Considering Native American Perspectives

It is important to understand that the Two Nations one reservation exhibit, guides and chronological narrative were never intended to exhaustively convey a complete history of this very critical period of western U.S. history, or the complex interplay between native and non-native people during the era. These topics are beyond the scope and design of the “Two Nations one reservation” exhibit specifically or the WY Treaties Matter project generally.

By design the pop-up exhibit project focused specifically on the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes now sharing the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming. It is important to recognize that many other tribes, particularly the Crow, Sioux and Cheyenne were also living in and fighting over much of the same geographical area now comprising Wyoming during the same time discussed throughout the exhibit and guides. The project focused on the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho because these are the tribes sharing a reservation designated for them within the boundaries of Wyoming.

Likewise, the project was never intended to either describe or interpret Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho culture, tradition, worldview, or religion. Some of these topics, however, deserve special mention in reference to Native American participation in the Ft. Laramie and Ft. Bridger treaties commemorated in 2018.

First, it is essential to realize that treaty deliberations between federal government representatives and Native American participants were accompanied by profound and nearly insurmountable differences in land tenure concepts, territoriality, language, spirituality, and political and social organization. Effective communication between the consulting parties must have been particularly challenging and much must have been lost in translation due to language differences and the nuanced rhetoric of the federal diplomacy. Further, Native American treaty representatives may not have understood they were negotiating with U.S. government officials who could neither guarantee nor implement treaty provisions because of American constitutional conventions in which Senate ratification was required before any treaty could be executed. The end result was that tribal expectations regarding treaty provisions were often unfulfilled.

Similarly, it is doubtful that Native American participants fully understood the expansionist urgency that animated the Euro-American drive to spread westward across the continent during the 19th century. White Americans believed the United States was destined by divine providence to spread democracy and progress throughout North America, which inevitably dispossessed Indian tribes of the land their ancestors had inhabited for millennia. As they found themselves increasingly relegated to the periphery of their former power and influence, most Indian tribes of the Northwestern Plains resisted, either by force or mediation, the unrelenting tide of white immigration.

Land ownership as understood under Euro-American legal practice was a concept not shared or understood by American Indians whose relationship with land was very different. To traditional Native Americans, land tenure was not subject to legal ownership, exclusive use, or well-defined external boundaries. Instead, tribal “boundaries” were amorphous and defined by expansive, interrelated cultural landscapes containing village sites, hunting and plant gathering areas, and ceremonial sites connected by a complex web of oral tradition and ethnohistory. Collectively, these landscapes signified tribal occupancy and land use without conveying legal ownership, and also embodied tribal identity in ways that carefully surveyed artificial boundaries could not.

Finally, it is critical to note that Euro-American treaty negotiators likely failed to comprehend the way that Native Americans related to the landscapes they inhabited. To the white negotiators, land was a commodity with economic value. To Indian tribes, the same land was the living incarnation of a worldview in which there was very little difference between the secular and the sacred, or between pragmatism and religion. The important geophysical features that defined tribal territorial identity served simultaneously as territorial markers, navigational aids, and in many cases, sacred sites.

For instance, places such as Devils Tower (known as “Bear’s Lodge” to most Plains Indian tribes) is an important sacred site representing uninterrupted centuries of ceremonial use by Indian tribes. It expresses powerful religious principals, abundant spirit life, and cosmological origins; and even today is a pilgrimage site for many tribes, including the Shoshone and Arapaho.

Bear’s Lodge is also deeply embedded with tribal historical narratives. To the Shoshone, Bear’s Lodge in northeastern Wyoming generally marks the eastern extent of an area where the tribe exerted a strong and influential presence during the 17th and 18th centuries, an era when the tribe was powerfully enabled by a relatively large population and the early acquisition of horses from their Comanche brethren. Bear’s Lodge is also historically significant to the Northern Arapaho. Following their brief but lethal war of retribution in response to the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, Arapaho and Cheyenne warriors convened near Bear’s Lodge before traveling to their respective winter camps. Native Americans were understandably reluctant to cede land that so fundamentally reflected the nearly seamless linkage between their culture history, tribal identity, ­and spiritual practice.