



Paiutes close area of Pyramid Lake over graffiti

Written by

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Stone Mother, a well-known tufa rock formation at Pyramid Lake, created the lake with her tears, according to ancient Paiute legends.

Now she's weeping again. Graffiti vandals have left their marks in spray paint on nearby tufa rocks. Broken glass from past drinking parties sparkles in the sunlight. Sick of the desecration, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribal Council has closed to the general public the area near Stone Mother and the nearby Pyramid Rock island to motorists as well as boaters on the east side of the lake.

It was not an easy decision, as the tribe depends on permits from more than 150,000 visitors a year who come to the reservation, said Scott Carey, tribal planner. The namesake Pyramid Rock, as well as Stone Mother, also known as the Woman with a Basket, are popular attractions.

The ban on visitors will be enforced while Paiutes find solutions to prevent additional

vandalism and promote responsible use of the sacred area, Paiute Chairman Wayne Burke has said.

For American Indians, the area is a place where they come to pray, enjoy the solitude and take in the beauty, said Ben Aleck, curator for the Pyramid Lake Museum-Visitors Center in Nixon.

"One of the tribes from the Navaho nation," Aleck said, "leaves offerings in the basket. They like to do it in a place where people aren't drinking beer, playing music loud and partying.

"The thing about sacred sites or places, the way most Indian people believe, is it's all around us. Everything is sacred," Aleck said. "This mother earth of ours is sacred."

And whether they're American Indians or not, the Pyramid Rock area is a serene and quiet place that "should be respected and where people can find solitude," he said.

The Pyramid Rock area was closed to

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overnight camping in 2007 because of the partying and littering. Now, it is the second area around the lake totally closed to visitors.

In 1980, the Needles and its hot springs on the north end of Pyramid Lake were closed to non-Paiutes because people left trash, graffiti and junk cars, Aleck said.

“One of the last things that happened is someone shot a cow and dragged it on the hot springs and left it,” Aleck said. “Talk about disrespect.”

The Paiutes also have banned all ATV users from the 742-square-mile reservation because they destroy the fragile desert environment.

“It’s unfortunate,” Aleck said. “There’s an attitude people can come out and do whatever they want. There’s a lot of good people who come out, too. Some of the older Reno families have been coming out for years.”

Possible solutions might include obtaining a special permit to visit Pyramid Rock on tours with Paiute elders, said Scott Carey, tribal government planner. Another possibility could be camp hosts to keep an eye on things, Aleck said.

Last summer, Aleck said a family from Rhode Island drove all the way here to camp near the Pyramid Rock but had to be turned away. If a special-permit system were created, he said, they could be enlisted as a camp hosts and be allowed to

stay.

With summer fast approaching, Carey said a plan to restore limited access to the Pyramid Rock area is hoped to be in place by Memorial Day. With the exception of the Needles, Carey said people are free to visit other areas of the lake after obtaining a permit.

Four large graffiti writings were discovered in early April on the tufa rock, and the Paiute council voted on April 15 to make the area off-limits. Carey said Paiute police are working with the regional gang unit to determine if any of it is gang-related. Carey said Paiutes debated whether to go public with the graffiti. Published photos could encourage more vandalism. But he said they also wanted the public to understand why the area is being closed.

With the ban, outsiders can no longer use part of Tribal Route 5 leading to the Pyramid Rock area. The banned area is a one-mile-radius from the Pyramid Rock/Stone Mother area. Trespassers will

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be fined \$250.

A community cleanup day, involving Paiutes as well as others who are fond of the lake, is being planned for the Pyramid Rock area, Carey said.

Aleck said Paiute volunteers including himself and several others clean up the graffiti. No chemicals are used because the tufa rock is so porous. Instead, a wire brush is attached to a drill to remove most of it, he said. Natural factors like wind and rain do the rest, and markings are usually gone in about a year.

The lake covers about 112,000 acres, about a quarter of the reservation, and its shoreline totals about 125 miles. More than 2,500 Paiutes are direct descendants of the Northern Paiute people who have lived in the Great Basin area for thousands of years.



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The sacred Stone Mother sits near the Pyramid at Pyramid Lake Wednesday April 27, 2011. / Photo by Marilyn Newton/RGJ

Solutions

The Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribal Council is seeking solutions to keep the Pyramid Rock/Stone Mother area open to the public while controlling graffiti, excessive partying and littering. If you have any suggestions, contact tribal planner Scott Carey at scott.scarey@plpt.nsn.us

Day-use permits

A \$6 day-use permit helps support the tribal government and is required to visit the lake. It can be purchased online for \$6 or at retailers for \$7. Details: www.pyramidlake.us/pyramid-lake-permits.html

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