

# The New York Times

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## The Treasures of Chaco Canyon Are Threatened by Drilling

By Richard Moe

Dec. 1, 2017

Santa Fe, N.M. — In the remote high desert of northwestern New Mexico lie the threatened ruins of Chaco Canyon, arguably the most significant cultural site on public land in the United States. The canyon and the surrounding region contain the remnants of great houses, kivas, ancient roads and sacred places built a millennium ago by an indigenous people who became proficient in architecture, agriculture, astronomy and the arts. Everything we know about them comes from these ruins and the artifacts they left behind, but it appears now that much of it could be at risk from the Trump administration's unseemly haste in allowing oil and gas drilling nearby.

In the early years of the 20th century, when archaeologists and others became alarmed by the plunder and damage to some of these accessible and fragile sites, Chaco Canyon was the chief catalyst for Congress to protect such places on federal land by authorizing the president to declare them national monuments. President Theodore Roosevelt accepted that authority by signing the Antiquities Act in 1906, and the next year he invoked it to declare Chaco one of the first national monuments deserving the protection of the United States government; it is now owned and operated by the National Park Service.



Chetro Ketl, another of the large structures known as great houses that were built by indigenous inhabitants of Chaco Canyon. Gabriella Marks for The New York Times

Unfortunately, the Park Service's jurisdiction is limited to the canyon itself and does not extend to the vast remainder of what's known as the Greater Chaco Region. The surrounding area is the domain of the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Indian Affairs whose missions, unlike that of the Park Service, do not emphasize protecting historically significant sites. Nonetheless, the two agencies agreed to defer all new drilling leases within a 10-mile radius of Chaco until consultations could be completed with affected communities and tribes. Now, well before the consultations have been completed, the B.L.M. district manager says the bureau plans to lease 26 parcels of land in the area next March; while none lie within the 10-mile radius of the park, one of them is just barely outside it and others are close by.

It's not known what other structures or artifacts lie buried beneath the desert floor of the Greater Chaco Region, nor can it be known until proper surveys are undertaken. Largely for that reason, the governors of northern New Mexico's pueblos and the Navajo Nation, which have geographic, ancestral, historic and sacred ties to Chaco, recently called for a moratorium on all drilling in the area until the consultations have

been completed. Almost simultaneously a group of archaeologists and other scientists issued a report calling for stronger protection of Greater Chaco and its remarkable complex of other Chaco-linked sites in the four-corners region. They specifically recommended the use of new satellite and laser-imaging technologies that can locate underground structures invisible to the naked eye.

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Kin Kletso, another historical site visible from the Pueblo Alto Trail in Chaco Canyon.

Gabriella Marks for The New York Times

Once drilling begins, with no restrictions on the use of fracking under the existing management plan, the site is likely to end up on an even more dangerous course to a bad ending. (More than 400 fracking wells have been approved already in the region.) The closer the drilling gets to Chaco itself, the more it destroys the context and views

of the site and its sacred places, to which living peoples still have a spiritual connection. The tribes also fear this invasive activity can contaminate both land and water.

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Finally, as we have learned elsewhere, concentrated fracking, when coupled with the injection of salt water into disposal wells, can lead over time to multiple earthquakes — phenomena that, combined with the impact of heavy trucks, would almost certainly be more than these fragile structures could withstand. One need only look at the pockmarked face of neighboring Oklahoma, especially around Cushing, where officials worry that earthquakes caused by this process seriously threaten a large oil-tank farm. But unlike tank farms, which have limited life spans, Chaco Canyon and similar national parks and monuments are intended to last forever.

The National Congress of American Indians, the oldest and largest organization of American Indian governments, recently issued a strong appeal for an immediate moratorium on all leasing and drilling until the bureaus of land management and Indian affairs “initiate and complete an ethnographic study of the cultural landscapes of the Greater Chaco Region.” Chaco Canyon has great importance for all Americans, but because of ties of history, ancestry and geography, it has a very special meaning to the native peoples who view it as sacrosanct.

Ryan Zinke, the secretary of interior, has made oil and gas drilling on public lands a top priority, but he fails to acknowledge that it is also the mission of his department to conserve and protect significant natural and cultural resources. Recent administrations have tried to reconcile these inherent conflicts by exempting places known to contain cultural sites from areas permitted for drilling, a practice that has only minimally affected the opportunities for resource exploration. It’s a matter of balance and it has largely worked, but this administration has yet to make the effort.

Mr. Zinke prides himself on being a conservationist in the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt, but he needs to learn more about that president, who more than any other committed the United States to the protection of its most important natural, cultural and historic places. The secretary seems more in the tradition of those who have viewed public lands primarily if not solely for exploitation of the mineral and other

resources they contain.

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Chaco Canyon is a world heritage site constructed over a period of 300 years by a highly developed civilization that most likely had celestial and other knowledge that has been lost to us. We can only hope that these mysteries remain in the Greater Chaco Region waiting to be revealed, if, that is, this special place is not otherwise disturbed. Mr. Zinke can remove the immediate threat to its integrity by ordering a ban on drilling anywhere within the region that has not been properly surveyed for cultural resources. He can also come to Chaco and see for himself one of America's unique treasures, of which he is now the chief steward.

*Correction: December 3, 2017*

*An earlier version of a photo caption accompanying this article misspelled the name of a historical site in Chaco Canyon. It is Chetro Ketl, not Chtro Ketl.*

Richard Moe was president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation from 1993 to 2010.

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A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 2, 2017, on Page SR4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Treasures of Chaco Canyon Are Threatened by Drilling