

## ***Defenders of the Black Hills***

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### **PRESS RELEASE**

## **"Group seeks designation of Sacred Landscape"**

**"Promotes Okawita Paha National Monument in the Black Hills"**

The Black Hills for millennia have been considered sacred by more than thirty Native American nations from North America. The sacred peak, Opahata I, also known as Harney Peak, is considered to be the "center of all that is" to many Native American nations. The surrounding Okawita Paha area, literally "Gathering Place", is considered a sacred landscape that was used for thousands of years in traditional Native American spiritual and cultural practices.



Prior to the incursion of Euro-Americans, people of the Great Sioux Nation gathered at Okawita Paha at the beginning of every new year which is the first day of Spring. They gathered to welcome back the Thunder Nation and gave thanks for the renewal of all life: plants, animals, birds, insects, all living beings. Their prayers were for all of creation and reminded everyone of the relatedness of everything.

The people of the Great Sioux Nation must preserve these spiritual traditions and cultural identities, and complete these practices in their rightful places. The Okawita Paha sacred landscape provides a place for traditional Native American spirituality and is unsuited for commercial and secular activities such as logging, prescribed burning, and building of roads. The Okawita Paha sacred landscape, part of which is the Black Elk Wilderness, is the last place in the Black Hills that provides protection and sanctuary for wildlife.

*Defenders of the Black Hills* hereby publicly endorses the designation of the roughly 40,000 acres of National Forest System lands shown on the accompanying map as the Okawita Paha National Monument. We support transfer of these lands to management by the National Park Service with a vigorous training program for Native American personnel to be managed as a sacred landscape and wildlife sanctuary. As a sacred landscape, traditional Native American spiritual practices may be freely exercised, spiritual practices that are once again resurfacing after nearly 100 years of suppression.

A “sacred landscape” is a natural landscape where the Creator’s creation is recognized in all the rocks, water, and wildlife that are present on the land. Providing a place for traditional spiritual practices of reverence and respect towards the land is an integral part of such a sacred landscape designation. Protecting wildlife from disturbance, harassment, and trespass is consistent with a sacred landscape designation, as is providing a secure breeding place.

Impacts on wildlife, other than those in harmony with traditional spiritual practices, would be subject to the fines and penalties already established in the Norbeck Organic Act of 1920 and updated relative to inflation. The restrictions imposed by a Wilderness designation are consistent with a sacred landscape designation. However, management in a sacred landscape would be restricted to natural fire which is more in tune with a “natural” designation than current Wilderness landscape management practices.

The proposed Okawita Paha National Monument would comprise roughly 40,000 acres of current National Forest System (NFS) lands in the Black Hills of South Dakota with management by the National Park Service. Non-NFS lands such as private inholdings, Custer State Park lands, and Mount Rushmore National Memorial are not included in this proposal and will not be subject to the management restrictions proposed for the Okawita Paha National Monument.

*Defenders of the Black Hills* strongly supports the designation of these lands as the Okawita Paha National Monument to be jointly managed by the United States and the Great Sioux Nation in recognition of the peace promised in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, and in the spirit of reconciliation as proposed by late SD Governor George

Mickelson. In addition, such a designation would finally uphold the true essence of the Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978.

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For more information contact: Charmaine White Face, Coordinator at 605-343-5387 or Brian Brademeyer at 605-574-4152.

*Defenders of the Black Hills is a non-profit organization composed of Native and non-Native American people who are concerned about the restoration and preservation of the natural environment of the Black Hills in South Dakota and Wyoming and the surrounding grasslands. To learn more about Defenders go to:*

[www.defendblackhills.org/joomla](http://www.defendblackhills.org/joomla)

## Okawita Paha National Monument



