

# Conservation Practices and Cultural Resources: Questions and Answers

## Fact Sheet

April 2011

## Natural Resources Conservation Service

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### What are Cultural Resources?

Cultural resources are evidence of past human activity. They include pioneer homes, farm and ranch buildings, historic railroads, town sites, historic or prehistoric artifacts, rock writings, burial sites, battlefields, American Indian camp sites, stone alignments, buffalo jump sites, or historic irrigation canals.

Cultural resources can also include certain land forms that take on different levels of historic or spiritual meaning. People may value these sites because of their ethnic heritage or their association with past or present community traditions. Land forms or spiritual sites may be sacred to people as a source of life and spiritual energy because of their cultural and spiritual significance.

Cultural resources are nonrenewable. That is, once damaged or destroyed, they cannot be replaced. They often provide important information about past societies and environments, and that information can provide solutions for modern conservation concerns.

### Why are Cultural Resources Important?

Cultural resources provide many useful benefits to people today. They:

- Expand our knowledge and understanding of history.
- Provide scientific data important to conservation efforts like past climate, floods, droughts, fire regimes, species diversity, irrigation methods, and more.

- Attract tourists who bring money into rural communities, and create additional jobs.
- Provide employment in rural areas during renovation, research inventory, and analysis.
- Stimulate other community improvements.
- Provide educational opportunities for our children.

Your cultural resources can be like a story book telling of prehistoric human behaviors, ancient transportation and migration routes, stage trails, fur trading posts, homesteading in sod houses, graves, an old windmill, or a wide variety of other sites. It's a book just waiting to be opened and explored! Evidence from the past is part of the cultural heritage of the United States. In Montana, cultural heritage extends over 12,000 years into the past. It's a legacy of people who met the challenges of changing environments without modern technology. Today's farmers and ranchers face similar challenges.

### Why is NRCS Concerned About Cultural Resources?

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) considers cultural resources when planning conservation practices because cultural resources are important to the history of this nation and it is required by law. Some of the federal, state, and local laws dealing with cultural resources in Montana are the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1987, and Montana Code Annotated pertaining to human



burials, archaeological exploration, and the preservation of historic sites.

## **Do I have Cultural Resources on My Land?**

Most farms and ranches contain cultural resources; however, the prehistory and history of the land is not written down. Existing evidence may be within the ground in the form of archaeological objects and sites--the physical remains of human behavior. If you know about such sites, you may be a great source of oral history about your area.

## **How Will I Know if my Cultural Resource Sites are Important?**

The USDA NRCS is committed to providing technical assistance to implement conservation practices. This includes cultural resources technical assistance. Landowners who are aware of cultural resources on their land should check with their local NRCS field office for technical assistance.

NRCS field office staff, conservation district staff, or other conservation partners will normally visit the site of planned conservation practices and will conduct a cultural resources inventory at the same time. If nothing is located, the practice is cleared for cultural resources.

If a cultural resource site is located, the appropriate qualified personnel will be notified to help in determining the significance of the site. This will include an on-site review and possible historic research to investigate the cultural importance of the site.

NRCS staff will work with landowners to design a plan to protect important cultural resource sites. Conservation practices can be implemented with appropriate measures to protect cultural resources. This can be done by avoiding the site or stabilizing the site to prevent erosion or deterioration.

## **What Benefits are Available to Help Protect my Cultural Resources?**

Federal, state, and local governments provide a variety of financial benefit. Private funds are also available.

These include federal and state tax credits, tax deductions for historic easements or donations, low-interest loans, and in some cases, direct funding for

rehabilitation projects. Grants are also available from the state of Montana.

## **Should I Dig or Collect Artifacts From my Land?**

You have the legal right to collect artifacts on your own land and investigate your sites. However, digging up burials is illegal by state law. Collecting artifacts from the surface, or digging on your own, is not a constructive way to participate in the preservation of cultural resources. You may accidentally destroy important information without realizing it.

Intentionally destroying cultural resource sites can affect whether or not you will receive technical and/or financial assistance from NRCS.

## **Where Can I Get More Information About NRCS and Cultural Resources?**

Your NRCS field office staff can provide information and assistance regarding cultural resources on your land. They can help provide options for preservation, economic benefits, and a variety of appropriate land uses.

NRCS field offices are located in USDA Service Centers listed under United States Government in the phone book.

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