

# NATIONAL REGISTER BULLETIN

Technical information on the the National Register of Historic Places:  
survey, evaluation, registration, and preservation of cultural resources



U.S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
Cultural Resources  
National Register, History and Education

## Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties



# ETHNOGRAPHY, ETHNOHISTORY, ETHNOCENTRISM

Three words beginning with “ethno” will be used repeatedly in this Bulletin, and may not be familiar to all readers. All three are derived from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning “nation;” and are widely used in the study of anthropology and related disciplines.

*Ethnography* is the descriptive and analytic study of the culture of particular groups or communities. An ethnographer seeks to understand a community through interviews with its members and often through living in and observing it (a practice referred to as “participant observation”).

*Ethnohistory* is the study of historical data, including but not necessarily limited to, documentary data pertaining to a group or community, using an ethnographic perspective.

Ethnographic and ethnohistorical research are usually carried out by specialists in cultural anthropology, and by specialists in folklore and folklife, sociology, history, archeology and related disciplines with appropriate technical training.<sup>3</sup>

*Ethnocentrism* means viewing the world and the people in it only from the point of view of one’s own culture and being unable to sympathize with the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of someone who is a member of a different culture. It is particularly important to understand, and seek to avoid, ethnocentrism in the evaluation of traditional cultural properties. For ex-

ample, Euroamerican society tends to emphasize “objective” observation of the physical world as the basis for making statements about that world. However, it may not be possible to use such observations as the major basis for evaluating a traditional cultural property. For example, there may be nothing observable to the outsider about a place regarded as sacred by a Native American group. Similarly, such a group’s belief that its ancestors emerged from the earth at a specific location at the beginning of time may contradict Euroamerican science’s belief that the group’s ancestors migrated to North America from Siberia. These facts in no way diminish the significance of the locations in question in the eyes of those who value them; indeed they are irrelevant to their significance. It would be ethnocentric in the extreme to say that “whatever the Native American group says about this place, I can’t see anything here so it is not significant” or “since I know these people’s ancestors came from Siberia, the place where they think they emerged from the earth is of no significance.” It is vital to evaluate properties thought to have traditional cultural significance from the standpoint of those who may ascribe such significance to them, whatever one’s own perception of them, based on one’s own cultural values, may be. This is not to say that a group’s assertions about the significance of a place should not be questioned or subjected to critical analysis, but they should not be rejected based on the premise that the beliefs they reflect are inferior to one’s own.

# EVALUATION, CONSIDERATION, AND PROTECTION

One more point that should be remembered in evaluating traditional cultural properties—as in evaluating any other kind of properties—is that establishing that a property is eligible for inclusion in the National Register does not necessarily mean that the property must be protected from disturbance or damage. Establishing that a property is eligible means that it must be considered in planning Federal, federally assisted, and federally licensed undertakings, but it does not mean that such an undertaking cannot be allowed to damage or destroy it.

Consultation must occur in accordance with the regulations of the Advisory Council (36 CFR Part 800) to identify, and if feasible adopt, measures to protect it, but if in the final analysis the public interest demands that the property be sacrificed to the needs of the project, there is nothing in the National Historic Preservation Act that prohibits this.

This principle is especially important to recognize with respect to traditional cultural properties, because such properties may be valued by a relatively small segment of a community that, on the whole, favors a project that will damage or destroy it. The fact that the community as a whole may be willing to dispense with the property in order to achieve the goals of the project does not mean that the property is not significant, but the fact that it is significant does not mean that it cannot be disturbed, or that the project must be foregone.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the qualifications that a practitioner of ethnography or ethnohistory should possess, see Appendix II.