

US construction of a second southern border wall disturbs important archaeological sites

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In the latest atrocity being perpetrated by construction of Trump's "smart" second border wall along the Mexican border, a construction crew "accidentally" bulldozed through a well-documented Native American archaeological site. The site, known as Las Playas Intaglio, is a geoglyph, estimated to be at least a 1,000 years old. Geoglyphs are created on the ground by arranging stones, gravel, earth or removing topsoil to expose contrasting soil underneath. The Nazca Lines in Peru are among the best-known examples.

The site, located in Arizona, is in the form of a more than 272-foot- (83-meter) long fish. It is held sacred by the O'odham Indigenous people, with members on both sides of the US/Mexican border. It has been studied for decades by Richard Martynec, a now retired archaeologist. He and his wife, also an archaeologist, recorded the site while doing surveys of the area in 2002. To add insult to injury, the site is located in the Sonoran Desert within the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, which is administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), a division of the Interior Department, thereby compounding the ill effects of border wall construction with impacts to the environment and wildlife as well as potentially to other archaeological sites. The wildlife refuge is one of the largest outside of Alaska.

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CPB), which is supervising the wall's construction, the supposedly inadvertent disturbance occurred on April 23 when a contractor bulldozed an approximately 60-70-foot- (18-21-meter) wide swath through the middle of the figure, destroying about a third.

The project, involving the construction of a second alignment of border wall, this time with "smart" surveillance technology, behind the first, already existing wall, is funded with \$46.5 billion as part of

Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill and is being erected at breakneck speed.

In a glaring example of the Trump administration's arrogant disregard of and contempt for the environment, historic resources and the wishes of local communities, construction of the border wall has been exempted from review under a number of federal regulations, including the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

The position taken by CPB that disturbance of the Intaglio site was an accident strains credulity. Martynec had visited the site about two weeks before the incident and noted the presence of stakes marking the project's alignment across the site. Local Native American residents were in active discussion with federal officials regarding concerns over possible disturbance of a number of sites, including a grave site in the project vicinity. Despite the ongoing consultation, and a report by Native American observers on the day prior to the destruction that construction was very close, it proceeded across the Intaglio site without notice, despite urgent communication with the proper authorities.

"This was a devastating and entirely avoidable loss," Tohono O'odham Nation chairman Verlon Jose said in an April 30 statement. "There is nothing more important than our history, which is what makes us who we are as O'odham."

During Trump's first term, a large number of archaeological sites, including at least one burial site, were damaged or destroyed by the construction of the original wall. According to a 2019 internal National Park Service report prepared in advance, up to 22 archaeological sites within Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument alone could be disturbed or

destroyed by the construction.

The O’odham Nation was successful in protecting the Intaglio site as well as the nearby grave site at that time. The Intaglio site was avoided and lies 10-to-15 feet (3-4.5-meters) from the existing border wall. During Trump’s current term, however, construction proceeded with arrogant disregard for its adverse impacts to this and many other sites.

Archaeological sites are non-renewable resources. Each site contains an irreplaceable store of information about humanity’s past. Many also constitute important symbols of people’s cultural heritage. Once lost they cannot be replaced.

In order to maximize the xenophobic impact of Trump’s rabid campaign against immigrants, the pace of border wall construction is being pushed hard. More such destruction will undoubtedly take place. The CPB commissioner has issued a statement regarding the Intaglio site that “The remaining portion of the site has been secured and will be protected in place.” Given the agency’s track record, and the wanton destruction of historic resources now being carried out in Iran and elsewhere by the US, no confidence can be placed in this promise or the equivalent for any other archaeological site or cultural resource.



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