

Strategic Collaboration with the National Park Service Advances Native Sovereignty

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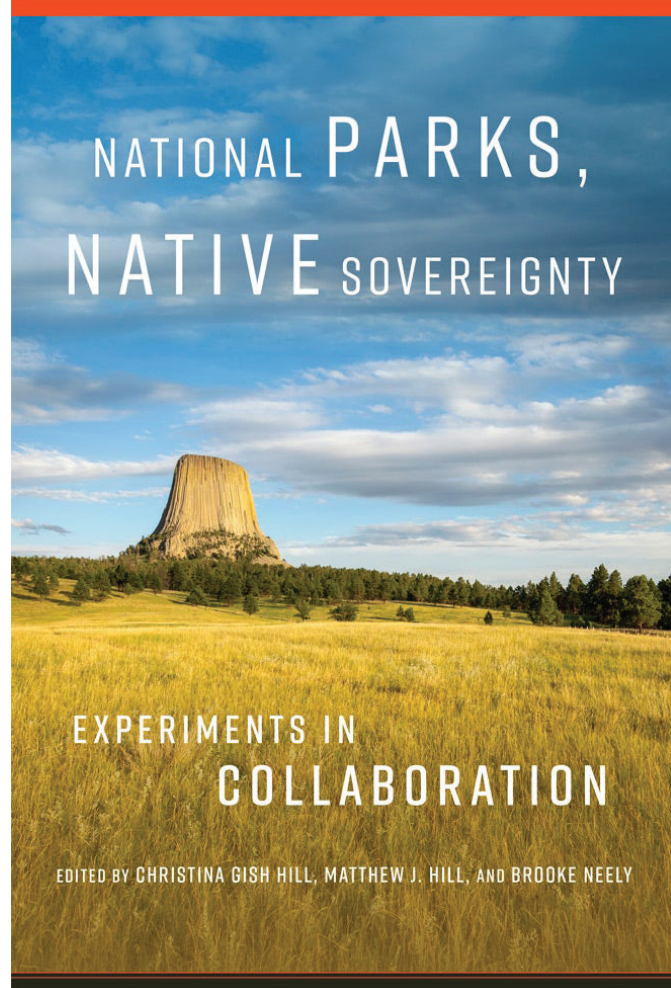
On December 16, 2021, US Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland shook hands with the newly sworn-in director of the National Park Service (NPS) Charles “Chuck” Sams III. At first glance, the promotional photo of Haaland and Sams on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial appears to be a swearing in like any other.¹ Of course, as many commentators emphasized at the time, this ceremony also marked a notable historical moment—when the first Native person to head the Department of the Interior officially welcomed the first Native person to head the NPS. Early in her tenure as interior secretary, Haaland had already made significant steps—advocating for tribal land protections, boarding school investigations, and renaming derogatory place names.² Many have wondered what precedent the appointment of Haaland and Sams may set for how the federal government engages with Native peoples and tribal nations across the United States, and how their leadership could establish new cultural norms for recognizing Native sovereignty more broadly.

The editors of this volume see this as a moment to celebrate and reflect. When we began this project, as much as we would have hoped for there to be Native people at the helm of these important institutions, we would not have predicted it would happen so soon. We read the news of Haaland’s and Sams’s appointments with a sense of hope for how they could usher in a new era—one in which Native peoples are more fully seen, and tribal nations engage with the federal government as sovereign nations with deep ties to (and expertise on) the public lands the Department of the Interior oversees. But we also wonder how much Haaland’s and Sams’s leadership can reshape a federal bureaucracy with a long and troubled legacy in relation to Native peoples. We believe this is a timely historical moment, one largely driven by Native communities, to consider how far the United States has come in understanding the importance of partnering with Native peoples and tribal nations over the management of public lands. At the same time, we acknowledge the constraints Haaland and Sams (and any federal government leaders) face as they attempt to enact change.

We also believe this is a moment for considering how meaningful collaborations between Native peoples and US national parks present a possible route for reckoning with our shared histories and for working to remedy the injuries of the past. This book offers a window into the on-the-ground efforts at a selection of national park sites as they work to more deeply engage with tribal nations. And it highlights how tribal nations strategically navigate their relationships with national parks to advocate for their nation’s best interests. Ultimately, Haaland’s and Sams’s success depends on how widely the NPS (and other federal agencies) adopt and implement Haaland’s

Excerpts from the introduction to *National Parks, Native Sovereignty: Experiments in Collaboration*, edited by Christina Gish Hill, Matthew J. Hill, and Brooke Neely. Shared with permission of the University of Oklahoma Press. © 2024 by the University of Oklahoma Press.

<https://www.oupres.com/9780806193687/national-parks-native-sovereignty/>



and Sams's priorities, and how tribal nations continue to put pressure on federal agencies to recognize their sovereign rights to these lands.

National parks have a fraught history in the United States and globally with respect to Indigenous peoples. The creation of US national parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was part of a broader project to dispossess Native peoples of their homelands.³ Furthermore, the early conservation movement that advocated for the creation and protection of national parks ignored or explicitly erased the experience of Native peoples on these lands.⁴ In parks such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier, park boosters reified these constructed landscapes as original and pristine, arguing that the land was compromised by Native peoples' presence. Mount Rushmore palpably illustrates such exclusion and erasure. The sculptor carved an explicitly Euro-American vision of the nation onto a landscape held sacred by many Native Americans.⁵ Though not always quite so dramatically, other parks do the same.

Yet, in response to Native peoples' lobbying over the past fifty years for greater protections of sacred sites and cultural practices, the NPS has worked to address the damage done by this complex colonial history.⁶ The NPS now consults with tribal nations on the protection, management, and use of cultural and natural resources located in national parks. Through its Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) and Ethnography in the Parks programs, the NPS seeks to bring park staff and researchers together with Indigenous resource managers and elders. The projects that emerge from these collaborations explore ways to revitalize, protect, interpret, and potentially co-manage Indigenous landscapes. Tribal nations have also approached the park service to engage with issues ranging from rights of access to co-managing lands. These collaborative projects do not come without obstacles, however. Well-intentioned NPS staff must navigate a challenging bureaucracy and funding shortfalls. Native people also have good reasons to be wary of federal agencies and academic institutions with colonial legacies. As a result, some working relationships are uneasy. Despite the challenges, collaborative projects strive to listen to Native voices, illuminate previously excluded histories, revitalize Native relationships with ancestral lands, and improve access for Native people to perform ceremonies or collect culturally important resources.

In recent years, the US national conversation around Native peoples and national parks has also included calls to return these lands to tribal nations.⁷ And some tribal nations have gained increased control over resources and

lands managed by national parks and other federal land agencies.⁸ We have seen national debates unfold over sites like Bears Ears National Monument, highlighting how much national politics can play into efforts to honor tribal nations' wishes for public lands in the United States. Given all these recent developments within the NPS, as well as the appointment of Deb Haaland and Chuck Sams, we believe this moment is ripe for conversations about new forms of engagement and collaboration among tribal nations, national parks, and scholars.

The existing literature on Native peoples and US national parks is either primarily historical in nature or framed in terms of an environmental studies perspective.⁹ More recent studies examine the environmental history of national parks from a transnational perspective, analyzing the origins, ideas, and ideological functions of national parks in comparative perspective.¹⁰ Another body of literature examines national parks, conservation areas, and wildlife refuges from a conservation management perspective, exploring paradigms for the co-management of protected areas.¹¹ There is also a robust literature on Native peoples and museums, including the NPS's role in the repatriation movement and fulfilling the requirements of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).¹² Building on sponsored research studies of US national parks,¹³ with this volume, we highlight ethnographic and ethnohistorical approaches to offer Native perspectives on national parks, while exploring the possibilities and challenges of collaborative work (involving shared interpretation, governance, and management) between the NPS and tribal nations today.

The chapters in the volume come from a variety of perspectives and positionalities: Native scholars and practitioners offer their insights and expertise on the potential for these collaborations. Non-Native park service staff adept at building relationships with Native communities also contributed, along with non-Native scholars who have conducted research that supports these collaborations. By bringing together these diverse perspectives, we seek to contribute to a larger conversation and invite further dialogue.



STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

The range of case studies in this volume, and the various types of engagement they illustrate, highlight how Native peoples assert agency and sovereignty in reconnecting with homelands and other vital places as they work with the National Park Service. They also show how scholars and park staff can and should play a more modest and supporting role, as they work to assist Native partners

in this process. Throughout the volume, we explore the concept of *strategic collaboration* to make sense of the complex process by which project participants come together with sometimes conflicting interests and find ways to strategically engage with one another across these differences. While ethnography is always collaborative to a certain degree because it involves working with people to learn more about their culture and experience, research participants often do not design the research or its protocols. Nevertheless, Native people have used collaborations with park service staff and researchers for their own interests, engaging strategically to motivate change within the National Park Service. The chapters in this volume reveal how tribal nations use these partnerships to assert sovereignty, establish shared governance, accomplish cultural revitalization, and reconnect with ancestral homelands. In many places, Native peoples' strategic collaboration with parks have led these parks to reckon with their relationships with Native communities, rethinking how they interact with both Native people and the broader public on many levels. The volume emphasizes that collaboration is most successful when Native people engage on their own terms.

As a concept and as a framework for practice, strategic collaboration moves beyond the kind of engagement researchers often strive for in collaboration, sometimes with an assumption that all parties are working toward the same goals and with the same intentions. Strategic collaboration recognizes the potential for participants to navigate different sets of interests to accomplish shared or overlapping goals. Native nations, park service staff, and researchers are each seeking their own outcomes from the collaborative process. Sometimes these interests are

competing, so integrating them requires openness and flexibility. When it's successful, strategic collaboration can be a process that furthers the sovereign relationships that Native people have with their landscapes. In strategic collaboration, park service staff and researchers assist and support Native people's efforts to access the landscape and to educate the staff and public about their history in a particular place. Ultimately, strategic collaboration is not an equal partnership. Because of its legal status in the United States, the NPS has more power and authority over the spaces they oversee than Native people do. Yet, tribal representatives come to the table and participate on their own terms. Strategic collaboration is a process that involves developing a reciprocal and respect-based relationship from the start. The volume walks scholars and practitioners through the process of building a collaborative relationship between researchers, Native partners, and public lands representatives. In the case studies that follow, we lay out three general steps for building strategic collaborations. First, staff, researchers, and Native peoples must initiate sustainable relationships. As a result of the history of erasure and assimilation, Native peoples are often wary of developing partnerships with governmental organizations like the park service. But many of the successes presented in this volume are helping to change attitudes on both sides, as is having Native leadership at the top. Once the participants forge trusting relationships, each of the groups are more able to approach the difficult conversations that come with contested understandings of history and the meanings of a specific place. Ultimately, the goal is to gain sustained collaborations that uphold the sovereignty of the tribal nations that are affiliated with a particular landscape.

ENDNOTES

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2. Scott Wyland, "Haaland Touts Indigenous, Conservation Work in First Year As Interior Secretary," *Santa Fe New Mexican* (March 16, 2022). https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/haaland-touts-indigenous-conservation-work-in-first-year-as-interior-secretary/article_b25c3eee-a549-11ec-8e4f-0f72abc8a8b2.html.
3. See, for example: Theodore Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos, and National Parks in Alaska* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philip Burnham, *Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000); Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).
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7. See, for example: David Treuer, “Return the National Parks to the Tribes,” *The Atlantic* (May 2021) (online April 12, 2021). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/return-the-national-parks-to-the-tribes/618395/>; Jim Robbins, “How Returning Lands to Native Tribes is Helping Protect Nature,” *Yale Environmental* 360 (June 3, 2021). <https://e360.yale.edu/features/how-returning-lands-to-native-tribes-is-helping-protect-nature>.
 8. In 2000, the Timbisha Shoshone Homeland Act passed as a notable example of land transfer and co-management. See: Theodore Catton, “To Make a Better Nation: An Administrative History of the Timbisha Shoshone Homeland Act,” report prepared under Cooperative Agreement with Rocky Mountain Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit for Death Valley National Park, California (2009). Since 2019, Yellowstone National Park has transferred bison to the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. See: <https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/management/bison-management.htm>. In 2021, the National Bison Range was transferred fully to Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. See: Aaron Bolton, “Feds Begin Transfer Of National Bison Range To Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes,” *Montana Public Radio* (January 15, 2021). <https://www.mtpr.org/montana-news/2021-01-15/feds-begin-transfer-of-national-bison-range-to-confederated-salish-and-kootenai-tribes>. And in 2022, the Cherokee Nation secured formal permission to gather plants at the Buffalo National River site. See: Alyssa Lukpat, “Cherokee Nation Can Gather Sacred Plants on National Park Land,” *New York Times* (April 27, 2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/us/chokeee-plants-national-park.html>.
 9. See, for example: Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness*; Keller and Turek, *American Indians and National Parks*; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philip Burnham, *Indian Country, God’s Country: Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000); Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).
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 12. See for example: Kathleen Sue Fine-Dare, *Grave Injustice: The American Indian Repatriation Movement and NAGPRA* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Mary Lawlor, *Public Native America: Tribal Self-Representation in Casinos, Museums, and Powwows* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Laura Peers, *Playing Ourselves: Interpreting Native Histories at Historic Reconstructions* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007); Lorie Roy, Anjali Bhasin, and Sarah K. Arriaga, eds., *Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums: Preserving Our Language, Memory, and Lifeways* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011); Jennifer A. Shannon, *Our Lives: Collaboration, Native Voice, and the Making of the National Museum of the American Indian* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2014).
 13. See for example: Jennifer Talken-Spaulling and Joe Watkins, “Applied Anthropology in the National Park Service’s Second Century of Stewardship,” *The George Wright Forum* vol. 35 (2018): 53–64; Michael J. Evans, Alexa Roberts, and Peggy Nelson, “Ethnographic Landscapes,” *Cultural Resource Management* no. 5 (2001): 53–57.