



The Chaco Night Sky Program

Chaco's Night Sky Initiative: Since 1991, Chaco Culture NHP has offered astronomy in its public interpretive programs. Programs emphasize the practices of the Chacoan people a thousand years ago, as well as modern approaches to viewing the same night sky they viewed--in a remote environment with clear, dark skies, and free from urban light pollution.

Astronomy also provides an opportunity to protect park resources. The park retrofitted all park lighting to reduce light pollution and enhance night sky viewing. In 1993, the park designated the night sky as a critical natural resource to be protected, and has worked on efforts to reduce the threat of urban light pollution in the Southwest.

The park established an on-going partnership with the Albuquerque Astronomical Society (TAAS) in 1991. Star parties are offered twice yearly. In January 1997, TAAS member John Sefick brought his astronomy equipment to Chaco. He was so impressed with the skies above Chaco that he donated a domed observatory and equipment to the park.

The Chaco Night Sky Program: The park began constructing a permanent observatory at the visitor center in 1997. In May 1998, the park dedicated the Chaco Observatory. The observatory added a new dimension to Chaco's interpretation of astronomy, and now serves many different people:

- Over 15,000 visitors and school groups annually who attend public astronomy programs.
- Over 30,000 visitors per year who visit our park web site and view the spectacular images that were photographed at the Chaco observatory. To see these inspiring images, visit: www.nps.gov/chcu, go to the **In Depth** section, **The Night Sky Darkness Project**, and the **Image Gallery**.
- Amateur astronomers who help monitor levels of light pollution in the region and use Charged Coupled Device (CCD) imaging systems to image deep-space objects.
- Volunteers who help the park present programs on Chacoan connections, our scientific understanding of the universe, and the hands-on use of a telescope.
- Hundreds of enthusiastic visitors, astronomers, and members of the Albuquerque Astronomical Society who participate in bi-annual Star Parties, usually held in the dark times of May and September.

In 1999, the National Park Foundation awarded Chaco Culture NHP and TAAS an Honorable Mention in the category of education at its Partnership Award Ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Ancient Connections--Modern Connections: The Chacoan people were intimately aware of all their surroundings. They were close observers of the skies and seasonal cycles, and their observations provided them with the invaluable ability to time their agricultural and ceremonial events, which were central to their survival. Today, Puebloan descendants carry on many of these same traditions.

Visitors are drawn to the park to learn about the monumental Chacoan sites, to view the pecked and painted images on canyon walls, to observe scattered pieces of pottery, and to ponder the greatness of the Chacoan world. It is natural to wish for a connection with the people who flourished in this stark and challenging place. The night sky, so clear and brilliant at Chaco Canyon, is a special connection that we all share, as we look to the skies to better understand our place on earth.

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