

“Vision Quest Sites in Southern Oregon”

By
Bill Banek
BLM – St. George Office

Presented to the Dixie Archaeology Society
June 13, 2012

Bill discussed the general topic of Vision Quests used by Native Americans in the past and even into the present. He defined a vision quest as wide spread, ritual religious ceremony taken by an individual (often with assistance) who is seeking direction or supernatural power. A vision quest is often taken as a sign of passage into adulthood.

Bill described how vision quests were practiced by Native Americans in Northern California and Southern Oregon. Working with Native Americans, researchers in the late 1960's identified a number of archaeological features that identified “Vision Quest” sites. These include:

- 1) A prayer seat or Tsektset, This is a place of dancing, fasting and prayer for an extended period of time either by an individual or with a “trainer”.
- 2) Rock Stack. This is a place of ritual purification on the approach to a “sacred place”.
- 3) Rock Cairn. These are piles of rock that act as trail markers. Some are associated with prayer seats.
- 4) Rock Alignments. These are straight or gently curving walls. Their use is not understood.
- 5) Rock Circles. A circle of rock that do not touch, generally found near prayer seats.
- 6) Rock Hearth Rings. These rings have some ritual activity. Archaeologists have found charcoal associated with the rings. They could have been used by the trainer or companion.

Bill then described his research with regard to vision quest sites in Southern Oregon. His work was in the Winema National Forest area and concentrated on sites associated with the Klamath Indians. The archaeology and ethnography indicates these people lived in the area since about 7000 BP. They were fishermen and their life was adapted to living in marshlands. The shaman was the most important person of the tribe.

These people used vision quests as part of their religion. They sought power from the spirits (birds, animals, wind, lightning, etc.) They believed that the spirit manifests itself in song. The “dream song” then follows in a vision, which serves to give direction to the person's life.

The location of a vision quest site was not random. Spirits dwelt in particular geographic locations.

Bill investigated a large number of sites. The sites in this area were generally rock stacks or cairns. The piling of stones was considered a form of conditioning in preparation to the reception of a vision.

The sites were generally on rock outcroppings with a view of the horizon. They were often oriented toward a particular feature on the horizon. There were a small number of “prayer sites”. It is thought they were reserved for the shaman. They seemed to correlate to the number of small tribal villages in the area. Most vision quest sites were generally on ridges above a village.

The images are of a couple of vision quest sites that Bill described,



Rock Alignment



Prayer Seat

Bill's contribution to the vision quest research was to develop a detailed form that an archaeologist was to use to describe a vision quest site. Prior to the use of this form in the 1980's, the site documentation was very limited and was most often not useful in understanding what was really at the site.

The following are some references from the internet regarding vision quest sites.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_quest

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/99h4b4q7>

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1917&dat=19860823&id=-Q8hAAAAIBAJ&sjid=bnIFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2747,5943899>

<http://www.simitrailblazers.com/articles/SHAMAN.html>

<http://www.pryormountains.org/cultural-history/archaeology/vision-quest-structures/>

<http://core.tdar.org/document/251030>

John Mangels

XXXXXXXXXXXX

