

Opening Statement
Senator Craig Thomas
Senate Indian Affairs Committee
Hearing on Sacred Sites
June 18, 2003

Thank you for holding this hearing to discuss Native American sacred sites. As you know, the federal government owns roughly 50 percent of the land in the State of Wyoming. These federal land management agencies – the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service – all have a tremendous responsibility of consulting with various groups, including tribes, in land management decisions. Many of these areas contain sites that have a spiritual meaning for tribes throughout the West.

Throughout my time in Congress, I have always advocated for public involvement in land management decision processes. Further, I have always supported the right of Native American people to practice their religions. Tribal consultation and the consideration of sacred sites is an important component in this process.

Federal land management agencies are required to consult with tribes on a government-to-government basis whenever plans, activities, decisions or proposed actions affect the integrity or access to such sites. Further, the agencies must accommodate access to and ceremonial use of Native American sacred sites to the extent that is practicable, permitted by law, and consistent with essential agency functions. Maintaining access and multiple use is a purpose of our public lands. While I certainly understand the need to protect sacred and ceremonial areas, this must be done in a reasonable and responsible manner that is consistent with the purpose of our public lands.

Federal agencies have a responsibility to provide for the protection of sacred sites while allowing reasonable and responsible multiple use activities. These two goals should be inclusive of each other and I support efforts that will allow us to achieve both objectives. Including all interested parties is necessary for this to occur.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.