



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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By 1970, more than 500,000 visitors may be traveling to a new national recreation area in Montana and Wyoming and enjoying the same scenic mountains, canyons, and rivers where an unknown Indian tribe lived in prehistoric times.

The Department of the Interior has announced it favors enactment of Federal legislation which would authorize establishment of the 63,000-acre Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area surrounding Yellowtail Reservoir in southern Montana and northern Wyoming.

The 71-mile reservoir, expected to be completed by 1966, will be formed by the 525-foot-high Yellowtail Dam being built near the mouth of Big Horn Canyon, about 42 miles southwest of Hardin, Mont., by the Bureau of Reclamation as a part of the Missouri River Basin Project.

A bill pending in Congress provides for acquiring approximately 7,300 acres of non-Federal lands within the authorized boundaries and for the inclusion of Crow Indian Reservation lands. The reservation acreage could only be included in the recreation area at the request of the Crow Tribal Council, "subject to any limitations specified by the tribal council and approved by the Secretary of the Interior."

Located between the Bighorn Mountains on the east and the Pryor Mountains on the west, Bighorn Canyon was formed by continued erosion during the geological uplift period during which the Bighorn and Pryor mountain ranges were being formed. The canyon depth varies from 800 to 2,000 feet and its walls present the various strata of geological periods dating back millions of years.

In addition to the impressive scenery and geological story presented there, it is an area of significant archeological and historical interest. The Smithsonian Institution is studying a narrow strip of land running the length of the canyon on which have been found campsites, tepee rings, a medicine wheel, original trails, and other evidence of habitation by an unknown prehistoric people.

In historic times it is known that the Crow, or Absaroka, were among the earliest people to dwell in the area and they have remained to the present.

Within a few miles of the dam site are the remains of Fort C. F. Smith, an Army infantry post established in 1866 to protect travelers on the "Bozeman Trail" - the main supply route between Fort Laramie, Wyoming, and Virginia City, Montana - who were constantly under attack by the Sioux and Cheyenne for "encroachment" on their hunting grounds.

Farther downstream from the dam is the site of the Hayfield Fight, where a small force of hay cutters and their soldier guards repelled a superior number of attacking Sioux by using the then newly issued breech-loading Springfield rifles. This fight has become a classic of Western Indian wars, being the first battle in which the new weapons were used.

In addition to providing a safe water access to area formerly nearly inaccessible, the reservoir will offer new opportunities to the area for all types of water-based recreation and other outdoor activities.

The proposed recreation project is in one of the Nation's major vacation areas and meets National Recreation Area qualifications established by the President's Recreation Advisory Council. It can be reached from the north and west by U. S. Highway 87 and Interstate 90, now under construction, and from the east and south by U. S. Highway 14. The Department estimates that more than half-million visitors annually would travel to the area by 1970.

The Crow Indian Tribal Council, the Council's planning and economic consulting firm, and the National Park Service are making a joint master plan study of the entire reservation area to consider the recreation potential of the Indian lands and their relation to the recreation area. The results of the study will enable the Tribe to determine the extent of its participation in the development of the national recreation area.

<https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/interior-department-favors-establishment-bighorn-canyon-recreation>