



Volunteers carry soil to the summit of Sargent Mountain while participating in the "Save Our Summits" restoration program through Friends of Acadia at Acadia National Park in Maine, on Friday, July 10, 2026. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)

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In the soft light of dawn, an Ohio tourist studied the interpretive sign at the summit of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park, reading about how magma formed the ground under her feet.

There is one sign she and the other 4 million-plus tourists who visit Acadia annually can no longer see at the summit: a marker explaining the mountain's sacred significance to the Wabanaki people in the region. "Today, visitors from everywhere find meaning on the mountain," it said.

It was among 30 markers removed from Acadia under a [Trump administration campaign](#) to strip national parks of materials deemed disparaging to American history, according to the National Parks Conservation Association.

But when park staff took down the summit sign at the orders of Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, they also unraveled some of the trust that took decades to build between Acadia National Park and the Wabanaki people. The Wabanaki Confederacy, also known as "the people of the dawnland," has inhabited the northern seaboard for over 10,000 years and was the first known stewards of land that includes much of the national park. It was a gathering place to trade, hunt, fish and pick sweetgrass.

Some of the signs removed from Acadia were developed over years of partnerships with organizations including Friends of Acadia, the Schoodic Institute and the Native Plant Trust — with consultation from citizens of the Wabanaki Nations. They know the mountain in Maine as Wapuwoc — "white mountain of the first light." From October to March, it's the first place to see the sunrise in the continental United States.

"Getting to a place where our language is in these parks and it is educational ... erasing that or setting that back has big implications for how far we've come," said Maulian Bryant, the Wabanaki Alliance's executive director.

Bryant says the removed signs reflected "the good stuff."

"These signs don't say 96% of Wabanaki people died from smallpox, or there were 26 nations and now there's four," she said. "If we really want to get into the real history, that's a whole other slice of cake."

Other signs removed from Cadillac's summit addressed issues of climate change, informing visitors that "Acadia's future will be warmer and wetter" and that "In the last century, average annual precipitation has increased by six inches."

During their tenure under the Biden administration, former National Park Service director Chuck Sams and former Interior Secretary Deb Haaland — the first Native Americans to hold these positions — aimed to reflect the experiences of all Americans throughout the national parks. Before leaving his post in February 2025, Sams saw parts of his work unraveled by the current administration.

This "attempt to rewrite history into a single narrative ... is also counter to our democracy. And counter to the idea that we are a plural nation," said Sams.

Lawsuit against national park removals advances

Now, a coalition of conservation, history and science organizations are fighting in court to get the Acadia signs and hundreds of other items put back. Under Burgum's 2025 campaign, signs, books, films and exhibits covering topics such as slavery, climate change and the massacre of Native Americans were flagged and removed from national parks and monuments nationwide.

"Some of it's been put back, and then some of it has been removed again," said the Center for American Progress' Angelo Villagomez. He was part of the progressive policy group's team that examined a database leaked earlier this year and found that a third of national parks had flagged exhibits featuring history or science. Of those, Black and Indigenous history were most targeted.

Portions of all flagged material have since been reviewed and cataloged by a committee led by Joy Beasley, a National Park Service associate director. However, in a June affidavit, she writes that the spreadsheet is "unlikely to capture every removal, revision, or replacement."

The Interior Department did not respond to The Associated Press' questions about the current status of sign and exhibit removal or the ongoing lawsuit filed by the nonprofit coalition in February against the federal government.

The parks "are America's storytellers," said Todd Martin of the National Parks Conservation Association, a plaintiff in the lawsuit. "It's their duty to preserve and interpret American history, the good, the bad, and the ugly."

Jenny McBurney, a government publications librarian at the University of Minnesota who co-founded the project Save Our Signs, feels it's more important than ever for park visitors to document revised signs.

"People are going to go to the parks and think that they will get to learn history there when in fact they will be learning an incomplete history," said McBurney.

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Wabanaki culture — past and present — shared in Acadia

Despite the [job cuts](#), threats of land [reduction](#), talks of [privatization](#) and even [demolition](#) within some parks, Indigenous groups and park partners have [persevered](#).

In Maine, members of the Wabanaki Confederacy — comprised of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot and Abenaki principal nations — carry on the cultural traditions and spiritual practices that helped them maintain sovereignty and connection to their ancestral land after settlers arrived. That includes sharing their culture with tourists.

Penobscot Nation citizen Jennifer Neptune had mixed emotions about the attempted erasure of her people from Acadia and their ancestral homeland.

"It's hard to get good signage in national monuments, in national parks," said Neptune. "It's a real gut punch when it (removal) happens, not just for Indigenous people, but for [Black people](#), for the people whose stories don't get shared."

Over the past decade, she's seen real change from the National Park Service, playing an integral part in bringing Wabanaki voices to the table to create Indigenous-designed spaces.

In partnership with Acadia, the privately owned Abbe Museum, which is largely overseen by Wabanaki people, hosts a program that brings Native voices into the

park through music, arts and culture.

Nick Bear and members of a Wabanaki drum circle perform on Cadillac Mountain annually as part of this collaboration. "That's just like bringing those ceremonies right back to the original sites," he said.

In July, Passamaquoddy basket maker Lydia Soctomah demonstrated traditional Wabanaki basketry using pounded ash bark and sweetgrass outside the Sieur de Monts Nature Center. Both the ash tree and sweetgrass are part of the Wabanaki creation story, she said.

"Making a basket is worth 1,000 memories for me," said Soctomah, whose grandmother was a well-known basket maker. "I was always told it holds a part of your spirit."

Sweetgrass access an example of shared stewardship

Access to sweetgrass has long been difficult for Wabanaki people as they were pushed from coastal lands onto reservations. In Acadia, it's been nearly nonexistent since the park's creation in 1916. But over the past decade, park staff and Wabanaki members have collaborated to change that.

In 2017, scientist Suzanne Greenlaw, a citizen of the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, partnered with the U.S. Forest Service, Acadia's Schoodic Institute and 14 traditional gatherers to conduct a Wabanaki-led sweetgrass study in hopes of allowing tribal access.

"It was really impactful because we had never had those kinds of co-stewardship relationships," said Greenlaw, adding that those relationships, built over time, have not changed.

By the end of the Biden administration, there were over 400 co-stewardship or co-management agreements with tribes, 159 within the National Park Service alone, says Sams. Programs in Acadia were among them.

These programs, he says, allow tribes to fulfill their obligation to protect, preserve and enhance natural resources, and the federal government to fulfill its obligation to allow tribal access for hunting, fishing, and gathering foods and medicines.

Sams cautiously hopes there will be a rebuilding period for the park service under the next administration.

"There are always ebbs and flows with every administration," he said. "Nobody has seen that more than American Indian tribes."