

Conflicting Values: Spirituality and Wilderness at Mt. Shasta¹

Maria Fernandez-Gimenez Lynn Huntsinger Catherine Phillips Barbara Allen-Diaz²

Abstract: Many people from a variety of backgrounds believe that Mt. Shasta is a major spiritual center. Although these "spiritual users" value the area's natural features, their spiritual and social activities, including construction of sweat lodges, medicine wheels, altars, meditation pads, trails, and campsites, are leading to rapid ecological degradation. This situation is not compatible with the solitude and pristine conditions called for in the Wilderness Act. Participatory management of Mt. Shasta by cultural resource users offers a possible solution.

The easily accessible meadows in and adjacent to the Mt. Shasta Wilderness have become a focal point for spiritual and social activity among non-traditional National Forest users. Each summer, hundreds of people gather in the small meadows, often remaining for weeks or months at a time. Mt. Shasta and the meadows have a long history of spiritual importance, beginning with Native American tribes and culminating with the Harmonic Convergence and establishment of a New Age community in Mt. Shasta City (Theodoratus and Evans 1991, King 1934). As much as half of the local population hold some explicit spiritual beliefs about the mountain.

Impacts and Conflicts

Conflicts over the spiritual uses of the meadows center on two types of user impacts: ecological and cultural. Ecological impacts occurring at Panther and Squaw meadows include these: excessive trampling; removal of dead wood and damage to trees; proliferation of user-created trails, campsites and fire rings; construction of dams to create bathing holes in creeks; construction of sweat lodges; and rearrangement of rocks to create medicine wheels and other structures.

Cultural impacts, such as construction of altars or mandalas, reflect the use of the resource for cultural purposes. They may or may not have an ecological impact, and may conflict directly with other users' cultural norms. Constructing shrines and placing crystals or other offerings in Panther Spring is offensive to the Wintu tribe of Native Americans who also hold the spring to be sacred (Theodoratus and Evans 1991). These structures also conflict with Forest Service wilderness policy. Drumming, chanting, and nudity, which sometimes accompany spiritual use, may also be considered cultural impacts and are the subject of frequent user complaints.

USDA Forest Service and Spiritual Users: Conflicting Cultures

The non-Native American spiritual users of Mt. Shasta are predominantly Caucasian, span a variety of belief systems, and represent every socio-economic level. Though they generally defy definition as a group and incorporate several distinct sub-groups, the spiritual users share certain values, behaviors and beliefs that differ from those of the USDA Forest Service or other user groups such as climbers or skiers.

The culture and land ethic of the Forest Service is founded on scientific understanding of the natural world. Aldo Leopold described the land ethic as an ecological conscience, evolving from an awareness of the interconnectedness of people and their environment and based on a scientific understanding of ecology (Leopold 1949). Forest Service guidelines for wilderness management specify that "...National Forest Wilderness resources shall be managed to promote, perpetuate, and where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land and its specific values of solitude, physical and mental challenge, scientific study, inspiration and primitive recreation" (36 CFR 293.2).

The New Age land ethic is based on an individual and collective spiritual relationship with the earth as a living being (GALA). It incorporates the notion of human interconnectedness with the physical and biological world, but is founded on a personal relationship with earth, rather than a scientific understanding of ecology. A goal of New Age practitioners is to overcome humanity's alienation from the earth and to restore "balance" and "harmony" in personal lives and in human relationships with nature. Some New Agers borrow heavily from Native American or other indigenous earth-centered traditions, or from a variety of religious and cultural archetypes including Judeo-Christianity to develop a new cosmology. Others emphasize love, light, the inner-God and ascendancy. Many believe that higher beings or masters, and/or extra-terrestrial beings are available to assist humans in their quest for enlightenment. Mt. Shasta is believed by some to be an area of frequent UFO activity. Some believe in a city called Lemuria located inside the mountain and inhabited by benevolent giants or "Lemurians" (Cerve 1988).

A New Age publication suggests the following activities for individuals wanting to reconnect with the earth: camping in wilderness areas, solitary or group pilgrimages to sacred sites, and earth renewal celebrations (solstices and equinoxes) (Gray 1991). All of these are common activities at Mt. Shasta. In contrast to the Forest Service emphasis on solitude and physical activity, the New Age views wilderness as a source of community and place of gathering, as well as a place for solitary contemplation.

The highly structured and hierarchical organizational culture of the Forest Service contrasts with that of the spiritual

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²Graduate Student Researcher, Assistant Professor, Graduate Student Researcher, and Assistant Professor, Department of Forestry and Resource Management, University of California, Berkeley.

users. They have no homogeneous organized group, no identified leader, no single belief system. Some New Age interviewees overtly rejected rules and authority, expressing a dislike of "control." Frequently spiritual users go by unusual names that make formal contacts difficult or impossible.

Finally, each group perceived the other to be hypocritical. The Forest Service noted that while New Agers profess respect for nature, they are ignorant of ecology and unaware of the impacts of their activities on the alpine ecosystem. Spiritual users found it difficult to take the Forest Service seriously in its attempts to protect the meadows when it has permitted logging over most of the mountain and is planning to develop a downhill ski area adjacent to Panther Meadow. While the Forest Service tells visitors not to move rocks to construct wheels or altars, the Forest Service moves rocks to build trails. Forest Service personnel we interviewed believed that Native American uses and values should have precedence over those of New Age users, and described some New Agers as "Native American Wannabes." In contrast, most New Age interviewees felt that Native American spiritual uses or values should not take precedence over their own, as the Native American tradition is only one part of a continuum in the evolution of human spirituality, of which New Agers are the latest and most developed part. However, New Agers criticized Forest Service management as insensitive to the spiritual values of both the Native American and New Age communities. In sum, we can characterize the Forest Service as justifying its activities via the culture of "science and rational thinking," and the New Agers as basing their actions on "spiritual understanding and cosmic relationships."

Implementing the Convergence Model of Intercultural Communication

During summer 1991, the Mt. Shasta Ranger District of the Forest Service undertook an experiment in the effectiveness of the "convergence model" in managing spiritual use of the meadows by recruiting a New Age volunteer to work at the meadows. The convergence model emphasizes personal communication, through which shared cultural norms or values can be established, creating a "convergence" culture. The "most effective means of creating this convergence culture is through a member of the agency culture who is perceived to be similar to and empathetic toward the cultural user group" (Simcox 1990).

The volunteer, a well-educated man in his mid forties, had been drawn to Mt. Shasta by its power and approached the Forest Service with a desire to serve the mountain. The Forest Service stationed the volunteer at the trailhead into Panther Meadows, adjacent to the Ski Bowl parking lot. The volunteer's role was to greet the public, inform them of camping restrictions in the meadow, educate them about the restoration project and the sensitivity of Panther Spring, and urge them to leash their

dogs and stay on established trails. The Forest Service also considered him important in gathering information about the number and type of visitors, and about the general atmosphere in Panther Meadows and the Ski Bowl parking lot. The volunteer and two graduate student researchers wore t-shirts identifying them as part of the cooperative "Mt. Shasta Meadows Restoration Project" that included the USDA Forest Service, but were not otherwise identified as Forest Service personnel.

The volunteer appeared able to communicate with all types of visitors. Because of his location he developed a special relationship with users who stayed in the area for extended periods of time. Most of these people were engaged in some personal or spiritual quest. Others were essentially rural indigents (homeless people) with some historical connection to the mountain. Several of the latter were mentally disabled and reported that they lived on government support. The volunteer explained that he grew a beard during the summer to relate better to these "street people." He also invited the public to informal campfires at his campsite and shared his food with those in need.

Both Forest Service personnel and the volunteer described the "experiment" as a success. Illegal camping was virtually eliminated in Panther Meadow, and vandalism and offensive behavior were significantly reduced. The experiment helped to establish a convergence culture between the Forest Service and spiritual users; however, conflicts still exist. One of the most difficult to overcome is the mutual perception of hypocrisy, because each group is accurate in assessing the disparities between the stated beliefs and actions of the other. Ongoing research aims to assist the Forest Service in better understanding the culture of spiritual users and working more effectively with them to protect and restore the meadows of Mt. Shasta.

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