

# “It ain’t all about the Falcons”

An Alternative Sinks Canyon Master Plan

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Sinks Canyon is an extraordinary place; a famous and familiar natural feature near Lander that receives thousands of visitors every year. As locals we love the Canyon, but we often are so casually familiar with its wonders, that we forget what a real marvel it is.



Stop for a moment and think of the eons of time and the natural forces that shaped this monument. Let the awe begin in you again.

As we experience Sinks Canyon we have to wonder what ancient people thought. Is it possible that, without a modern understanding of the deposition of the Madison limestone in a shallow sea, the uplifting of the Rockies by the Laramide orogeny, at least six major glaciations in geologically recent times, and eons of erosion by water and ice and more, these Native people were more cognizant of the spiritual side of the Sinks and the Canyon than we are today? What did they believe?

The Canyon is filled with rock art from ancient people. There are some theories that specific rock art has deep spiritual meaning. Rock art is often found in places that are sacred; some saying this marks locations where the membrane of the earth is thin and the spiritual side is very close to the material world. In these sacred places, people - perhaps through medicine leaders or Holy ones - can communicate through the veil.

If this is true, then the Sinks Cavern must pierce the very membrane of the earth creating a hallowed place. Do we dare liken this sacrosanctity to Jewish-Christian religious experience? If the Canyon is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, then for the ancients here, could the Sinks be the Holy of Holies within the Temple itself?

This spiritual connection is powerful, and it has meaning today for many Native people who have always considered the Canyon sacred. Rock art from one Sinks vantagepoint has an obvious male fertility message, complementing the female



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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank all of those people who provided comments on early drafts and all of those working to “Keep Sinks Canyon Wild”.

attribute of the Sinks Cavern as seen far below. Under Wyoming State Park's proposed masterplan, this view to the right of the Sinks will be cluttered with a new maintenance building and residences.

Indigenous people may wish to share this culture in varying degrees. Even if not shared, it doesn't mean it is not there or that it doesn't need protection. And that's why today matters, too, and that the importance of this for Native culture and tradition should also be important to white culture.

Most importantly we do not wish to destroy what's left and prevent it from being experienced by future generations. The real key to a Sinks Canyon master plan is to provide for the future. "Protect the Temple, don't let the moneychangers in."

### Wildlife Movement and the Proposed New Visitors Center

The narrowest part of the canyon is literally the door to the corridor of the Winds. It is a scant 200 yards wide most of which is taken up by a highway, the Popo Agie, and a tacky campground. Through this stone gate passed woolly mammoth, short-faced bears and saber tooth cats and just last night, deer, and likely a black bear or even a mountain lion. Part of the vicinity is a Game and Fish Wildlife Management Area with active peregrine falcon activity.



Ignoring the importance of this narrow section to the movement of animals, State Parks intends to plug the critical part with a new visitor center building and associated facilities. At the same time, activity related to improved access for the via ferrata will disturb the constricted paths on the other side of the river -- the only place animals are able to move without close human contact.



Rather than be developed for an expanded Visitor's Center and ferrata access, the Sawmill area should be opened back up. Less surface disturbance, no overnight



camping, a much smaller foot print and reduced day use on the south side of the highway would improve outcomes for wildlife "Worth the Watching". A long-term plan could think about a wildlife crossing structure too.

## The Middle Canyon

They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot  
With a pink hotel \*, a boutique  
And a swinging hot spot  
Joni Michell "Big Yellow Taxi"

One of the best experiences in the canyon, the meadow above the highway across from the Sinks, is a hidden gem. Designated as Crucial Winter Range by the Game and Fish, from here you can see the Canyon as it was before the new highway and other development. Here is the obvious pre-highway pathway to the high mountains, and an ancient campsite, the closest and largest campsite to the Sinks Cavern.

Unfortunately, if State Parks has its way, this will be the sight of greedily- constructed semi-private homes for the park superintendent and employees as well as maintenance facilities. All to be selfishly built on land providing Crucial Wildlife Habitat, extraordinary views, and ancient campsites with Temple access and grass for ponies. Never would we permit private homes to be constructed there; why would we allow this construction now?

## Take Development Outside

A future sinks Canyon should locate maintenance and other facilities outside of the Canyon, perhaps on formerly private ground on the road to Lander. The Sawmill Campground should be removed. Modern accessory buildings around the Rise and the Sawmill Campground should be eliminated. The meadow storage areas must be cleaned up and made safe.

Ideal thinking would even have a voluntarily reduction in the private built-up area by implementing a long-term strategy to acquire private land and someday open up the mouth of the Canyon as part of this effort to enhance the Canyon and preserve the Lander Front.<sup>2</sup>

Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot  
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## Create a Learning Park using the True Attributes

Future parks programs for visitors would double down on wildlife "Worth the Watching", biology, geology, archeology, and native American culture taught by local native people. Collaboration with the nearby Branson Field Station, Central Wyoming College Alpine Science Institute, Wind River Tribal College, and the National Outdoor Leadership School offers an unparalleled opportunity for successful visitor involvement. These educational institutions could be key to developing our visitor economy and conscious raising about our environment and the cultural heritage of Native people.

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<sup>2</sup> Private foundations and other funds could be key to making this happen, along with the creative use of conservation agreements and voluntary lifetime-residence agreements. People who live in the area at the mouth of the canyon do so because they love it. They more than anyone would appreciate efforts to preserve it for future generations.

“And remember that the Peregrine Falcons are important too:”

A word cloud of terms related to Peregrine Falcons and conservation. The words are arranged in a roughly triangular shape, pointing downwards. The colors of the words include green, red, orange, and brown. The words are: BlackFootedFerrets, MostSuccessfulNestingLocation, DDT FalconRecovery, KeepSinksWild, AlmostExtinct MateForLifetime, Brave, WildlifeManagementArea SuccessStory, Peregrine, Biology, TwoHundredMPHStooping, BobGameAndFish, SpeciesOfCriticalConcern, and Reintroduction.

# Big Yellow Taxi

by Joni Mitchell

They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot  
With a pink hotel, a boutique  
And a swinging hot spot

Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot

They took all the trees  
Put 'em in a tree museum  
And they charged the people  
A dollar and a half just to see 'em

Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot

Hey farmer farmer  
Put away that DDT now  
Give me spots on my apples  
But leave me the birds and the bees  
Please!

Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot

Late last night  
I heard the screen door slam  
And a big yellow taxi  
Took away my old man

Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you've got  
Till it's gone  
They paved paradise  
And put up a parking lot

They paved paradise  
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