



Cultures clash on the range

Air Force, Indians seek common ground at Nellis

By Richard Levy
LAS VEGAS SUN

More than a generation ago, a war plane spit large bullets into Nevada's parched floor and scarred an ancient rock carving.

The copper missiles, bled green with age, remain embedded in the petroglyph, discovered last year on the Nevada Test Site by American Indians.

The defaced carving illustrates the clashing of two cultures: the military's need to destroy the land and the Indians desire to cherish it.

The rock - even as it symbolizes years of conflict - is in part responsible for increased communication between the two groups, an American Indian official said.

Finding the 6-inch-long bullets in the petroglyphs intensified Indians' desire to protect their heritage, said Richard Arnold, director of the Las Vegas Indian Center.

It helped prompt the first high-level talks between 19 tribes and Nellis officials. This month, they meet for a second time.

The discussions are occurring for a number of reasons:

- Presidential order. About a year ago, President Clinton asked all federal agencies to improve their role as caretakers of land that first belonged to Indians.
- Federal law. In order to continue to use Nevada as a bombing range, the Air Force must complete an environmental impact statement. The comprehensive analysis of the military's effect on the land requires officials to seek public comment.
- National conscience. There is a growing awareness of American Indians' legal rights to artifacts and ancestral land. At Nellis, this is demonstrated by the hiring of a base archaeologist last year and a \$271,000 contract with Science Applications International Corp. to meet with Indian tribes and develop an ethnohistory of the Nellis Range.

Ultimately, the talks may open the doors to 3.1 million acres of land that have been off limits to Southern Paiutes, Western Shoshone and others for almost 50 years.

"That area is part of our cultural landscape and ecosystem," Arnold said "That traditionally was all of our territory.

"We don't recognize the Department of Energy and Nellis. Those fences and boundaries don't exist to us."

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Nellis Air Force Base has scheduled six public meetings to receive input on management of the Nellis Range:

Before the face-to-face meetings, discussion between the tribes and military officials in Las Vegas occurred in writing or by telephone.

"We've been doing it poorly," said Susan Barrow, chief of Nellis' natural and cultural resources management and range liaison division.

In Southern Nevada, the military and Indians are conducting some of the most extensive research into Nevada Indian artifacts and culture. There are an estimated 1,500 sites on the bombing range that have some historical or cultural significance. While many of those sites may be "just a flint chip" with little research value, Barrow said, about 240 are eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. One such site is the Pintwater Cave, in the southeast corner of A Department of Defense grant is allowing archaeologists to conduct a three-year study of the Pintwater Cave. Scientists from Nellis and the Desert Research Institute planned to travel to the cave this weekend to review their work. "I've talked to Native Americans who say, "My grandfather lived in that cave," base archeologist Keith Myhrer said. "That's pretty powerful stuff. " Nellis has hired an ethnographer to interview tribal elders and document tales and songs that refer to specific locations on the bombing range. Federal money is paying historians to sift through old newspaper articles and other manuscripts that document the interaction early Nevadans had with the Indians who once lived on the bombing range.

And for \$99,000, contracted scientists are verifying Nellis' master list of petroglyphs by sampling the rock art, dating it and, with Indians' help, interpreting it.

The bullet-scarred petroglyphs like the one found on Test Site land bordering the range are an anomaly, base officials said.

Fighter pilots from throughout the world train in Southern Nevada because of its ideal flying conditions. They use just 3 percent of the 3.1 million acres as target practice - the rest is needed to protect the public from wandering into a simulated war zone, Barrow said.

"We don't go out there and bomb all over," she said. "Quite frankly, our pilots are getting better over the years and they hit the targets."

Yet some American Indians remain skeptical, wanting to visit the bombing range before accepting the words of scientists and military officials.

The EIS program, which involves extensive research and numerous public meetings, must be completed by 1998.

The next step: six public meetings from June 17-26 in Indian Springs, Caliente, Las Vegas, Beatty, Tonopah and Reno. The goal is to involve the public in the process and record their concerns.

Scientists have found evidence that the bombing range actually serves as a refuge for threatened wildlife, plants and now Indian artifacts.

The reason? Targets are located on dry lakebeds where little can survive, scientists and military officials agree. The hills and mountains that rise from the edges of the hardpan make poor target zones but good living conditions. Wildlife now thrive there, as did early American Indians, they said.

"I think if the property was not protected by the Air Force, if it was on Bureau of Land Management land, for example, it would be a lot less protected," said Desert Research Institute archaeologist Paul Buck, who found no signs of looters, offroad vehicles ... or missiles.

- **JUNE 17: Indian Springs High School, 6-9 p.m.**
- **JUNE 18: Caliente Youth Center, 6-9 p.m.**
- **JUNE 20: Chaparral High School, Las Vegas, 6-9 p.m.**
- **JUNE 24: Beatty Community Center, 6-9 p.m.**
- **JUNE 25: Tonopah Convention Center, 6-9 p.m.**
- **JUNE 26: Lawlor Events Center, Reno, 6-9 p.m.**
- **WRITTEN: Direct written comments to Col. Michael Fukey, Nellis Air Force Base Box 9919, Las Vegas, NV 89191.**

So tribal leaders and military officials hold on to hope.

And the scarred petroglyph - its copper-green bullets oxidizing within the rock - may no longer illustrate years of military occupation, but coexistence.

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Photo Caption: ARCHAEOLOGISTS STUDYING Indian history on the Nellis Range are focusing on Pintwater Cave near Indian Springs. It is about 100 feet wide and 40 feet high at the entrance, extending back about 200 feet.

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