

106 SUCCESS STORY

River Bank Stabilization Protects Tribal Village Site

Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests, Idaho



“The Selway Bank Stabilization Project reflects the finest tenets of historic property stewardship in collaboration with the Nez Perce Tribe, and provides a case study for managing complex resources within congressionally designated areas.”

—CHERYL PROBERT
Nez Perce–Clearwater National Forests
Forest Supervisor



THE STORY

The Nez Perce Tribe’s indigenous territory covers roughly 17 million acres, including parts of Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Idaho. Located deep within the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness is an ancient Nez Perce village site. The tribe identifies the village, known as *nixiwléekt*, as one of several Nez Perce origin sites. The generations of Nez Perce who called this village home were known as *nahalahtpa*. The site is also considered one of the most important archaeological sites in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests.

For decades, the Selway River has eroded portions of the site, scattering and destroying archaeological features along the rocky shoreline within the high-water zone of the river. From 2004 to 2014, portions of the terrace flanking the river had eroded over two feet—further threatening ancient Nez Perce houses and taking with it valuable archaeological data. The eroding features, important for their cultural significance as homes of the tribe’s ancestors and potential to understand more about early habitations, were in desperate need of protection.

THE PROJECT

In 2014, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) proposed a bank stabilization project to halt the ongoing erosion along the Selway River to protect the archaeological site, which was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Logs would be placed along the river channel to deflect high flows from the eroding bank, and vegetation would be planted along the scoured and eroding bank to restore its integrity. In addition, USFS proposed an archaeological survey of the village site to evaluate and better document the resource and to identify areas most in need of protection.

THE 106 PROCESS

USFS, the federal agency carrying out these projects, was responsible for conducting the Section 106 review process under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), which requires agencies to identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the historic property when adverse effects may occur.

Photos: Above, after stabilization, a view of one-of-four log protective weirs; Right, local materials such as willows were collected for use in plantings and erosion control; workers preparing the materials; archaeological testing program and data recovery in advance of the bank stabilization project (photos courtesy USFS)

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Photos: From left, two log protective weirs with revegetated terrace shown in between; fire-killed trees located along the site were felled and used as weir logs and terrace support elements (photos courtesy USFS)

In addition to NHPA requirements, the project’s location within a designated wilderness required USFS to comply with the Wilderness Act of 1964, which seeks to preserve the character of designated wilderness areas to ensure such spaces remain “unimpaired for the future use and enjoyment as wilderness.” To reconcile the project under both NHPA and the Wilderness Act, the Forest determined that the bank stabilization would be protecting and preserving a centuries old landscape that existed years prior to the wilderness designation. The wilderness status required the stabilization effort use specific techniques and limited technology to make the repairs appear natural, including using existing felled trees, prohibiting the use of power tools, and employing traditional tools to move logs and rocks.

Despite the long-term benefits of halting ongoing erosion, the stabilization effort would alter *nixiwléekt* and, therefore, constitute an adverse effect to the historic property. To resolve these effects, the Forest consulted with the Idaho State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and the Nez Perce Tribe and entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to guide the archaeological survey and data recovery plan to be completed prior to the implementation of the stabilization project. The MOA included provisions for curation of artifacts, data sharing, and procedures for unanticipated discoveries, including human remains.

Following the execution of the MOA in 2016, the USFS implemented the archaeological testing of the village site with services of an archaeological consultant. After the testing, USFS personnel who had extensive backcountry engineering skills and primitive-tool knowledge implemented the stabilization project. While a consultant conducted the archaeological work, the stabilization work was assisted by the members of the Nez Perce Tribe’s Watershed program, whose knowledge of river restoration was critical to the success of the project.

THE SUCCESS

The USFS’ stabilization project reflected the values and concerns of numerous groups including the Nez Perce Tribe, the SHPO, and wilderness advocates. This project exemplifies how the goals and outcomes of the Section 106 process can, when conducted through meaningful consultation, align with other federal laws and regulations. Moreover, the USFS was able to partner with the tribe in the execution of the riverbank stabilization, which paves the way for similar partnerships in the future that could expand the focus to include treatments and evaluations of historic properties.

Ultimately, the greatest success of this project came during the 2017 spring run-off, when the Selway River reached high water and the protective measures employed proved successful in guarding the site from further erosion.

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



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