

Environmental History

*Source: E. Michell, J. Langfield, and M. Fiege
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Importance

An environmental history promotes understanding of past human interaction with the natural environment. The environmental history of Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site is a record of how complex human-environment relationships contributed to the 1864 massacre which profoundly influenced US-Indian relations and the structure of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. These relationships included competition for limited resources and were affected by different land use philosophies and practices by Indian and Euroamerican cultures. The site represents the environmental and cultural changes that have taken place in the Plains and American West over the past 10,000 years since humans have been present.

Trends in Sand Creek

The Plains have gone through several dry and wet periods over the past 8,000-10,000 years since humans have been present.



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Sand Creek has been used continuously for ranching and farming since the massacre.

RESOURCE BRIEF



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Inhabitants adjusted their lifestyle to available resources as regional climate fluctuated and transitioned from nomadic hunter-gatherers during dry periods to a sedentary horticulture life during wet periods. The Plains population increased significantly between 1700 and 1850 when European and American explorers, American pioneers, and Cheyenne and Arapaho cultures expanded into the region. Heavy demands on resources were magnified by a mid-1800s drought. By 1864, the ecosystem was severely stressed and contributed to the competition between Euroamericans and Indians for increasingly limited resources. The site has been used continuously for ranching and farming since the massacre and has been affected by development activities and water availability.

Discussion

Climate fluctuations and historical conflicts between cultures with different land use philosophies contributed to the environmental and cultural changes in the Plains. The establishment of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site in 2007 reflects current human relationships with the environment. The environmental history supports management and interpretation of the site by describing how the environment changed over time, how human actions altered the environment and the ability of ecosystems to respond to disturbances, and how the environment contributed to human conflict. The environmental history is an important resource that reflects the changing human values placed on the environment by the native Plains people, European explorers, Euroamerican settlers, and, most recently, the National Park Service.