

Archaeologists: More protections needed for Chaco region

September 23 2017, by Susan Montoya Bryan

Archaeologists, professors and other researchers on Friday called for more protections of an expansive area surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park, saying increased oil and gas development has the potential to destroy parts of the landscape that could provide a better understanding of the ancient civilization that once inhabited the region.

In their report, the scientists point to new technology that has uncovered previously indiscernible sections of roads that connect sites throughout northwestern New Mexico to the heart of Chaco park. They say they have only begun using new satellite and laser-imaging tools to document the area and that more discoveries are possible.

Aside from actual archaeological sites that include [stone structures](#) and pottery sherds, the scientists say research also has provided insight into the importance of the landscape to whatever activities were drawing people to Chaco centuries ago. They noted less tangible features, like unobstructed views to distant buttes or mountain peaks.

While some of the mysteries surrounding Chaco are still debated in academic circles, there's agreement that the massive stone structures, kivas and other features that dot the landscape offered something of a religious or ritualistic experience for the ancestors of today's Native American pueblos. Many of the structures are aligned with celestial events, such as the summer solstice.

Anna Sofaer, president of the nonprofit Solstice Project, said people

who don't understand Chaco see it as sort of a high desert wasteland that can offer only oil, gas, coal and uranium.

"I think it's our obligation as people who've been working with Chaco for decades to bring out to the public and to the people who affect policy the great value of going back and connecting with the people who were so connected with their natural world," she said.

The report comes as federal officials revamp a management plan that will guide development as more companies look to tap shale deposits in the San Juan Basin, already one of the nation's largest natural gas fields.

A [world heritage site](#), Chaco and its outlying archaeological remnants have become the focus of the fight over expanded drilling.

Environmentalists have long complained about pollution from fossil fuel extraction and coal-fired power plants in the region, and now tribal leaders have joined in with concerns about the potential effects on cultural resources.

They have asked for the federal government to make permanent a 10-mile buffer zone around Chaco park.

Industry officials say developers can operate in a way that protects significant sites.

Robert McEntyre, a spokesman for the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, said recently that no one in the industry disputes the significance of Chaco or the strong desire to protect the area's cultural resources for future generations. He said regulations already in place require reviews to ensure important areas are not disrupted.

The archaeologists argued Friday that existing regulations do a good job of protecting physical sites but there is no consideration of less tangible

aspects, like those found at a site about 15 miles north of the park that includes two great houses and vantage points of Chaco's Great North Road.

Ruth Van Dyke, an anthropology professor at Binghamton University, said the Bureau of Land Management followed the letter of the law in protecting the site but allowed for 12 pump jacks to be installed within view of the great houses. The nearest one is less than a mile away and others can be seen glinting in the distance.

Van Dyke said archaeologists need to be cognizant of things like viewsapes and soundscapes, figure out ways to study and record them and provide that information to land managers. She said such features are important for understanding a complex like Chaco.

"We really need to set aside large landscape areas to protect and to prohibit drilling all together," she said.

G.B. Cornucopia, a ranger at Chaco park, also raised concerns about light pollution from oil and gas operations. Chaco was the [site](#) of the first National Park observatory and it has been recognized for its dark skies. He considers the night sky a cultural feature that provides visitors an opportunity to understand their relationship with the larger cosmos.

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