



Foundation Document Overview

Chaco Culture National Historical Park

New Mexico



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of CHACO CULTURE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK is to preserve, protect, interpret, and facilitate research on the internationally significant monumental architecture and the objects they contain, cultural landscapes, and other elements of Chacoan culture located in the center of the Chacoan world.



Significance

Significance statements express why Chaco Culture National Historical Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The Chacoan civilization flourished between the 9th and 13th centuries and was characterized by remarkable achievements in architecture, designed landscape, craftsmanship, agriculture, social complexity, economic organization, engineering, and astronomy. Chaco Canyon was once the cultural center for a system of communities linked by an extensive road and trading network within a 50,000-square-mile region.
- The monumental structures known as Chacoan great houses are among the best preserved, largest, and most complex buildings constructed in North America until the late 19th century. Several sites found within the park are formally recognized as archeological type sites (definitive examples) by the scientific community.
- Since the 1880s, scientific research in the park has yielded a detailed record of the environment and lifeways of the region's former inhabitants. This research has resulted in a significant collection of more than 2 million objects, records, and samples that are curated to further scientific inquiry, public education, and preservation of shared heritage. Ongoing research continues to expand the knowledge of the Chacoan culture.

Significance

- While Chacoan influence spanned an approximately 50,000-square-mile region, the cultural landscapes within and surrounding the canyon proper comprise the most intact example of Chacoan architecture, roadways, earthworks, rock art, and other landscape features. Chacoans observed the sky and incorporated astronomical knowledge into the built environment, demonstrating a tangible connection between the sky and their daily lives.
- The global significance of the Chaco system, which dominated much of the Southwest during the mid-9th to 13th centuries, was reaffirmed by the designation of Chaco Culture World Heritage Site, which includes Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Aztec Ruins National Monument, and five Chacoan sites managed by the Bureau of Land Management.
- Created by Congress, the Chaco Culture Archeological Protection Sites Program is a unique management model through which the National Park Service, the Navajo Nation, and other agencies collaboratively protect and preserve a portion of the vast Chaco system that extends well beyond the borders of the national park.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Core Canyon Communities and Associated Architectural Features**
- **Chaco Regional System**
- **Museum Collections**
- **Ongoing Cultural Connections**
- **Unique Visitor Experience**

Chaco Culture National Historical Park contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Paleontological Resources**



Description

Chaco Culture National Historical Park is located in northwestern New Mexico, about 150 miles northwest of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The park was first established as a national monument by presidential proclamation in 1907. It was later expanded and designated Chaco Culture National Historical Park in 1980 to recognize the interconnections between the park and its 50,000-square-mile area of influence. In recognition of its unique archeological resources, Chaco Culture National Historical Park was named a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in 1987. With this listing, the national monument became one of 23 World Heritage Sites in the United States.

The park extends over 34,000 acres and contains some 4,000 recorded archeological sites. The Chacoan people combined many elements including preplanned architectural designs, astronomical alignments, geometry, landscaping, and engineering, to create an ancient urban center of spectacular public architecture. From the 9th to the 13th centuries, Chaco Canyon was the center of a civilization of social, political, and architectural sophistication.

The cultural flowering of the Chacoan people began in the mid-800s and lasted more than 300 years. Using masonry techniques unique for their time, Chacoans constructed massive stone buildings (great houses) of multiple stories, containing hundreds of rooms, much larger than any previously built. The buildings were planned from the start and construction on some of these structures spanned decades and even centuries. Sophisticated astronomical markers, communication features, water control devices, and formal earthen mounds surround the great houses. The buildings were placed within a landscape surrounded by sacred mountains, mesas, and shrines that still have deep spiritual meaning for their descendants.

By 1050, Chaco had become the ceremonial, administrative, and economic center of the San Juan Basin. Its sphere of influence was extensive. Dozens of great houses in Chaco Canyon were connected by roads to more than 150 great houses throughout the region. The great houses may have been impressive examples of “public” architecture used periodically during times of ceremony, commerce, and trading when temporary populations came to the canyon for these events.

In the mid-1100s and 1200s, change came to Chaco as new construction slowed and Chaco’s role as a regional center shifted. Chaco’s influence continued at Aztec, Mesa Verde, the Chuska Mountains, and other centers to the north, south, and west. In time, the people shifted away from Chacoan ways, migrated to new areas, and reorganized their world. Their descendants are the modern Southwest Indians who continue look upon Chaco as a spiritual place to be honored and respected.

