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The Big Horn Medicine Wheel: Native Science Research in Astronomical Place-Based Pedagogies

The Big Horn Medicine Wheel, located a few miles south of the Montana border, is an American Sacred Site long honored by many diverse peoples. A deep time-cut travois trail leads up to nearly 10,000 ft in the Big Horn Mountains, providing many past generations of travelers with a route to the wheel and to the protection of its high altitude, white limestone “huts.” Here, a traveler could meld with the voice of the wind, wrap themselves in the resonance of sequined-studded stars, and prepare to request an audience with the universe. Researchers in astronomy and archaeology--using Western Science methods--have erected a few noteworthy conclusions concerning the Medicine Wheel, but remain at a loss to explain the wheel’s original purpose. Using methods of Native Science, an abundance of new data reveals the coalescent nature of the Wheel’s multiple properties, conveying value to the integrated systems of the Wheel and its environment. Methods that combine the oral histories, the patient immersion in place-based cognition, and the willingness to learn from “inert” materials such as the wind, stars, and stones, uncover a rich pedagogy for learning sky-earth relational knowledge, accessible through the processes of perception, recognition, cognition, immersion, and assimilation.