NATIONAL MONUMENTS:

NPS accused of hiding scathing report on Indian mound blunders

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The National Park Service is suppressing a damning report on the desecration of prehistoric Indian burial sites at Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa, according to a federal government watchdog.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility today released a "Serious Mismanagement Report" blasting Park Service officials for ignoring warnings from staff and moving ahead on nearly $3.4 million in construction projects that caused serious damage to the ancient earthen mounds along the Mississippi River.

The Effigy Mounds monument, created in 1949, contains at least 206 mounds -- many in the shapes of animals or birds -- on 2,526 acres in northeast Iowa. Some of the features date back to 500 B.C. and are affiliated with 12 neighboring American Indian tribes.

PEER said the effects of boardwalks, trails and a maintenance shed built on sacred ground in violation of federal historical preservation laws were the "largest official mass desecration" in Park Service history.

Controversy has embroiled the monument since 2010, when former employee Timothy Mason filed a complaint with the Department of the Interior's Office of Inspector General, prompting an investigation.

"The National Park Service should carefully remove every bridge, deck and boardwalk that was built illegally and attempt to return the park to its intended historic state," said Mason, now an activist with Friends of Effigy Mounds. "Created 65 years ago, this little park is supposed to preserve sacred sites, not serve as a construction playground for clueless and criminal federal employees."

Today's report, co-authored by David Barland-Liles, the National Park Service special agent who led the inspector general's investigation, blamed the "willful blindness" of the monument's leaders from 1999 to 2010 to laws protecting the mounds. But the report refrained from mentioning former superintendent Phyllis Ewing and former maintenance chief Tom Sinclair by name, because "the intent was not to defame individuals or assign blame," but "reflect on the lessons learned."

The pair had "an inexcusable lack of understanding of the fundamental importance of the archaeological resource they were assigned to protect," according to the report.

Mismanagement reported by "numerous employees on multiple occasions, both formally and informally," was ignored, and no disciplinary action was taken for years, however, because of sympathy for Ewing, who was fired in 2014, and Sinclair, who left the agency. They only escaped federal criminal charges, the report stated, because of that "weak and inappropriate initial response."
"The U.S. Attorney's office reluctantly declined to prosecute primarily due to a belief that it would be difficult to overcome potential jury sympathy for the defendants," the report stated.

According to the report, no new guidelines to prevent the incident from recurring have been implemented. Instead, "progress instead of preservation" is emphasized to obscure the fact that "protection of these mounds is the primary reason for the monument's existence."

National Park Service Midwest Deputy Regional Director Patricia Trap denied the existence of a report in a Thursday email sent in response to a request from Mason.

"Simply put, there is no such agency report. There is a team, from outside the park and the region, that is undertaking a review of events occurring at the park, including lessons learned. I am in the process of obtaining an update of the status of this effort, and an idea of when the report may be finalized, and available to you and others. Stay tuned," Trap wrote.

E&ENews PM's attempts to contact the Park Service's Midwest Regional Office were unsuccessful, but Trap told the Associated Press that the report was not considered an "agency approved" document. She said the team members, who included current monument Superintendent Jim Nepstad, archaeologist Caven Clark, and Bob Palmer, former monument chief ranger, were too close to the investigation and their report represented a narrow viewpoint, noting the report's title.

"I'm not denying some serious mismanagement," she said. "But also there were actions taken along the way that were actually appropriate management."

Trap said a new report written by employees from outside the region will ultimately replace their work.

PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch said the ongoing failure to react to the "wake-up call" at Effigy Mounds is symbolic of a culture within the upper echelons of the agency.

"This entire affair through today is a case study of a Park Service leadership that is rotten to its core," Ruch said in a statement. "By suppressing this report, the Park Service both seeks to avoid any serious self-examination of this epic leadership failure but also, like those who forget the past, is doomed to repeat it."