

106 SUCCESS STORY

Tennessee Valley Authority Builds Coalition to Protect Indian Images

Marshall County, Alabama



“Having the opportunity to engage in face-to-face consultation on this project was very valuable, because it gave us the chance to talk through the impacts, and to have an open dialogue about how we should best manage such a significant site.”

— ERIN PRITCHARD
*Senior Archaeological Specialist,
Tennessee Valley Authority*

THE STORY

Indian tribes have occupied Marshall County, Alabama, for millennia, and for 600 of those years, a pair of bluffs overlooking the Tennessee River have provided a glimpse into their history. Although visible for ages, etched and painted images on the “Painted Bluff,” as the site has come to be known, were first documented the 1823 book *The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee*.

The movement of settlers into the area during the 19th century resulted in displacement of the original inhabitants. As a consequence, many of the tribes that originally occupied this area have moved further south and west, but their ancestral, cultural, and spiritual ties to the traditional cultural and sacred places in this area remain strong.

As the centuries wore on, impacts from man and nature alike took their toll on the sacred images. The effects of modern-day graffiti on the more than 80 animal effigies, ovals, circles, and other abstract symbols were documented in the 1950s.

Half a century later, in 2004, a team of archaeologists from the University of Tennessee noted that, in addition to damage from vandalism and rock climbing at Painted Bluff, humidity and erosion were causing pictographs at the National Register of Historic Places-eligible site to chip and flake.

THE PROJECT

Painted Bluff overlooks Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) land at TVA’s Wheeler Reservoir. The agency worked with the Alabama Historical Commission to have the site named to its 2013 “Places in Peril” list, highlighting the state’s most endangered landmarks.

The following year, TVA hired consultants to study the damage to the site. They recommended a multi-faceted approach to address the problem, including removal and camouflaging of the existing graffiti, along with public outreach and volunteer involvement.

Photos: Above, dancing human image (photo courtesy TVA); Right, Painted Bluff from a distance (photo by Alan Cressler); LaDonna Brown, tribal anthropologist for the Chickasaw Nation, visiting Painted Bluff (photo courtesy TVA).

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Photos: Painted Rock graffiti; volunteer Camille Bowman works on graffiti removal at the site; a view from the river (photos courtesy TVA)

THE 106 PROCESS

TVA was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects on those properties of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of historic properties when adverse effects are likely to ensue.

With the removal and camouflage plan in hand, TVA initiated a Section 106 review with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and 15 federally recognized tribes that have ties to Painted Bluff as part of a broader commitment to protect and provide stewardship for these important places. The tribes recommended that images impacted through natural weathering be left alone, and that the focus of any remediation work should be on human impacts to the site—in particular, those caused by rock climbing.

In 2014, TVA worked with the consultants and community volunteers from northern Alabama and University of Alabama students to catalog, remove, and disguise the damage at Painted Bluff. Graffiti 50 years or older was left in place pending further research, while disturbances less than 50 years old were removed or camouflaged. Ultimately, graffiti was remediated at more than 120 different surfaces.

Next, TVA collaborated with the Southeastern Climbers Coalition to close climbing routes located along the bluff, and to install signs alerting climbers of the closures. Finally, TVA used Painted Bluff as a proving ground for an archaeological site monitoring program called “A Thousand Eyes.” Volunteers went through the program training course, and then recorded data on the site that was submitted to TVA. The agency continues to work with the historical commission and student volunteers to protect and monitor the site.

THE SUCCESS

Federal agencies sometimes struggle to fully address impacts to traditional cultural properties and sacred sites as part of Section 106 consultations. In the case of Painted Bluff, TVA, the tribes, and university and volunteer groups created an exemplary model of how to work together to protect historic properties. Through the Section 106 review, significant cultural symbols in the tribes’ ancestral homelands were preserved against further damage for enjoyment by future generations.

Consulting Parties:

Tennessee Valley Authority
Alabama Historical Commission
Cherokee Nation
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma
Muscogee (Creek) Nation of Oklahoma
Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas
Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town
Kialegee Tribal Town
Thlophlocco Tribal Town
Poarch Band of Creek Indians
Seminole Nation of Oklahoma
Seminole Tribe of Florida
Absentee Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma
Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma
Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma
Chickasaw Nation
University of Tennessee
University of Alabama
Southeastern Climbers Coalition
Stratum Unlimited LLC

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov



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