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Topic: Cultural Significance of Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Fishing: An  
Ethnographic Assessment

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## Introduction

This memorandum responds to your request for information concerning the cultural significance of Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal fishing and the relevant fish species. It reflects my ongoing ethnographic research which may be subject to modification as research proceeds. Because this information is to be provided to the Bureau of Reclamation and used for other official purposes, I am providing you the most accurate and current information available. At the outset it should be noted that Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe members have always consumed a much greater variety of fish than most of

their non-Indian neighbors and that fish have great value both for food and for ceremonial purposes. Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal members use nearly every species of fish available and most of the fish parts. Fishing is especially important for the economically disadvantaged residents of the Reservation as well as the focus of a major ceremony, the Feast of the Raw Fish.

### Types of Fish

Following is a list of the culturally significant types of fish (both native and introduced) available to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in the Missouri, Cheyenne, Moreau, and Grand rivers and their tributaries. They are available according to season and other factors. Although many types of fish are eaten by Tribal members, my research indicates that the most popular species currently are Catfish, Northern Pike, Walleye, and Bass.

Bass – Rock	Crappie - Black	Sauger
Bass - Hybrid Strip	Crappie - White	Saugeye
Bass – Largemouth	Goldeye	Sturgeon - Shovelnose
Bass – Smallmouth	Lake Sturgeon	Sturgeon - Pallid
Bass – White	Ling (Burbot)	Smelt
Blue Gill	Mussels	Suckers – Blue
Bullhead – Black	Muskellunge/Tiger	Suckers - White
Bullhead – Brown	Northern Pike	Sunfish
Bullhead – Yellow	Paddlefish	Trout - Brown
Catfish – Blue	Perch - Yellow	Trout - Rainbow
Catfish - Channel	Roughfish	Turtles
Cat fish - Flathead	Salmon – Coho	Walleye
	Salmon - Kokonee	White Fish

## **Cultural Significance of Fish and Fishing for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe**

In order to appreciate the cultural significance of fish for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, it is helpful to review the fishing history of the Tribe and the associated cultural functions of fish and fishing. The four ancestral Cheyenne River Sioux bands have ancient linkages to various other American Indian groups and believe they originated in Wind Cave, a sacred site located in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The Tribe holds the Black Hills to be sacred and insisted that they be reserved to them in their Treaty of 1868. Extensive research indicates that riverine habitats, including the river bottoms and terraces, have formed a principal settlement area for American Indians of this region for thousands of years. The Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation is located in what anthropologists have termed the Middle Missouri cultural province. The broad sweep of prehistory and cultural development within the Middle Missouri cultural province of the Great Plains may be divided into five archaeologically defined periods, each of which contains evidence of fishing: 1) the Paleo-Indian period includes all cultural developments before 6000 B.C., 2) the Foraging period includes cultural developments between 6000 and about 500 B.C., 3) the Plains Woodland period includes cultural developments between 500 B.C. and about A. D. 900, 4) the Plains Village period includes cultural developments between A.D. 900 and somewhat after A.D. 1700, and 5) the recent period began somewhat after A.D. 1700.

The relevance of an archaeological perspective to our concern with the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal habitat is that there is solid evidence that rivers have been common locations for Tribal villages for millennia throughout the northern and central plains. This perspective also provides an ancient foundation for the cultural practices of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe during historic times which include a mixed economy based on a wide variety of food resources including significant reliance on fish. In fact, archaeological evidence suggests that about 6000 B.C. the inhabitants of this region intensified their dependence on fish as seen in improved fish spears, harpoons, and fish hooks. Similar archaeological evidence of dependence on riverine resources is regularly seen in fish bones, mussel shells, and certain bird bones recovered from excavations.

By the beginning of the Euroamerican period, the ancestral Teton Dakota occupied much of the Missouri River drainage, including the Black Hills and beyond, and were making full use of available aquatic resources. By the end of the 19th century, after most of the big game had been decimated on and around the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation, the river and river bottoms contained most of the remaining traditional food resources available to them. Despite the enactment of Public Law 776 on September 3, 1954, which authorized the acquisition of 104,420 acres of Tribal land containing extensive and primary wildlife habitat for the Oahe Dam and reservoir project, fishing continues to play a significant role in the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe's domestic economy and ceremonial life. For example, in one year, the Tribe's fishing produced 2,616 channel catfish, 19 buffalo fish, and 51 of other species. Another report indicates

that Tribal members took 3,000 fish for home use. My research indicates that these reported catches of fish are definitely undercounts for several reasons. While Tribal members rely heavily on fish as a staple of their diet, many cannot afford the cost of a Tribal fishing license. During fishing trips firewood and medicinal plants as well as traditional food plants are collected from the river bottoms. Examples from a much longer list that continues to be expanded in my research include the wild turnip, groundnuts, arrowhead, ground beans, yampa, and various fruits, including serviceberries, chokecherries, red plums, rose buds, bull berries, buffalo berries, gooseberries, currents, sour grapes, a plant similar to rhubarb, and others. The river bottoms continue to provide an oasis-like protection from the harsh weather of the northern plains, and the rivers have been a main source of drinking water for both humans and animals.

Informants affirm that the rivers and fish continue to provide an essential setting for various religious ceremonies such as the sweat lodge ceremony. Water from the rivers is believed to be sacred as are the very powerful spirits who created the earth and who are thought to dwell in the rivers. Informants affirm that they periodically offer thanks to these river spirits as a spiritual obligation and that religious powers are sought in vision quests conducted at certain high points along the north and south banks of the Missouri, Cheyenne, Moreau, and Grand rivers, each of which has a distinctive name, i.e., Missouri – “Mni Sosé,” Cheyenne – “Wakpe Waste,” Moreau – “Hinhan Wakpa,” etc. As part of their veneration of rivers, Tribal members also prefer to drink river water rather than well water, believing it capable of safeguarding health and curing disease.

While there has been a simultaneous trend toward more reliance on a money economy, a significant percentage of Tribal members cannot survive on their cash incomes and must rely on the fuel and food resources of the riverine habitats on the Reservation. The 1990 census shows that about 25% of Cheyenne River Sioux households earn less than \$5,000.00 annually with a Tribal poverty rate of about 51%. Tribal officials agree that slightly less than half of the households earn enough to supply their needs in a money economy. The 1990 census also shows that Dewey and Ziebach counties are among the poorest in the United States. Of the 100 poorest counties, Ziebach is reported to be the seventh poorest county in 1990, while Dewey is the 29<sup>th</sup> poorest. The estimated 50 percent of the households earning less than \$10,000.00 annually are obviously under extreme economic pressure. Again, according to Tribal officials, the situation may be worsening in that while many households now live in poverty, it is a growing problem as more children are born to this rapidly increasing population. Tribal officials as well as social and medical personnel on the Reservation also estimate that because of economic necessity many households must heat at least partly with wood obtained from the river bottoms. Likewise, the more economically disadvantaged hunt and fish along the rivers and in neighboring reservoirs in a regular pattern tied to end-of-the-month economic shortfalls. Many families are out of money by the middle of each month and survive by whatever means are available. Not only are deer and fish regularly taken but also other wild foods, including prairie chicken, grouse, dove, chukar, deer, antelope, and small game such as rabbits, gophers, muskrats, and beavers.

## Conclusion

Tribal members continue to venerate the Missouri, the Cheyenne, the Moreau, and the Grand rivers and think of them as one of the few secure and enduring aspects of their natural and cultural environment. Although sometimes obstructed in their use of the rivers, their extensive fish resources, and their other resources, they affirm that they must always rely on the rivers and their resources. This attitude reflects an ancient historical and cultural linkage of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe to the rivers and their resources which are for them, a fundamental source of life, religious power, and economic security against the uncertainties of both the Tribal and the surrounding non-Indian economies.

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