

## RECOGNITION OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AT RED ROCK CANYON, KERN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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### ABSTRACT

In 1968 funding passed the California Legislature and was signed by the Governor which established the long sought after Red Rock Canyon State Park. Created primarily to preserve the canyon's colorful, inspiring and artistically weathered landscape and several uncommon biological species, pursuant to the new protective status, cultural resources documentation and preservation benefited. During the past decade an intensified archaeological, historical and archival research program has documented a prolonged human use pattern with emerging elements of significance. Red Rock Canyon's use by Native Americans, the Death Valley Forty-niners, wagon and stage lines, placer gold miners, a temporary railroad, the motion picture industry, and modern highways and recreationists has produced a mosaic of overlapping cultural components within a rural landscape. The interaction and interrelationship of topography, exposures of valuable geologic materials, the canyon's striking aesthetics and available water in a xeric environment have focused human endeavors, resulting in the elements necessary to consider the terrain worthy of recognition as a cultural landscape.

### INTRODUCTION

In the northwestern Mojave Desert of Kern County, California, the limited rains of an arid environment have etched over endless eons a powerful theater of sculptured rock. The scenic inspiration and wonder, combined with unique biological and scientific values, led this badlands landscape to be preserved as a unit of the California State Park System. Human use and perception of this canyon, and its exploitable resources, will be discussed within the context of a "cultural landscape." Thus, we enter the complexity of Red Rock Canyon, a topography influenced by human behavior and in which human behavior has been influenced by topography.

The term "cultural landscape" represents an attempt to define the significance of human interaction with terrain. The terminology is utilized in some fashion to measure "special cultural value" (Melnick *et al.* 1984:3). The term, however,

remains diffusely defined, causing its usage or investment to have less distinction than a National Register of Historic Places designation. Though the use of "cultural landscape," at present, has less definitive value, the term's application can serve the purpose of elevating the concern for preservation or the regard for the human interaction which has occurred on a specific site. The term "cultural landscape" speaks in a broad fashion to the purveyor's determination of site significance. It might also indicate the significance of the heritage of the remaining or remnant features surviving on a rural landscape. Recent literature attempts to provide increased criteria for the identification of cultural landscapes and the evaluation of their significance (Clement 1999).

The term "cultural landscape" is useful to apply to my principal site of research and investigation, Red Rock Canyon State Park, as it implies my desire to elevate the stature and indicate the importance of the human events which have transpired within this rural landscape,

and to document the repetitive nature of the human interaction and perceptions within multiple cultures utilizing scenic Red Rock Canyon.

### THREE PRINCIPAL USE THEMES

The human use of space over time within Red Rock Canyon can be broadly defined or categorized within three use patterns. All three themes display both social and economic roles within human societies. The first category is defined by physiography. Red Rock Canyon is part of the topographic feature known as the El Paso Mountains and, as the name of the mountain range implies, is an important pass through which regional transportation is required due to the canyon's occurrence adjacent to the Sierra Nevada and El Paso mountains. Red Rock Canyon is a natural funnel in the landscape and has been an essential transportation corridor for multiple cultures. The presence of water, in the form of local springs, was also a critical attraction to human passage through a xeric or desert environment.

The second use pattern has been the exploitation of geologic resources. The aridity of the desert landscape produces less vegetative concealment and thus geologic resources are more readily exposed to human investigation and use in desert landscapes than elsewhere.

The third principal use of Red Rock Canyon has been human aesthetic appreciation and spiritual inspiration derived from the canyon's majesty. This aspect, which appears to date from the earliest cultures forward, has increased in importance relative to increased and concentrated human populations and the invention of improved modes of transportation.

These 3 human use patterns remain repetitive themes as we briefly investigate the known human interaction with the Red Rock Canyon landscape over time.

### OVERVIEW OF NATIVE AMERICAN INTERACTION

The earliest evidence of human presence within the Red Rock Canyon watershed derives from the discovery of a single chalcedony flake which was discovered *in situ* within a Pleistocene (Ice Age) stream bed dated at 10,730 BP. The flake displays evidence of human modification (Whistler and Sampson 1994:31). Studies of local packrat (*Neotoma* sp.) middens indicate that during the late Ice Age a different flora existed on the Mojave plateau which locally was dominated by a pinyon-juniper woodland consisting of *Pinus monophylla* and *Juniperus californica* (McCarten and Van Devender 1988:226).

Fossils found from this era within Red Rock Canyon document the presence of Columbian mammoths (*Mammuthus columbi*), mastodons (*Mammut* sp.), horse (*Equus* cf. *occidentalis*), camel (cf. *Camelops*) and a large bison (*Bison antiquus*) (Whistler et al. 1991:55). The Ice Age ended approximately 10,000 years ago and melting glaciers created large lakes in the western and northern Mojave regions, which eventually evaporated as the climate became increasingly arid. About 8,000 years ago a change from woodland to desert vegetation occurred in the Mojave (Van Devender 1977:189).

Landscapes and the human relationship to them are not static over time. The Native American perception and use of Red Rock Canyon had to evolve with the changing climate and its imprint on the physical landscape. For instance, local evidence (such as exposed cliffs of Miocene geology capped by thinner Pleistocene strata observable at the White House Cliffs, the Temple of the Sun and other canyon localities) suggests the canyon we experience today has been mostly exposed by Holocene erosion.

The Kawaiisu, or Newooah as they referred to themselves (Kroeber 1976:602), were the native peoples documented using Red Rock Canyon at the inception of local recorded history. The Kawaiisu's core area existed in the adjacent Sierra Nevada, Piute and Tehachapi mountains (Zigmond 1986:398). Red Rock Canyon was utilized on a seasonal basis, primarily in winter

months (Greene 1995). The Red Rock Canyon theater provided a diversity of products and values which enriched the Kawaiisu's physical and spiritual life. A distinct plant assemblage provided their community with varied food and medicinal resources, as well as raw materials for the production of goods (Zigmond 1981). Geologic exposures, principally of siliceous chert and chalcedony, but occasionally of volcanics, were quarried for tool production and apparent trade.

During Native American cultural dominance the topography of Red Rock Canyon funneled travel and trade through the canyon pass. It is logical that the distribution of materials from the regionally significant obsidian source in the Coso Mountains (east of the southern Sierra Nevada mountains) toward coastal southern California utilized Red Rock Canyon. The topography, water sources and recovery of Coso obsidian from numerous sites within Red Rock Canyon attest to this probability (McGuire *et al.* 1982:41,164-165; Gardner 1994:131-132,228-229; and obsidian sourcing data on file at Red Rock Canyon State Park).

Red Rock Canyon was known as "the canyon with rocks on fire" to the Kawaiisu (Greene 1994) and the spiritual inspiration of the canyon is strongly hinted at in known Kawaiisu literature and personal contacts (Zigmond 1986:407; Greene 1994, 1995 personal communications). Red Rock Canyon is also a significant fossil terrain (Whistler and Burbank 1992). A canyonland displaying scenic wonders and readily unveiling or displaying the fossil remains of prehistoric large mammals would be and has been viewed as a special place of awe by many cultures.

Since 1994 new discoveries increase the perceived regional significance of Red Rock Canyon within the Late Middle Period of southern California pre-history. Extensive high-quality chert and chalcedony quarries have been documented in the northeastern reaches of the park on recently-acquired properties. The remains found at these primary reduction quarries and the associated secondary reduction sites appear to exceed local production needs and are viewed as a technology designed to produce tradable commodities. Preliminary results suggest the

quarries produced biface preforms or blanks for regional distribution. The majority of recovered projectile points from these production sites are either of Elko or Rose Spring style.

## BEGINNING THE HISTORIC PERIOD

The "historic period" at Red Rock Canyon begins with the passage through the canyon of the famous Death Valley Forty-niners in January and February of 1850. Following a Native American trail these weary and forlorn travelers used Red Rock Canyon as a water source and a corridor of travel. Lewis Manley, years later, referred to the pass through the El Paso Mountains they used as "Red Cañon" and elsewhere described the striped sedimentary cliffs of the Red Rooster area at the mouth of Red Rock Canyon as viewed from Desert Springs in the valley south of the canyon (Manley 1894: 235, 237).

By 1862 the trails through Red Rock Canyon were replaced by the first wagon road (*The Semi-Weekly News* of Los Angeles 3-5-1862:2). From this time until 1893 Red Rock Canyon was principally utilized by freight and stage lines serving the Eastern Sierra region with both stage and freight stops in operation within the canyon adjacent to springs.

## DRY PLACER MINING

Only a handful of people lived in Red Rock Canyon until the glitter of gold enticed increased human presence in October of 1893 (Faul 1990:131, Sampson and Faul 1994:2). Placer gold was discovered and for a short period 200 miners took up residence in the canyon (*Los Angeles Herald* 12-3-1893:13). Like the Native Americans who quarried chert, these miners tended to find their exploitable geologic resource on rugged ridgelines and gulches. Both groups sought more comfortable locations on local flats below these ridgelines to establish their camps and further refine their products.

The lack of sufficient water forced the local miners to utilize "dry placer" mining technology

(Faull 1990:132, Sampson and Faull 1994:4). Red Rock Canyon represents at present the only international location where the terrain modified by dry placer technology is preserved in a protected park.

The socio-economic evolution of the mines progressed from individual subsistence miners in 1893, to these miners banding together to share profits and workloads, but began to collapse in early to mid-1894 when capitalists who employed other miners purchased the gold fields. The *Daily Californian* of Bakersfield reported on May 24, 1894 that mining was waning due to a decline in the output of gold dust (p. 3). On June 29, 1894 the *Daily Californian* reported, "At Red Rock there are only about forty men left" (p. 2). This number tumbled to 18 men operating 7 dry washers in an 1896 report and the active claims were only said to "pay wages" (Crawford 1896:195).

### THE RED ROCK RAILROAD

From October of 1908 until December of 1910, a railroad, known as the Red Rock Railroad, existed within Red Rock Canyon, again representing a transportation mode utilizing the geomorphology of the canyon pass. The railroad was constructed to transport supplies and materials to build the local segment of the Owens Valley to Los Angeles aqueduct (City of Los Angeles 1916:94). The 8.35-mile-long railroad terminated in a wye at the Dove Springs residence and work camp, which constructed portions of the local Freeman and Jawbone Divisions of the aqueduct (City of Los Angeles 1909:15,24,56).

Initially known as the Owens River Project (and later referred to as the Los Angeles Aqueduct) this undertaking was the first of the large water rearrangement projects in California this century and started the "water" century (as the 1800s were the state's "gold" century). California's mammoth twentieth-century water diversion and re-distribution projects produced large scale land alteration. The newly rearranged water resources altered the human settlement patterns within the state, converted large tracks of semi-arid lands into agricultural croplands, and most importantly shifted the "balance of power" in the state away from the

northern natural harbors and rivers to the previously arid southland. The significance of the Owens River Project within California history undoubtedly qualifies this undertaking and some of its archaeological remains as worthy of enrollment on the National Register of Historic Places.

### FROM GOLD AND TRANSPORTATION TO AESTHETICS

In Red Rock Canyon human use patterns were evolving, driven by both improving modes of transportation and the increasing congestion of large urban centers. No one represents the transition period in Red Rock Canyon better than Rudolf Hagen.

Rudolf Hagen, an immigrant from Germany, settled in Red Rock Canyon in 1895 as the gold strikes waned. Hagen, an entrepreneur, juxtapositioned his economy on two of the canyon's principal use themes, eventually expanding to service all three. Hagen dabbled in gold recovery, but mostly serviced, as a local monopoly, the passers-by on the local stage route and provided provisions to local miners. Hagen established a post office and acquired the heart of the canyon through mineral and homestead patents.

Following the turn of the century, the automobile began to reshape California society and its values. The first automobile trip through Red Rock Canyon was reportedly in 1905 (Heyser 1988:79) and a paved highway was eventually established through the canyon to expedite travel to the Eastern Sierra region. The importance of this transportation corridor is attested by the fact that 3000 people gathered in Red Rock Canyon in 1931 to celebrate the opening of the new paved roadway (*Bakersfield Californian* 2-23-1931:9).

With the advent of the automobile, travel and access to the Mojave Desert and the scenic halls of Red Rock Canyon increased. The aesthetic appreciation of the canyon for the first time in the American period began to soar. Camping became popular within Red Rock Canyon and proposals to preserve the canyon as a "national monument"

surfaced as early as 1915 (Barnbaum 1970:31). By 1920 Rudolf Hagen was providing recreational maps of the canyon to the public, realizing the economics of tourism. By the mid-1920s travel magazines, such as *Touring Topics*, routinely touted outings to Red Rock Canyon (Archer 1925).

Improved mobility brought Hollywood to Red Rock Canyon. The aesthetics of the canyon have inspired over 140 motion pictures to be filmed (in part) in these badlands. The use of the canyon by the motion picture industry begins during the silent picture era (Schmidt 1998:12). This is an industry which has had a global impact. The majority of the movies filmed in Red Rock Canyon were westerns which used the colorful and imposing backdrop of Red Rock Canyon as a graphic stage upon which to set in motion the mythic image of the American West. Red Rock Canyon has thus helped to achieve a global image or ideal of the American western frontier landscape.

Red Rock Canyon became an often-visited source of inspiration for painters, poets and photographers. Photographer Edward Weston wrote, "Justly famed for its extravagantly eroded and riotously colored formations, Red Rock Canyon is a source of neverending delight for photographers and desert lovers" (Weston 1938:8). The *Bakersfield Californian* wrote, "Want to be a writer? A poet? A painter? Want to indulge in any of the fine arts? If so, go to Red Rock canyon. Kern county's nationally famous garden of natural wonders" (1-23-1920:1).

Red Rock Canyon had entered the "age of adjectives" describing its hallowed scenery, and had become a point of destination rather than transit. Citizens' efforts to preserve Red Rock Canyon continued for decades until legislation was enacted to include this special landscape as part of the State Park System in 1968.

The late Joseph Campbell stated:

People claim the land by creating sacred sites, by mythologizing the animals and plants - they invest the land with spiritual powers. It becomes like a temple, a place

of meditation ... To turn the land where they live into a place of spiritual relevance (Campbell and Moyers 1988: 92-93).

Certain landscapes have a special presence, a special impact on the human experience and conscience, and thus attract human activity focused, if you will, by their ethereal qualities. The aesthetics and scenic splendor become recognized by the prevailing societies for their ability to inspire and even spiritualize human presence. In our society we set these areas aside as our "parks" (national, state and sometimes local). They are places of relaxation, refreshment, rejuvenation and our re-creation. They receive focused human activity and thus could be termed a form of "cultural landscape."

Red Rock Canyon is one of these inspirational landscapes, where aesthetic elements have currently prevailed over resource exploitation and have placed constraints upon the highway transportation corridor which exists within the canyon today. The value to society of the aesthetic qualities inherent in Red Rock Canyon are increasing in stature. The retention of the features which awe human perception are dominating the previous human interactions and needs from this landscape.

## CULTURAL LANDSCAPE CONCLUSIONS

The Red Rock Canyon landform contains at least four significant "cultural landscapes;" those of (a) regional Native American quarry, (b) preserved historic dry placer mining terrain, (c) a Los Angeles/Owens River aqueduct construction site, and finally (d) a site of motion picture heritage.

However, Red Rock Canyon as a whole is a mosaic, nicked by scars of human interaction, and in a certain sense is itself a cultural landscape. Red Rock Canyon State Park is a landscape in which scenic appreciation, stress reduction and species preservation prevail and where cultural resources are valued, protected, studied and preserved as part of our societal heritage.

Red Rock Canyon State Park remains a

valuable contemplative model upon which to test and refine the interacting concepts of "cultural landscape" and significance.

### NOTES

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