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Discovering Where the Trail of Tears Ends, Interpreting Complex Cultural Landscapes

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106 GROUP

CULTURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT,
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The Cherokee Nation's jurisdiction is a 7,000-square-mile area located in northeastern Oklahoma. This land area is home to more than 110,000 Cherokee people whose ancestors traveled the Trail of Tears in 1838 from the southeastern United States to what is now Oklahoma. Here they rebuilt a democratic form of government and today are one of the largest Native American tribes.

Chief Chad Smith, the current chief, has articulated a vision for the Cherokee Nation that includes maintaining cultural identity, economic self reliance, and a strong government; cultural tourism can play a role in achieving this vision. To implement this vision, the Cherokee Nation established a cultural tourism division to develop programs that communicate the cultural identity of the Nation and help sustain the economic self-reliance of its people.

The first step in developing a cultural tourism program was strategic planning. The strategic planning effort addressed six components of cultural tourism: resources; community outreach; interpretation; site planning; economic development; and marketing. None of these areas can be developed or implemented in isolation; the development of a successful program requires maintaining a delicate balance between all six components. When these components are developed in harmony with one another, a synergy develops that transforms the individual resources into a new and cohesive whole. However, the focus of this paper will be on resources and interpretation.

The cultural, historical, natural, and recreational resources of the Cherokee Nation are broad and provide a strong foundation on which to build the cultural tourism program. These resources range from visible and tangible sites, buildings, and cultural events and festivals; to ecological and recreational resources; to less tangible resources, such as hidden stories, archaeological sites, and sacred and cultural significant places known only to a few.

One of the central and most powerful resources for the tourism program is the Trail of Tears. The Trail of Tears is one of the most tragic and shameful episodes of U.S. history. The physical places associated with the trail confront us with making decisions about how something so shameful and painful from our past should be integrated into a tourism program that seeks economic development without diluting the story, or being at risk of exploiting heritage for economic gain.

The Illinois Campground is one of a few disbandment camps for the Trail of Tears. Even with power lines overhead and a sewage plant at the edge of the property, the place is powerful and compelling, some would say haunting. It probably contains remarkable archaeological resources, but the true power of this place lies in its very existence as open space by the creek where the survivors of the long removal march stopped and realized

this would be their new home in a strange land. Only a few people know of the significance of this place—hundreds drive by it daily completely unaware of what it represents and could reveal. The place is a metaphor of the recent history of indigenous people who have been made invisible on the American landscape. It is also iconic and therefore important for the Cherokee people to choose how to preserve, reclaim, and interpret this place and all it represents as their own.

Within native communities, the term storytelling often has more meaning and relevance than the term interpretation for how people communicate importance, values, and meaning. Interpretation of native communities is often bound within a EuroAmerican frame of reference, and, in turn, the negative and clichéd often supersede the positive and genuine. Common understandings of native culture are often grounded in:

- History textbooks that present Native Americans as a defeated people
- Hollywood’s pop culture: from John Wayne to *Dances With Wolves*
- Alcoholism, impoverishment, and casinos

Conflict and struggle are often the central elements in these types of interpretation. Yet what is largely missing is a depth of understanding. When most people think of the history of North America, they think of a relatively recent history. Yet, native are an ancient people. The temporal depth of their experience on the land is profound. The stories and events of that past are not ancient history to native people; they are as real and vivid as if they happened just yesterday. Therefore, this greatly affects and challenges the process of interpretation of native stories and history by the descendants of the colonizers. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the creation of a Native American cultural tourism program, as there are inherent differences in expectations, perceptions, and realities from whichever perspective one looks.

The history and culture of the Cherokee Nation is a legacy that gives the Cherokee people strength, identity, and value; sustains them; and gives them a sense of direction. In light of this legacy and spirit, a theme for the cultural tourism program was developed.

The Cherokee people have faced centuries of adversity with resilience to prosper and excel, and today maintain a distinctive cultural identity.

Subthemes and storylines are being developed for individual sites, exhibits, and programs in support of this overarching theme. The theme, subtheme, and storylines are being conveyed in many ways that are authentic to Cherokee identity and culture, such as:

- Cherokee people who are storytellers
- Non-native interpreters and tour guides who have received training in cultural interpretation
- Arts and crafts based on traditional Cherokee values and aesthetics
- Music, dance, and celebratory gatherings
- Sacred gatherings (even those that are not accessible to non-Cherokee people)
- Stories that reflect Cherokee culture and values
- Re-enactments
- Design and physical fabric of tourist sites

Ultimately, the success of the program is dependent upon four key factors:

- Keep sight of the big picture—the program is more than a few interesting museums, sites, or tours; plan for a cohesive whole
- Implement a process that will bring the community together around a common vision
- Commit to long-term thinking that never loses sight of who you want to attract and what this audience will demand
- Dare to dream and realize the possibilities

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