

Destruction of Native American Cultures and Religions

The United States and Christian religious communities tried many ways to assimilate Native American peoples. The boarding schools cut children off from their traditional ways. They had to give up their language and their religion, cut their hair, a symbol of pride, wear western clothing and even take European names.

Land policies forced Native peoples into individual land ownership instead of communal ownership, which has its own cultural ways. Indians were encouraged to farm like Europeans rather than their traditional ways. The Indian Relocation Act of 1954 encouraged Native Americans to leave reservations, acquire vocational skills, and assimilate into the cities, part of the broader federal termination policy.

While the First Amendment has been a cornerstone of American self identity, it was long denied Native nations. One old example was the Ghost Dance of the late 1800s. The dance was associated with a prophecy of a peaceful end to white expansion. Government officials viewed it as threatening and arrested Sitting Bull in 1890 for failing to stop his people from practicing the dance.

It wasn't until 1978 that Congress passed the [American Indian Religious Freedom Act](#). Even now, conflicts remain over Native American religious practices – practices deeply tied to the land. One critical area of conflict is Native access to sacred spaces to practice their ceremonies. Here are three contemporary examples:

Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Ass'n (1980) The U.S. Forest Service wanted to build a road and harvest timber in the Chimney Rock Area a national forest area in northern California, a sacred area to the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa. The tribes said the project violated their free expression of religion on their sacred sites. The U.S. Supreme Court sided with the Forest Service, ruling that creating the road and the logging did not violate their freedom of religion “because it compels no behavior contrary to their belief.”

National Monuments: Current controversies include proposals by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to pare back national monuments that include places sacred to indigenous peoples. According to a [Washington Post report](#), Zinke proposed reducing the size of Utah's Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments and Oregon's Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument. The Bears Ears Commission of Tribes calls the recommendations to eliminate protections very troubling. “The proposed reduction in size would leave thousands of sites more vulnerable to vandalism, compromise the integrity of the landscape as a whole, and disrespect the unified voices of tribal nations that have consistently called for Bears Ears to be protected,” a spokesman said.

Dakota Use of Coldwater Springs: Coldwater Springs near Fort Snelling is a sacred space to Dakota people. They are not allowed to hold ceremony there without a permit from the federal government which owns the land.

