

State of the Art

Indigenous Rock Images in Wyoming

Short report prepared for the Wyoming Select Committee on Tribal Relations
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Background

On April 12th, 2024 Donna Shippen of the Wyoming Legislative Service Office invited State Archaeologist Spencer Pelton to testify on Protection of Indigenous Rock Art Sites in Wyoming at the Select Tribal Relations Committee hearing in Ft. Washakie, WY on May 1st, 2024. In preparation for this hearing, Pelton collaborated with members of the Wyoming Cultural Records Office (WYCRO) to compile information regarding archaeologically known rock art sites in Wyoming. Pelton also compiled information from a rock art documentation project on State lands conducted in summer 2023. This information is intended to provide the Select Tribal Relations Committee with context for rock art sites, how archaeologists document and understand them, and the prevalence and nature of rock art vandalism on Wyoming lands.

Rock image sites in Wyoming

As of April 18th, 2024 there are 1,085 rock art sites documented in the WYCRO database. Rock art sites are documented in all Wyoming counties but are most common in the southwest portion of the state (Sweetwater, Unita, Lincoln, Fremont, and Sublette Counties) (Figure 1). This is followed by the northwest (Park, Teton, Bighorn, Hot Springs, and Washakie counties), then southeast (Albany, Carbon, Laramie, Goshen, Platte, Converse, Niobrara, and Natrona counties), then northeast (Crook, Weston, Campbell, Johnson, and Sheridan counties) portions of the state. Rock art site frequency is likely related to the prevalence of cultural resource management surveys conducted alongside energy extraction projects, which are especially common in the carbon-rich deposits of southwest Wyoming. However, we did not formally evaluate this notion. My impression is that the Bighorn Basin of northwest Wyoming, especially the canyons on the western slope of the Bighorn Mountains, contains the densest prevalence of rock art in the state. This region includes two of the most widely known rock art sites: Medicine Lodge Creek and Legend Rock.

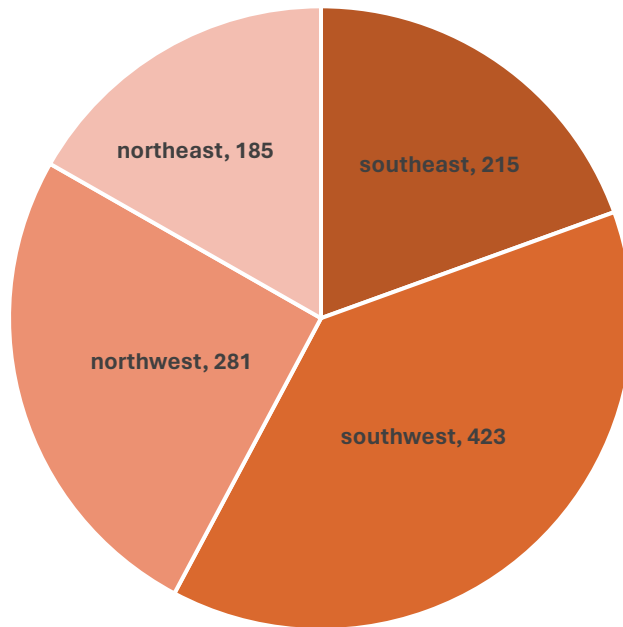


Figure 1: Frequency summary of Wyoming rock image sites by region.

Rock art vandalism

Wyoming rock art sites are documented to widely varying standards based on when they were recorded and by whom. Some sites are simply points on a map documented with WYCRO based on a tip from a member of the public. The best documented sites are entirely sketched by hand and thoroughly documented through photography and 3-dimensional modeling of the cliff face. Along with these varying documentation standards, we have an incomplete record of how many rock art sites have suffered from vandalism. WYCRO maintains a data field for documenting impacts to sites, and 666 of the 1,085 total sites (61%) are associated with data pertaining to rock art site impacts. The most common form of rock art site impact is natural erosion, with 471 (71%) of the 666 sites for which we have data noted as eroded. Only 28 sites (4%) are noted as having no impacts at all.

157 sites (24%) are noted as either vandalized or defaced. Vandalism prevalence is largely comparable between land jurisdictions. 635 sites for which impacts are known are located on either Federal, State, or private lands. Of those, 22% of rock art sites on Federal lands are vandalized, followed by 24% on private lands, and 32% on State lands (Table 1). These differences are not statistically significant, but it is my opinion that rock art sites on State lands might be at a slightly higher risk for vandalism for one major reason. State land parcels are often closer to population centers and thus more easily accessed. Such parcels are often popular places for shooting, dumping, or other potentially destructive activities, thus placing rock art sites at higher risk for vandalism.

Table 1: Summary of rock art site vandalism for a sample of sites (635) for which impacts and land jurisdiction are know.

	not vandalized	vandalized	Total
Federal	306	88 (22%)	394
State	32	15 (32%)	47
Private	147	47 (24%)	194
Total	485	150	635

Pine Canyon Case Study

In 2023, the Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist (OWSA) and the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) conducted a thorough documentation of a rock art site located on State lands north of Rock Springs in response to a request from former Northern Arapaho Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Yufna Soldier Wolf. Soldier Wolf had noted ongoing vandalism of the Pine Canyon rock art site (48SW309) as part of her involvement with a Red Desert conservation group. In response, OWSA and SHPO spent 2 field days documenting the site, including detailed sketches of all imagery (Figure 2), 3-dimensional modeling of all panels, and detailed assessment of vandalism to the site.



Figure 2: Example of technical illustration of a rock art panel at the Pine Canyon site.

Rock art vandalism at Pine Canyon is extreme, but demonstrates the various types of vandalism incurred at Wyoming rock art sites. Vandalism at Pine Canyon is typically one of four types: initials/names, dates, painting, or firearms. We have not yet systematically tabulated vandalism for Pine Canyon, but my impression is that initials/names are the most common type of vandalism, followed by dates, then firearm damage, then painting. Initials, names, and dates are almost always incised into the rock face as opposed to pecked or chiseled. Firearm damage is often present on images for which a logical target is present, such as the center of a shield-bearing warrior motif (Figure 3) or the body or head of an animal image (Figure 4). Painting is most often done to augment the shape or outline of an existing image (Figure 4).

At Pine Canyon, I tabulated the frequency of vandalism dates to determine the prevalence of rock image vandalism through time (Figure 5). I had assumed that rock art vandalism decreased in the past several decades alongside greater public awareness of its significance, but this is not the case. Based on the subset of vandalism depicting dates, rock art vandalism seems to have only grown more common through time, with the years between 2010 and 2020 having evidence for at least 10 vandalism episodes and likely many more that did not leave dates behind. Based on 3 vandalized dates from the 2020s, this decade appears to be on track to be equally as destructive as the last. This pattern at Pine Canyon seems entirely related to population density (Figure 6), where the more people that are present in nearby Rock Springs, the more likely one of them is to vandalize rock art.



Figure 3: Initials, names, dates, and firearm damage overlaying an Indigenous rock image at the Pine Canyon site.



Figure 4: Firearm and painting damage to a bison rock image at the Pine Canyon site.



Figure 5: Rock art vandalism by decade at the Pine Canyon rock art site as indicated by vandalized dates.

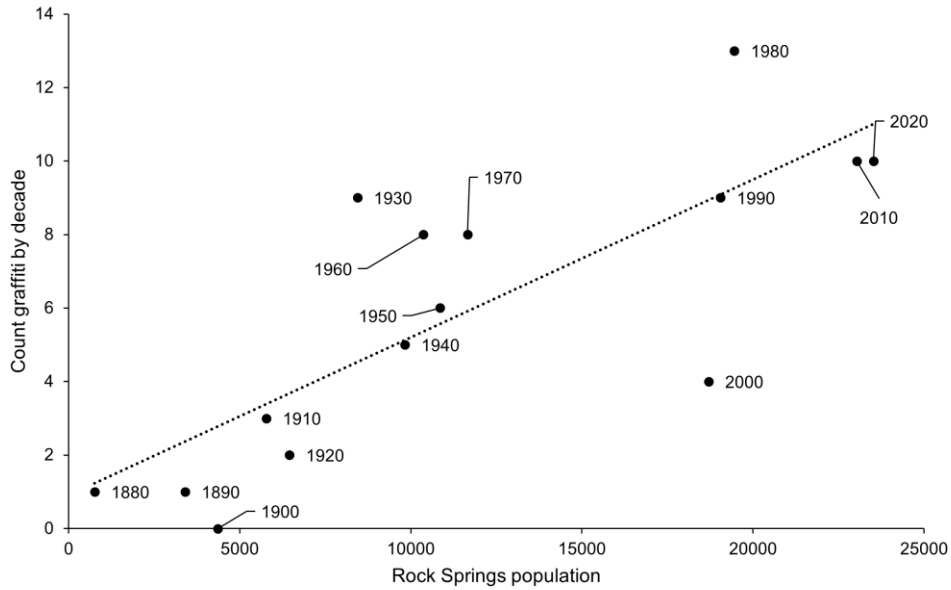


Figure 6: Rock art vandalism by Rock Springs census population at the Pine Canyon rock art site as indicated by vandalized dates.

Take-aways

- The counties of southwest Wyoming contain the highest number of documented rock art sites, but the Bighorn Basin is probably the single densest region for the sites.
- Pending data cleanup, Wyoming Federal lands contain most rock art sites (62%) and State lands contain the least (7%). This is a function of total land jurisdiction and the frequency of cultural resource surveys.
- Rock art sites on State lands seem slightly more susceptible to vandalism than those on other lands, which is likely a result of their greater accessibility by population centers.
- Rock art vandalism consists largely of initial/names, dates, firearm damage, and painting
- Rock art vandalism is likely a function of population density. A small subset of Wyoming's population vandalizes rock art, perhaps 1 in 1,000 people at most, and this subset has remained relatively constant through time.