with those other places where water has left its mark, remind us that there is water, even in its frequent visual absence. As we say in Navajo, *tó bee' na'aztiin*- traces of water are everywhere.

04:24 – 05:26

The Grand Staircase-Escalante area is a rugged one, and these landscapes filled with cliffs, canyons, pinnacles, and so on, are important parts of Navajo cultural teachings and traditions as well. Navajo deities live in, and are part of, the rock-scapes. For instance, *Bil ahit'ini*, or the Visionary, after learning the Nightway ceremonial from the Holy People, disappeared into the canyon cliffs. He comes back to the people in various ways. He, like all Navajo deities, inhabits all mountains, all rock-scapes, all deserts, all water places, and the universe as well. The elders teach us we never travel alone, and that we are always accompanied by our *Diyin Dine'e* (gods/deities/Holy People), even if the landscape is new to us. Our stories of our travels throughout southern Utah, including the lands of the Monument, are buried deep in our collective memory. And the landscape is here to attest to our past presence.

**00:03 – 01:12
(Part 2)**

In the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, and beyond, have lived many people, past and present. In Navajo origins, the people traveled across the vast landscape, including to the shores and islands of the Pacific Ocean in what is now California. In fact, the original four Navajo clans came from islands in the Pacific. We also have in our Tribal history stories of Navajo travels to the Atlantic Ocean. But to get back to southern Utah, early Navajos travelled across the Colorado, Escalante, and Green rivers to hunt and gather resources to survive. In fact, on an interpretative sign near the end of the pavement of the Johnson Canyon Road, north of Kanab, Utah, it says “On the Skutumpah Terraces east of here, Archaic, Anasazi, Paiute, Ute and Navajo peoples hunted wild game and collected plants to supplement their diet.” Ethnographic work for the Bears Ears



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National Monument has further documented Navajo presence in many other parts of southern Utah.

01:13 – 02:13

Throughout the monument we see the countless remains of the Anasazi and Fremont peoples (both groups are referred to as *Anaasazi* in Navajo): burials, rock art panels, structures, trails, and campsites. Many Navajo people believe some of these ancient ones became part of the Navajo people. Navajo clans have their own histories of where they came from, and how they joined the Navajo people. Some clans trace their ancestries to people who lived a nomadic hunting and gathering lifeway, others to people who lived underground or to people who lived in stone houses and cliff dwellings. Still others trace their clan origins to the ancestors of other modern-day tribes, such as the Paiutes, the different Ute bands, and even the Pueblo Indians who reside along the Rio Grande in New Mexico. Because of these connections, Navajo cultural teachings instruct us to respect and honor the physical remains of ancient peoples' lives, including archaeological sites.

02:14 – 03:18

For untold centuries, the landscape has nurtured us, taught us, disciplined us, and has provided everything we need to live as Navajo people. And although our lives unfold here on the ground, the sky forms an integral part of this landscape. In Navajo cultural teachings, the Earth and the Sky/Universe are paired together in prayers and songs. Earth is our mother and Sky, the universe, is our father. Life cannot happen without the Earth's interaction with the universe. And when we experience the earth from another place – such as from the sky – we more clearly appreciate and understand our place in the world. The moon, stars and other celestial objects are often found inscribed on rocks to remind us that the earth is not the only place that has life and power. Today, more people are beginning to understand that we must also consider the universe -- both in the day and in the night -- to fully appreciate the beauty of the lands we inhabit.

03:20 – 03:54

When we look out beyond the boundaries of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument at the greater landscape of southern Utah, we see an array of awe-inspiring places that made the Navajo people: Dixie National Forest, Glen Canyon National Recreational Area, Kaibab National Forest, Bears Ears National Monument, Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument, and others. We can even see Navajo Mountain from here. The public lands are managed by various federal agencies, and we continue to work with them to protect our heritage.

03:55 – 04:23

In celebrating the establishment of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, we acknowledge that the monument holds an incredible amount of



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information and history of which the general public is unaware. Some of that information is held by Indian Tribes who have affiliation with the Monument, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) must continue to work with tribes on a government-to-government basis to manage the Monument's resources.

04:25 – 05:12

Far too many times in the past, Tribal peoples have been denied access to the many resources in ostensibly “public lands.” In the Southwest, Tribal peoples have been driven from public lands for many reasons, including the establishment of parks such as Wupatki National Monument and Chaco Culture National Historical Park, or because of resource development at places such as Bears Ears National Monument. But we remember those places--we remember where our people are buried, where our children were born, where we hunted and gathered, and where our sheep grazed. We must work together to ensure this landscape continues to provide for everyone, for you and me without destroying it.

05:13 – 05:47

I encourage the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument to fund ethnographic projects that would identify resources important to tribes, and to solicit recommendations on how to manage the resources. For our part, Tribes should continue to work with organizations such as Grand Staircase Escalante Partners to increase our understanding of the monument's goals, to promote public awareness, and to help develop appropriate and culturally relevant educational and interpretative programs.

05:48 – 06:28

My people remember these places, have memories of places they traveled, of places, plants, waters that gave us our cultural lifeways and teachings--our homeland is much larger than the Navajo reservation. Let us all celebrate that, today, the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument brings us together, as Americans, so that the many generations of our grandchildren will have this place too as part of their heritage--that this place will be their place and part of their origins too. That we all worked together to be a part of this land. Thank you.