

Track Rock Gap Stone Landscape News Briefing
Blue Ridge Ranger District Office
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
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Andy Baker
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“What I would like to do today is take 15 to 20 minutes here to introduce you to who we have to speak today, mostly our Tribal partners, and our forest archeologist in Gainesville with the Chattahoochee National Forest. And I’m going to try to provide some context as to why we are here today, and then let them speak and provide their perspective, and then we want to take the conversation out to the Track Rock site itself and do any follow up interviews, or questions out there and just minimize our time right here. It’s just a good rally point. And then I know some of you that can’t do the hike, but were glad you’re here.”

“Let me just roll right into it. We’ve invited you here today to try to give what we feel is the real story about the track rock gap archeological site out here in Union County on the Chattahoochee National Forest. My name is Andy Baker, District Ranger for the Blue Ridge Ranger District which is the central zone of the Chattahoochee National Forest, and of course includes Track Rock Gap archeological area. Of course my job and our job as land managers of this site is to balance the need for public enjoyment and visitation, with the need for protection of cultural resources, and we do that through a very strong partnership with our Tribal partners.”

“Again today we have the Eastern Band of Cherokee represented, and the Muskogee Creek Nation from Oklahoma represented. They’ve been a continual partner, not just at Track Rock, but throughout our cultural heritage program, so we’ll let them talk more about that. But, as you know, about a year ago, there was some unfounded speculation and blogs and articles written about a potential Mayan connection to the Track Rock Gap site, and you’re going to find out today that it’s pretty much unfounded, it’s basically unfounded speculation is what it is. There is no archeological evidence of any Mayan connections to Track Rock Gap. And so we want that story to get out there. We understand that the Mayan craze is a big deal right now, but we, at the same point, we have a very important counterpoint to make to that story.”

“And that’s why when the potential Mayan connection came about, locally you folks at the Chamber, and here at the County, and our office here received lots of public interest. “Is this true?” “How do we go take a look at this?” And so the challenge for us is to protect this site which has such sacred nature to the Native [Americans], our Tribal partners, but still provide public access to the National Forest. And so our legal mandate is to protect these sites through the Archeological Resources Protection Act. And what we’ve done, is we’re not disclosing the specific location of the stone landscapes, because it is sacred. And we will let the Tribes talk about why that is, so were not disclosing it publicly. We’re

discouraging public use of the stone landscapes, to avoid the potential for vandalism, and anything like that. But we do want to encourage is an area where the rock art site is, right there at the Track Rock Gap, that has been managed. We've done a lot of management investment in making sure that is interpreted correctly for the public, that it's protected in the right way. And so that's where we want to encourage use, where we have protections in place where public use can be enjoyed, and properly interpreted. The stone landscape site on the other hand has none of that protection in place, and of course the Mayan interpretation is not the correct interpretation, and so we are discouraging use of that site, and we are encouraging use of the rock art petroglyph site."

"We're discouraging use, but it's not officially closed at this point. We're trying to avoid any permanent or temporary closure, and that's one of the reasons we're here today is to get the real story out. Obviously if we get a huge influx of people to this particular stone landscape site, it creates trails that didn't exist previously, and the most important thing is it increases the potential for vandalism, and issues out there that we don't need."

"So that's kind of the perspective and the background of why we are here. And now I'm going to hand it off to our Tribal partners and let them talk about it a little more, and their perspective about Track Rock Gap. First off we have Yolanda Saunooke with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and we're very thankful for her being here today, and we will let her come speak."

Yolanda Saunooke

Tribal Historic Preservation Assistant

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

"Around January of this year we did receive word from the Forest Service that there was a potential issue with this Mayan craze going on and its association with the Track Rock site. Our primary goal is not to just preserve but also protect such sites as this. With the Mayan craze we are afraid that it's going to lead to detrimental impacts with the site. We're not trying to keep people from it just because there's something we're hiding. We're not hiding anything, we're just trying to do our job and that is to protect what is very, you know, sacred to us."

"So we have been in constant exchanges since January, mostly month to month, as it gets closer to December it's been weekly to daily, there's always something new and outlandish that's coming up with this. If you have any other questions just ask us, we have nothing to hide. We will be able to answer it for you. The Forest Service has gone above and beyond in consultation with us, and we're very happy that they are supporting us, and that we are supporting them as well."

Andy Baker: "Thank you, and again we will have plenty of time for further questions for you later on. Tyler Howe is also here with the Tribal Historical Preservation Office of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians."

Tyler Howe

Tribal Historic Preservation Specialist

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

“Thanks for coming out. One of the things that I want to touch on, are how what is being written is a threat to Tribal sovereignty. About a hundred years ago there were multiple theories of who built the mounds in the Southeastern United States. And scholars and anthropologists and archeologists were convinced that there was a Jewish connection, that it was the lost tribes of Israel that built the mounds. Well, the archeological data showed that no, that there’s no connection to that. You know so then *it was* the Southeastern people it, it was the Creeks, it was the Cherokees, it was the Choctaws. Well then they thought “there’s got to be some other connection, because you got the pyramids in Egypt, you got ziggurats in Mesopotamia , you got pyramids in Guatemala, Mexico and Belize, then you got mounds up here, I bet you it’s Mayans or Aztecs who did that, or Egyptians.” Well, the empirical data threw that out in the 1970’s. So this is a debate that has come up forty years later that’s been put down.”

“But what it really is for Tribal people is a threat for our sovereignty. It’s saying that our people, that Cherokees or Creeks were not smart enough to do this on their own. You know it’s just a continuation of that. And more than that, we want to show that for the Cherokees, for the Eastern Band, the Forest Service -- we hold them up as a standard bearer. When it comes to consultation for federal cultural resource laws, the Forest Service does it right in our opinion, you know. We hold them up as the standard bearers. We also want, and you guys of the local community, to realize that this is also part of your heritage, you know, this is one of those sites that Congress talks about , these sites that are important in the ... It’s of cultural significance for all Americans. So it’s not just a Cherokee site; it’s not just a Creek site. It’s also a Georgian site; it’s an American site. So, and I’ll be here, too, so if you have any other questions.”

Andy Baker: “Thanks Tyler. We have Emman Spain all the way from Oklahoma with the Muskogee Tribe. We would love to hear your perspective.”

Emman Spain

Tribal Historic Preservation Officer

Muscogee Creek Nation

“I’m the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Muskogee Creek Nation. We believe that these sites are some of our ancestral sites also and it was very well stated by previous speakers that what we think of this site. We pretty much hold it in reverence. We’ve been removed out of the Southeast for 170 or so years, but we still consider a lot of these sites, such as the burials, to be our grandparents and things like that. So these sites are very important to us. And we felt compelled to come out here because of some of the recent activities here at Track Rock Gap as you heard with the media.”

“All the things written about it, and some of the individuals here that are stretching things, trying to claim connection to the Muskogee Creek Nation. We felt compelled come out here and debunk a lot of the things he is saying, such as he is not a Tribal member. He has no association with the Muskogee

Creek Nation. The Muscogee Creek Nation does not endorse anything he says or any of his writings. In fact most of the people in the Muscogee Creek Nation thinks he's kind of a quack. He did a little bit of work a few years ago for a Tribal Judge that is no longer there. Other than that, there was no connection to the Muscogee Creek Nation. A lot of the things he says in his writings are basically stretching the truth a little bit. He's trying to make this Mayan connection. Our folks, our Tribal people back home, we don't believe that. I mean, they are saying that if there were some kind of connection like that we would have oral histories that would have been passed down. There would have been stories. There would have been things in our culture today and in our ceremonial grounds and places like that that would have probably linked to that, but there is nothing like that and they don't believe that."

"He tries to make a connection through the language. For one thing, a lot of the word he's using are mispronounced. For one thing he is not even pronouncing the words right in the Muscogee language, nor does he know the Muscogee language. Where he's getting his information about these, maybe a Muscogee dictionary, but I know it's not anybody that's pronouncing his words like that that are true Muscogean speakers."

"So we're here, we just want folks to know, people to know, that he has no connection to the Muscogee Nation and he has no authority to speak on behalf of the Muscogee Nation or anything like that. And also we're here to applaud the Forest Service efforts to protect and preserve these significant cultural sites here. We know there is a fine balance in the mandates that the Forest Service has, and obligations to the general public, as well as obligations to these Federal laws, such as ARPA, and NEPA, and the National Historic Preservation Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. So we're here to applaud the Forest Service efforts in the protection of these cultural sites and we would like to say that we look forward to being a continuing partner with our Federal partners here such as the Forest Service and we appreciate everything they are doing. Thank you."

Andy Baker: "And thank you, sir. And finally James Wettstaed, who is our Forest Archeologist with the Chattahoochee National Forest, will finish up for us. He's kind of our resident expert on Track Rock so we'll let him tell us a little bit."

James Wettstaed

Forest Archeologist

Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

"Well, I want to thank everyone for coming. Just a little bit of background on the site itself. There's the rock art site at the gap by the road, and then we have the stone landscape site which is where all the claims have been made, which is across the road and down a little ways. We've known about the stone landscape site for about twelve years, did a little research out there. An archeologist named Johannes Laubser did some research supported by the Forest to see what the rocks really were. And through that research we were able to confirm that the site dates to at least AD 800 based on some artifacts that

were found out there, and maybe earlier, certainly more recent. There's a whole series of rock piles, and linear rock features that look like rock walls out there."

"So we have confirmed through archeological excavation that it was made by the American Indians, the ancestors of the Creek and the Cherokee who were out here. The site was probably used repeatedly for several hundred years, maybe a thousand years or more. It's an important site. The stone landscapes occur throughout the Appalachians from Alabama all the way up to New England. We're finding sites similar to this with similar layouts. They all look a little different but kind of similar patterns, and it's part of the legacy and history of the Appalachian region. And it's something we want to protect and take care of, and we want the real story to be out there and not that it's a Mayan connection."

"Archeologically, if it was Mayan you would see signs of Mayan artifacts and things. And there's nothing out there. What's out there is American Indian and it's an important site. And that's short and sweet. I'll answer any questions you will have when we go out there."

Andy Baker: "Okay, so again the plan was to kind of transition out there to the site. We thought for those who can we'll caravan between two Forest Service rigs, and that way we all stay together. Some of you know exactly where it is, some of us don't. And again we'll do any follow up out there. And of course Judy has your factsheet that's got all your media contact information. If you need to follow up with us after today, please do. You know the whole objective is to get the true story out there, so that's all we want to do. Thank you very much."