

# BLM is ignoring Great Divide native sites

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By Richard Baldes

Most of us live in Wyoming because of the quality of life and outdoor opportunities it has to offer. As an enrolled member of the Eastern Shoshone tribe, my roots in Wyoming go back thousands of years, and the natural beauty and ties to the land are why I want to stay.

No place else in America has such wide-open spaces and abundant wildlife — the priceless legacy of our public lands, which cover half the state. Try camping, fishing, or hunting in states that don't have public lands, and it becomes clear very quickly why those of us living in Wyoming have chosen this place.

Now the Bureau of Land Management is rewriting its blueprint for 3.5 million acres of public land, as they revise the Great Divide Resource Management Plan. And the spectacular wild country of Adobe Town is right in the middle of the action.

The first time I saw Adobe Town I couldn't believe my eyes. I've lived most of my life in Wyoming and for years I didn't know about this beautiful, fascinating place. Together with two former BLM employees from the Rawlins Office, my best friend and I traveled along the east side of the Adobe Town and south of The Haystacks, a hideout where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid had kept fresh horses during their outlaw years.

The roads were very muddy with standing water in the low places, and it soon became obvious that we were not going to reach Adobe Town from the east. We had to turn back.

We then drove all the way around the north end of the Haystacks. From the west, the spectacular cliffs of Adobe Town are hidden beyond the folds of the desert until you reach the very edge of the rim. Up to that point, you wonder if this legendary

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place exists at all. But taking in the magnificent view from a cliff-top perch, the experience is overwhelming. Light and shadow plays across a beautiful landscape with spires, deep canyons, and sandy draws. I had my camera ready, but I couldn't take my eyes from the magnificent scenery to take a picture.

We saw chips (stone flakes) from flint and chert that Native people used to make tools as long as 10,000 years ago. It was moving to contemplate people sitting along the edge of the rim chipping out an arrowhead and taking in the same view we were now enjoying. Back then, there would have been a lot of wildlife such as mule deer and pronghorn antelope, sage grouse and rabbits. There still is.

As we were leaving Adobe Town, we were shown a place where native people had built a dam out of large boulders (on a small stream). Perhaps it held fish back then, in wetter times, or served as a place to get water, bathe and swim. A short distance away, stone flakes of all kinds were scattered across the sandy surface. The ancients must have spent a lot of time in this area, camping and hunting.

Adobe Town is situated in the lowest spot in the Great Divide Country, and fossils from millions of years ago can be found here. We were told that the bones of

ancient mammals, woolly rhinoceroses and giant ground sloths, can be found here. I look forward to seeing them one day.

Since our first trip to Adobe Town years ago, we have returned at least twice a year. I plan to spend as much time as possible with my friends and family in Adobe Town and the surrounding area. Looking out across the landscape, it is obvious that we could spend the rest of our days exploring and taking in these wonderful sights.

And we want to do it as soon as possible, for there is a threat from BLM mismanagement, which may soon allow oil and gas drilling to desecrate parts of Adobe Town. That first day as we tried to reach Adobe Town, we saw hundreds of stakes with fluorescent orange and pink flagging surrounding Adobe Town to the east, north and west. At least one helicopter was flying low over the area, probably doing seismic work. We could see a drilling rig far off in the distance, near the south end of Adobe Town. Despite its low oil and gas potential, this area is definitely being targeted by the oil and gas industry.

Drilling for natural gas in the area would ruin its wild character. We don't want it to change. We want to continue enjoying this landscape and show others so they can have the same experience.

Native people lived here for obvious reasons — it is an outstanding place for camping and hunting. Early peoples were surely inspired and viewed the area as a special place the creator put there for worship and spiritual use. As the hawks and eagles soar over this land, they too, surely marvel at the beauty of such a place.

Today, native people continue to use spiritual sites in the Great Divide country. Sacred places like Adobe Town, as well as features elsewhere in the Red Desert like Boar's Tusk and the Oregon Buttes, are

still used for vision quests and spiritual enlightenment. To native cultures, they represent places to worship—for over 12,000 years.

What bothers me most about BLM is its attitude and lack of concern about protecting Native American cultural sites and sacred places in the Great Divide country.

There are thousands of cultural sites in the area. In fact, 794 of them are known to be eligible for designation on the National Register of Historic Places. Occupation by native people dates back 12,000 years. Yet the BLM provides less protection for these sites than they do for historical sites only a century old. Furthermore, the agency has done little to involve tribal communities in the Great Divide planning process.

We realize the importance of oil and gas to the people of Wyoming and our nation. We also realize the technology exists to extract natural resources more responsibly. Those of us who want to leave something for our grandchildren believe that there are places like Adobe Town that are too special to turn into another gas field.

The majority of people want more protection—not less—of special places. Yes, oil and gas development can occur in some areas; but it must occur in a responsible manner using the best technology that exists so that cultural and sacred sites, wildlife habitat, and special places can be protected for the enjoyment of the public and for future generations. The people have spoken. The federal government needs to listen.

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