

# Ethnographic Trail Systems as Large-Scale Cultural Landscapes: Preservation and Management Issues

James H. Cleland, Ph.D., Principal, EDAW, Inc., San Diego, California, United States

## Abstract

Native American belief systems do not distinguish geographic boundaries for revered landscapes, and the appropriate scale at which to assess ethnographic landscapes may not be readily apparent, as they range greatly from small scale to large. The cultural landscape associated with the *Xam Kwatcan* trail in California, Arizona and Nevada is 160 miles in length. It incorporates extant trails, associated ceremonial sites, and highly revered geographic places. This vast size raises management concerns, but Native American cultural perspectives can be clearly described and taken into account under relevant federal laws (i.e., Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act) using ethnographic interviews. Landscape scale is a useful construct in understanding that a place may be simultaneously significant on several scales.

## Key Words

Ethnographic landscapes, Native American trails, regional-scale landscapes, southwestern United States

## Introduction

It is well known that Native American ethnographic landscapes can encompass relatively large geographic expanses (Hardesty 2000; Parker and King 1992). Sacred mountains, such as Mt. Shasta in California, San Francisco Peak in Arizona, and Devils Tower in Wyoming, are examples. What is less widely appreciated is that Native American belief systems often not only refrain from delineating geographic boundaries with respect to specific revered landforms, such as mountains, but also insist on a critical interconnection among what might otherwise be considered separate landscapes. Boundary definition can be problematic for all types of cultural landscapes, but this problem can seem even more daunting when specific locations such as mountain peaks, intermontane basins, river valleys, and residential areas are inextricably interconnected through a complex belief system. In the case of Native American ethnographic landscapes, song cycles and other sacred texts often weave huge geographies together to form an interconnected whole—a whole seen by modern tribes as critical to their cultural continuity. Because of these widespread interconnections, scales for ethnographic landscape assessments can range from the relatively local to the regional and trans-regional. As a result, the appropriate scale of assessment may not be readily

apparent to non-native resource management agencies or cultural resource professionals who are not trained specialists.

This paper focuses on a large-scale regional cultural landscape associated with a trail system in the arid southwestern United States. Trails of cultural significance to Native Americans in this region range from relatively short ceremonial pathways (Hedges and Hamann 1992; Van Vlack and Stoffle 2006) to trans-regional trails that are closely tied to epic accounts of tribal history, tribal identity, and cultural continuity. A well-known example of a regional trail system is the Chacoan Road network (Hardesty 2000). Lesser-known examples, but equally daunting in scale, are the Salt Song Trail of the Paiute and Chemehuevi tribes and the *Xam Kwatcan* trail system of the Quechan Tribe. The Salt Song Trail traverses southwestern Utah, southern Nevada and much of southern California. The “Salt Song” tells of the trail and its surrounding landscape:

It's telling about different landmarks, different mountains, the beauty of this mountain, what it stands for, what medicines are found in that mountain. The Salt Song tells all of that. If you understood it, you'd be a scholar (Eddy 2004).

The *Xam Kwatcan* trail system, the primary focus of this paper, is 160 miles or more in length, encompasses portions of three states (California, Arizona, and Nevada), and traverses the traditional territory of multiple Native American tribes. It incorporates extant trails still visible on the desert surface, associated ceremonial sites, and elements of the natural landscape, including highly revered geographic places. A component of this trail system is currently a focus of legal action under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA),

which challenges the impact of a large open-pit mine on such a vast landscape.

The present paper concludes that when adequate ethnographic interviews have been undertaken, Native American cultural perspectives can be clearly described and taken into account under the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

As defined by the National Park Service, an ethnographic landscape is an area containing a variety of natural and cultural resources, including plant and animal communities that associated people define as heritage resources (USDI, NPS-28 1998). Further, the NHPA defines a traditional cultural property (TCP) as one that is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (National Register) because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that are (a) rooted in that community's history, and (b) important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community (USDI, NPS, NRB 1998). By these definitions, the *Xam Kwatcan* trail system can be considered a significant ethnographic landscape and a traditional cultural property. Beyond these definitions, what about its scale?

The concept of landscape scale must include the understanding that a specific ethnographic landscape may be significant because it operates simultaneously on several scales – local, regional, and trans-regional. “Region” is a tricky word that may connote a variety of geographic scales, depending on the context. In this paper, I use the term “regional-scale ethnographic landscape” to denote an area that has geographic unity in terms of its natural and cultural environment and corresponds to a verifiable ethnographic construct. While a local-scale landscape might entail a particular valley or mountain range and vary in

size up to a few hundred square miles, a regional-scale landscape might encompass several mountain ranges and valleys and range up to an area of a few thousand square miles.

### **The *Xam Kwatcan* Trail System and the Trail of Dreams**

Ethnographically, the Native American tribes who occupied most of western Arizona and southeastern California were speakers of related languages of the Yuman family. (Figure 1) The lowland Yuman tribes, including the Quechan, Mojave, Kamia, Cocopah, Halchidhoma, and Maricopa shared many cultural elements, including mythic traditions, cosmology, and religion. They strongly resisted missionization and continued to practice their traditional life ways through the mid-nineteenth century.

The regional environment was strongly dichotomous—the hyper-arid Sonora desert, crossed by the “linear oasis” of the Colorado River (Stone 1991). Structured by this environment, the economy was based on floodplain agriculture, fishing, and harvesting of wild plant foods. For most lowland tribes, hunting was decidedly a secondary subsistence activity. These groups traveled widely across the desert for purposes of social visitation, religious pilgrimages, trade, alliance building, and warfare (Altschul and Ezzo 1994; Forbes 1965; Forde 1931; Kroeber 1925). The construction of a regional trail system was a key component of this cultural system (Baksh 1997; Cleland and Apple 2003; Johnson 1985, 2001; Rogers 1936; Von Werlhof 1987).

The regional trail system plays an important role in the origin legends and the religious practice of the

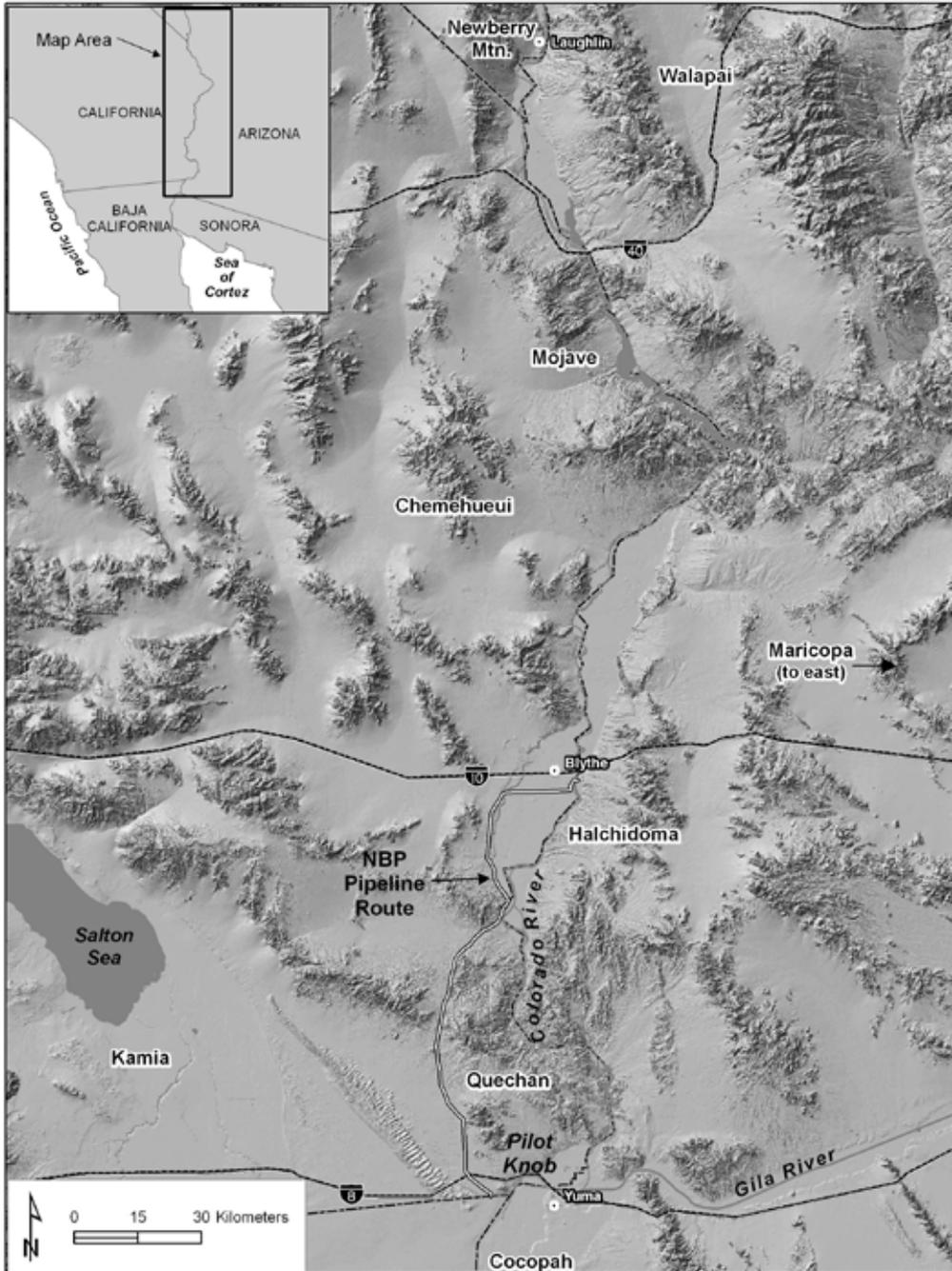
Yuman peoples. According to Quechan cultural tradition:

In the beginning ... [the Creator] Kwikummat ... created real people. ... The several Yuman tribes all descended from the top of Avikwame [Spirit Mountain near Laughlin, Nevada] and spread to their respective territories. The Quechan, however, took a special trail called *xam kwatcán* (‘another going down’). As a result, the Quechan adopted their tribal name, which is a form of the word *kwatcán* (Forbes 1965, 3-4).

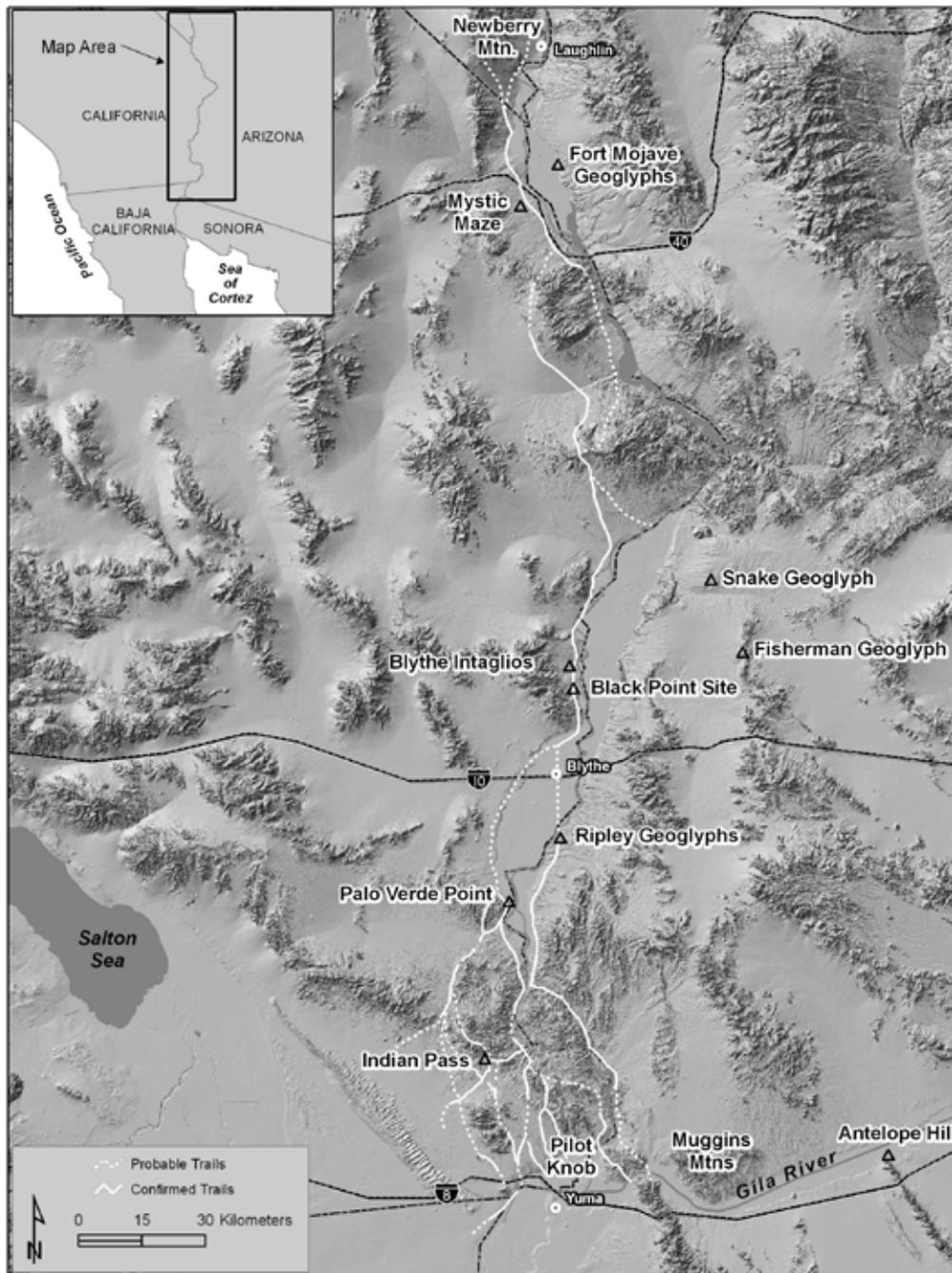
Thus, contemporary tribal identity is directly tied to the *Xam Kwatcan* trail.

For the lowland Yuman groups, dreaming is considered the primary road to spiritual knowledge and wisdom. Dreams are acquired during sleep, but are interpreted via mythological narratives. It is noteworthy that dreaming is also directly tied in with the regional trail system. A contemporary Quechan put it this way:

They [Quechan] were taught that dreaming enabled them to have direct contact with various supernatural beings in order to gain advice and teaching on how to solve the problems of the living. While dreaming, their souls returned [following trails] to the time of creation to learn. ... So the mountains along the Colorado River region are highly significant in regional Native American cultural and ethnic identity. Spiritual activities and events are deeply associated with numerous intaglios, petroglyphs, trails, lithic scatters, and cleared circles present along the Colorado River and surrounding hills (Cachora 1994, 14).



**Figure 1.** Native American tribes of the Lower Colorado River. (Kroeber 1925)



**Figure 2.** Map of Xam Kwatcan Trail and related places. (Baksh, 1995, 1997; Johnson 1985, 2001; Raven and Raven 1986)

Writing of the Mojave at the turn of the twentieth century, Kroeber (1925, 454-455) wrote:

[A] Mohave can not tell a story or a dream without *naming the exact spot at which each character journeyed or slept or stood or looked about* [emphasis added]...

The naming and description of distant places on the vast desert landscape was a common thread in the lowland Yuman narrative tradition, reinforcing and facilitating the culture of long-distance travel. Kroeber continued about the important connection between dreaming and narrative:

Dreams, then are the foundation of Mohave life; and dreams throughout are cast in a mythological mold. There is no people whose activities are more shaped by this psychic state... and none *whose civilization is so completely, so deliberately, reflected in their myths.*

Thus, myth and dreams are somewhat interchangeable but are set in real space on the landscape—a respected dreamer usually related his dreams in terms of mythic traditions, and as Kroeber noted, these mythic traditions molded lowland Yuman culture to an exceptionally high degree.

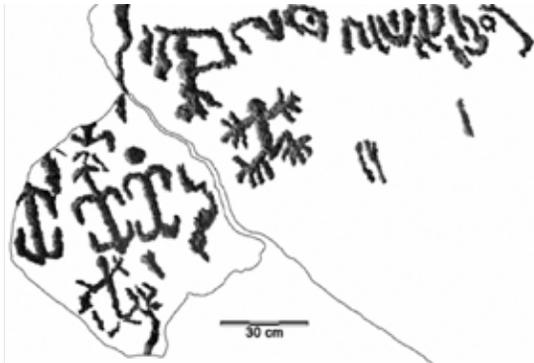
Another important connection between the trail system and traditional religious practice was the *keruk*, or cremation ceremony. The *keruk* was the most important religious ceremony and often the occasion for relatively large social gatherings (Altschul and Ezzo 1994; Forbes 1965; Forde 1931). Pilot Knob near Yuma was the site of the mythic first cremation – the cremation of the Creator god – and served as an ongoing location for major *keruks*. Following completion of the *keruk*, people

seeking spiritual guidance would undertake a pilgrimage from Pilot Knob to Avikwame, the creation mountain and home of the Creator, near Laughlin, some 160 miles to the north. It is said that a pilgrim could make the trip in four days, quite a feat of endurance, and a tribute to the quality of the trail system. The *Xam Kwatcan* trail system connected Pilot Knob with the creation mountain (Forbes 1965; Johnson 1985; Raven and Raven 1986) and was used in the *keruk* pilgrimage.

According to contemporary Quechan, there were two major branches of the *Xam Kwatcan* trail leading north from Pilot Knob. (Figure 2) The more easterly branch is referred to as the Medicine Trail and the more westerly branch is referred to as the Trail of Dreams (Baksh 1997). The two branches merge near a major rock art complex (Figure 3) near Palo Verde Point on the Colorado River.

## Character-Defining Elements of the Contemporary Cultural Landscape

In the lower Colorado River culture area, Native American groups continue to occupy their traditional territories and maintain exceptionally strong cultural continuity, as evidenced in contemporary culture by the unbroken use of native languages, the maintenance of oral history and traditional oral narratives, the continued practice of certain ritual and ceremonial activities, and a strong identification with the land (Baksh 1997; Bee 1981; Raven and Raven 1986; Woods 2001). A strong identification with the land is typical of cultural persistence throughout southern California (Bean and Vane 1978). Tribes continue to occupy their pre-contact homeland and express a close personal affinity with



**Figure 3.** One of many petroglyph panels at Palo Verde Point. (Hedges in Cleland and Apple 2003)

the places of their ancestors. For many of the desert groups, not only are places in or near reservations remembered and revered, but quite distant places continue to have cultural meaning and importance. As an example, Avikwame, the creation mountain, is over 150 miles from the Quechan Reservation, but remains central in narrative, ceremony, and identity.

Lowland Yuman cultural authorities stress the interconnectedness of places and recoil from regulatory imperatives to divide the landscape and assess the resulting parts individually:

The sites in that area tie in with something that is bigger in the long run. As I've said before, the whole area along the Colorado River is sacred (Baksh 1997, 21).

The Quechan note that all the sites in their traditional range are connected spatially, culturally, and spiritually. They should not, therefore, be considered as isolated occurrences, but rather as part of a greater network of cultural heritage. As

such, effects to one site create effects on all the others (Woods 2001, 20).

This point of view can be appreciated by recalling Kroeber's remark that every story and dream is manifested at specific places within the desert landscape, and that stories and dreams are central to the Yuman cultural experience.

### Constructed Elements

Traditional cultural activities, some of which are ongoing, have left a coherent body of material remains on the desert landscape, connected by a largely extant trail system (Figure 4). The trail system connects cultural and natural elements, such as specific mountains, which the Lower Colorado groups identify as culturally significant. Many trails were intentionally created and are not simply a result of repeated use (Johnson 1985; von Werlhof 1987). The Native American trail system



**Figure 4.** Recording a portion of the Xam Kwatcan trail system. (Photo by author)



**Figure 5:** Historic aerial photograph of an expansive geoglyph associated with the Xam Kwatcan Trail. (Setzler and Stewart 1952)

clearly reflects the distribution of prehistoric sites in the region. A recent large-scale survey revealed that 40 percent of the 120-plus recorded prehistoric sites had trail features.

Geoglyphs and rock features constitute other important types of Native American landscape construction. (Figure 5) Geoglyphs (sometimes referred to as intaglios) are naturalistic abstract figures typically incised into the surface of the desert so that the lighter colored subsurface is exposed, creating light-on-dark images. These

figures are unique to the Sonora and southern Mojave deserts and can be expansive in scale with individual elements exceeding 30 m (100 ft.) in length (Johnson 1985). Others may measure only a meter or two across. Sonora Desert archaeologists (Johnson 1985; Von Werlhof 2004) have made a convincing case that some anthropomorphic geoglyphs represent mythological characters and events. These constructions are concentrated at locations of particular traditional significance (Altschul and Ezzo 1994; Baksh 1995; Pigniolo et al. 1997; Raven and Raven 1986). Cleared circles

and other cleared areas on desert pavements constitute another key type of cultural landscape construction encountered in areas of high cultural significance.

### Elements of the Natural Landscape

Mojave historical narratives (e.g., Kroeber 1925; Kroeber and Kroeber 1973) make it clear that the lowland Yuman groups “catalogued” and remembered the names of many distant places (Kroeber and Kroeber 1973). Forde (1931) noted that the Quechan, too, remembered a vast array of named places, but did not record many of them individually. These named places had varying prominence within the core narrative literature and its correlated belief system. Not every named place rises to the same level of significance.

Several mountains had particular importance, but not all highly revered places were topographic prominences. The Indian Pass area, where two major trails (including the Trail of Dreams) crossed, was particularly esteemed as a teaching place where initiates were brought to learn arcane cultural traditions considered critical to the maintenance of Quechan culture. Mesas surrounding important peaks (Pilot Knob Mesa, for example) are considered especially sensitive and contain high frequencies of constructed cultural elements such as geoglyphs, rock rings, and cleared circles (Ezzo and Altschul 1993; Raven and Raven 1986).

Beyond the physiography of place, lowland Yuman tradition puts significant emphasis on the plants and animals native to each place. Speaking of the culturally-related Chemehuevi, Halmo (2001) noted:

Given the intimate interrelationship between plants, animals, soil and water, Chemehuevi concerns for these resources are clear. Plants and animals are considered sacred resources that must be used appropriately. ... As mentioned, all traditional Chemehuevi territory is perceived to be a sacred homeland given to the people by their Creator. Any inappropriate treatment of the land is viewed as upsetting the balance with adverse consequences.

In sum, traditional Yuman cultural beliefs interact to create the need to address an integrated cultural landscape comprised of archaeological sites, natural formations, the biotic community, and trails that is truly regional in scale. The National Park Service originally defined an ethnographic landscape as a “landscape containing a variety of natural and cultural resources that associated people define as heritage resources” (Birnbaum 1994). Contemporary Native American consultants and ethnographic testimony gathered in the early twentieth century agree that the associated people (in this case existing Yuman tribes) define an expansive, holistic landscape across the desert as an important heritage resource.

### Management Issues

The immensity of regional-scale ethnographic landscapes and the insistence by many contemporary Native American spokespeople on the interconnectedness of the natural and cultural elements of these landscapes raises serious management issues. Can such a landscape be considered a cultural property under U.S. laws and regulations? If so, how would its boundaries be

determined and whose responsibility would it be to define the boundaries? Then, there is the issue of integrity. Typically, any regional-scale ethnographic landscape would have already been subject to some severe disturbance. How would one even begin to assess whether historical values still exist? In the case of the ethnographic landscape associated with the Xam Quechan trail system, three east-west Interstate highways cross it, several modern cities have been developed within it, and the once wild Colorado River has been tamed by dams and levees, and irrigated agricultural fields have replaced wetlands and sloughs.

Having faced these issues on several major projects involving land-management decisions within this regional-scale landscape, I have come to the conclusion that most of the objections to considering regional landscapes result from a too-rigid set of assumptions as to what U.S. regulations actually say and require. Through experience, I have come to understand that current laws, regulations, and guidelines contain most of the tools necessary to come to reasonable and balanced land-management decisions that take into account Native American values.

To put this conclusion into perspective, I will examine an ongoing NAFTA claim (U.S. Department of State 2007) by a Canadian mining company denied the right to develop a massive open-pit gold mine that would have impacted the Trail of Dreams and a specific place—Indian Pass as well as the regional ethnographic landscape as a whole. The issues and regulatory processes at issue in this case are exceedingly complex, and I will only attempt to summarize some of the cultural resources issues. This could be a precedent-setting case, and its high profile is underscored by the fact

that the National Trust for Historic Preservation put Indian Pass on its most endangered list in 2002.

Indian Pass had been known since the 1920s as an area rich in archaeological material, as evidenced by surface collections and excavations conducted by Malcolm Rogers (1936, 1939, 1966; Waters 1982). However, Rogers' work was never fully reported, and many archaeologists remained unaware of the value of the area. And, no one had thought to ask the Native American tribes what they thought until the Glamis Imperial Mine was proposed.

Native American values for the area started to come to light during public scoping meetings held by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) under the auspices of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Native American representatives voiced strong opposition to the project. BLM then retained the services of a cultural anthropologist who had previous experience with lowland Yuman tribes to assess the basis of this opposition. Ethnographic interviews revealed that many Quechan were concerned about all ancestral sites in their traditional territory; too many had already been destroyed. The Trail of Dreams passes through the proposed mine area, while the Medicine Trail was already cut-through by another open-pit gold mine. The Quechan believe that the construction of the proposed mine would preclude their ability to perform the pilgrimage from Pilot Knob to the creation mountain, physically and in dreams. The Indian Pass area is also of special significance. It is a "strong" place and ancestral spirits are thought to dwell there. Landscape features were of importance, as were aspects of the constructed environment. The intersection of

the two trails is an important aspect. Additionally, and of critical importance, the Indian Pass area is a teaching place that must be visited to learn traditional cultural practices. It is the first in a series of such places. The other places would be useless if the first place were destroyed. No mitigation could lessen the cultural damage that would be done if the mine were to proceed.

My company (EDAW, Inc.) conducted the archaeological survey required to conform to both NEPA and Section 106. Suffice it to say, the archaeological data supported the Quechan claims. The proposed site for the mine was found to hold a high concentration of features of probable ceremonial significance, and these features probably span at least a thousand-year period (Pignuolo et al. 1997). A trail associated with many ceremonial features can still be seen on the ground extending from the major trail intersection through the proposed open pit mine. This trail has been identified in the field by Native Americans as the Trail of Dreams. Based partly on the impacts to traditional cultural properties, the Department of the Interior denied the permit application in January 2001. This denial was subsequently reversed, but the State of California also moved to block the project.

Attorneys and an expert witness for the mining company have been critical of some of the cultural resources findings, raising issues of fact as well as procedural issues (Sebastian 2006). Of most importance for present purposes is the issue of scale. The mining company argues that since the Native Americans are concerned about a cultural landscape that is regional in scale, the impact of the mine itself would have to be considered relatively minor, only a few square miles out of many thousands (McKee 2005).

How valid is this criticism? I think it is fair to say that it would be impossible to stop all development in a regional scale landscape just because it would adversely impact that landscape. As noted above, the area in question contains modern towns and numerous modern transportation routes. If all projects are not stopped, why would one project be singled out for denial while another is allowed to go forward? This question underscores one of the major points I want to make. In the Imperial Mine case, if the regional-level landscape was the only issue, then it is doubtful that the government would have blocked the project. Rather, it was the confluence of landscapes on several scales at the proposed mine site that led to the government's decision. Not only was there a regional issue, there was the issue of the Indian Pass area itself and the local manifestation of the Trail of Dreams within that more restricted landscape. Although I cannot speak for Native Americans, my experience on other projects is that strident objections to projects are not raised based solely on regional concerns. While many Native Americans would prefer to see all new development restricted to previously disturbed areas, it is only when a project severely affects a more localized landscape of particular concern that the level of opposition raises to criticality.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In a more general sense, then, how is a regional scale landscape to be dealt with and managed? There might be a tendency either to panic and say "Oh, it's just too big, we can't possibly deal with it," or to shrug and say "Well, if everything is important, what difference does it make?" Neither of these reactions can be justified under current

Federal regulations and guidelines. My recommendation is to take regional cultural landscapes seriously first by acknowledging the existence of such landscapes for purposes of full disclosure. If a good case can be made for the existence of a regional scale landscape, it only makes sense that land managers and cultural resources professionals should take it into account in decision-making. Moreover, in the case of ethnographic landscapes, federal guidelines are quite clear that the concerns of the affected cultural group should be sought out and considered (Parker and King 1992). However, does this mean that a regional scale landscape should be formally evaluated for National Register eligibility as a TCP or ethnographic landscape? In my view, little would be gained in most cases by such an effort. In a rare case, such an assessment might become necessary to avoid a legal challenge, but this would not normally be the case.

What then is the proper format for taking a regional-scale landscape into account? In case of a federal undertaking subject to NEPA, impacts to the regional landscape would have to be addressed separately in the required cumulative impact assessment. This is a point that attorneys for Native American groups are beginning to recognize and advocate for. In addition, undertakings under Section 106 would address the regional landscape in the consultation documents, either in an agreement document like a memorandum of agreement or in agreeing that there would be no effect. Finally, in long-term land management programs, regional scale landscape concerns can be addressed with a formal plan for stewardship. Regional thinking would help lead the cultural resources profession toward large-scale planning similar to the ecosystem-management approach that is gaining popularity relative to rare and endangered species.

In conclusion, the idea of scale in cultural landscape analysis helps to illuminate and explain varying kinds of traditional cultural concerns: concerns dealing on the one hand with holistic regional landscapes and on the other with more localized places and their roles within the larger regional landscapes. This approach serves better to integrate Native American concerns and guide appropriate, informed management decisions. Issues of boundary determination and scale are more readily conceived and resolved within the context of a holistic landscape analysis than within a more partitive approach.

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