

Establishing A Gentle Etiquette for Sacred Wild Places: “Leave Only Prayers, Take Only Blessings”

by Kristen Meyer Stroud

Kristen has met with members of the Winnemem Wintu, and other tribes and listened to their requests for preserving Mount Shasta’s purity.

For centuries people have come to Mount Shasta in search of meaning and divine inspiration. Stories abound as to the mystical qualities of the place. Many people visit the slopes of Mount Shasta in search of profound insight, inspired vision, and divine guidance. Now, more than ever, people need access to the healing power of nature.

When approaching such natural sanctuaries, reverent guests ask, “*How can I most respect this sacred place?*” Moving rocks to build towers, shrines, mandalas, medicine wheels and labyrinths disturbs the soil plants cling to for nourishment, stability, and protection. Placing crystals, shells, tobacco, sage or talismans in springs interferes with native energies. Impacts multiply when many visitors rearrange the landscape. Remember the saying, “*Take only pictures, leave only footprints*” used in many natural areas to remind visitors to tread lightly and leave the place how they found it? How about: “*Leave only prayers, take only blessings*” for increasingly popular destinations like Mount Shasta, where the search for sacredness is taking a toll?

Mount Shasta seekers often leave personal treasures behind as a testament to their spiritual quest. Spiritual truths transcend the physical. Local Native American Indian tribes appreciate prayers to express gratitude rather than leaving modern artifacts. Let’s give the wild cathedrals of Native American people equal respect as expected in any temple, ashram, church, or synagogue. Few and precious are these refuges without the stamp of human development. Leaving a monument to our presence in these vestiges of natural splendor is self-serving. Why not let nature’s perfection rule in these remaining gems? When others make their mark in these divine gardens it draws our attention like a billboard along the highway.

Native American tribes surrounding Mount Shasta consider the mountain sacred and make no casual visits there. For thousands of years, the Winnemem Wintu people and other tribes have been performing healing ceremonies for the mountain, the waters, and all beings. They are deeply concerned about offerings and talismans left by many people. Visitors often bring offerings believing it blesses and thanks the place. As the Winnemem so aptly explain, “*How can you bless the blesser? You are the receiver of the blessing, not the giver.*” Crystals, statues, herbs, and other icons clutter the natural flow. In addition, the dedicated volunteers, staff, and visitors who lovingly care for the mountain routinely remove all items left behind. Many conscientious local residents have already stopped visiting popular sites on Mount Shasta to help reduce impacts to sensitive, vulnerable areas.

Some visitors plant crystals in the ground believing it links Mount Shasta to other sacred sites around the world and connects the earth’s energetic grid lines from one place to another. According to local Native Americans, the mountain is already connected to many other mountains and power sites. “*If the mountain is the sun, we are mere fireflies.*” For our humble offerings, all that is required is clear, open-hearted, compassionate intention. Props are not necessary. Every contribution is valuable, no matter how small, even when it appears invisible by physical measures. Set clear intentions and release them to the ethereal realms. The energetic imprint of intention will carry on after the physical body has departed. “*The power is in the prayer, not the prayer stick.*”

Under the guise of guidance, some visitors try to justify inappropriate behavior such as, “*My guidance told me to pick these flowers as an offering to the spirits.*” Flowers provide food in the form of nectar for insects, moths and hummingbirds. Left to mature, the flowers disperse seeds for future blossoms. Or, “*It is okay for my dog to be in the meadow because he is a reincarnated Buddhist lama so he won’t do any harm.*” Dogs can disturb wildlife, other visitors and destroy plants by digging. Also, “*My group has the*

right to camp in the middle of the meadow because this is the site I was guided to,” and “I can lie in the middle of the trail doing naked yoga because I was guided to do it here.” With a little extra effort, finding privacy for personal needs is easy. Respect, responsibility and consideration for other beings will assure a better experience for all. (Note: These are actual quotes.)

Over the years, a lot of personal sweat and tears has gone into cleaning up the messes people have made out of ignorance: trash, campfires, dams, graffiti, vandalism, etc. The USDA Forest Service built a greenhouse to propagate and restore native vegetation damaged by inadequate trails and heavy foot traffic. The Mount Shasta Bioregional Ecology Center, in partnership with the Forest Service, created a volunteer program called H.O.M.E. (Honor Our Mountain Environment) to assist with clean-up, education, and the meadow restoration program in lieu of visitor use parking fees. Every effort helps. Thanks for your part in preserving the purity of wildness wherever you choose to go to connect with Source (or whatever you choose to call it)!

In recent years, some visitors to Mount Shasta have actually placed the cremated remains of their loved ones in and around Panther Springs and elsewhere! Not only is it illegal and disrespectful to do so, how restful is that for the departed? The wise headman of the Winnemem says, *“Putting someone’s ashes in the spring is like putting them in the spin cycle of the washing machine!”* After the latest discovery of cremated human remains in the summer of 2005, Panther Meadows was closed for several weeks in order for the Winnemem to heal the area and clear the energies of the beings deposited there. Many visitors were turned away during this time.

Meanwhile, a team of concerned experts - trail engineers, hydrologists, botanists, archeologists, meadow caretakers, and the Winnemem - have begun restoring the integrity of the headwall around the springhead and making trail improvements in the sensitive wet meadows to prevent soil loss, root damage and a lowering of the meadow water table from deep ruts created by cumulative foot traffic. Most visitors intend no harm. It is easy to imagine that sitting in the meadows is like spreading out on a lawn where the grass pops back up when you’re done. Unfortunately, most sub-alpine plants are not resilient like grass. Woody plants like alpine laurel and mountain heather break and do not recover after one sitting or a single careless footstep! These plants take hundreds of years to mature in the short growing season between the snows. The meadows are especially vulnerable during snowmelt, which may come as late as August some years. The best medicine for the meadows is to walk, sit, meditate, or pray on existing trails and rocks and enjoy the meadows from dry areas just outside the wet zone.

Most Mount Shasta visitors *are* respectful and care deeply about preserving the integrity of the mountain. Oftentimes, harmful impacts result from poorly designed infrastructure (i.e. trails) and a lack of understanding about how to behave appropriately in sensitive wild areas. Compassionate and respectful information sources can easily cure ignorance and increase the circle of helping hearts and hands.

Everyone deserves to experience Mount Shasta and other sacred places in their innate divine perfection, without embellishment. When truly connected with the Source, there is no need to advertise with crystals or icons, which many, including Native Americans, consider spiritual littering. It is easy to remove any items you may have brought for use in your own ceremony. This assures clear energy for those who follow. Keeping the mountain clean encourages others to do the same. Future generations depend on us to take care of what remains of our sacred wild heritage. May you be fortunate to encounter Mount Shasta’s pristine power and beauty and be blessed with insight on your journey!

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