

2022 INDUCTEE

## JOHN MURRAY

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**B**lackfoot elder John Murray recalled the old stories and revealed a new way to protect sacred places.

The Badger-Two Medicine is part of the magnificent geologic shipwreck known as the Rocky Mountain Front. It's the cradle of the Blackfeet origin story, which begins at the headwaters of Badger Creek and Two Medicine River.

He became a Forest Service firefighter just out of high school when he reported to a fire in the Salmon River country wearing new cowboy boots. He still has scars on his feet. He served as superintendent of the elite Hotshot firefighters and later became operations section chief for one of the most complex forest-fire management teams.

And John humbly advocated for the protection of Badger-Two Medicine, magisterial Chief Mountain, and countless Blackfeet cultural sites.

In the early 1980s, the U.S. Forest Service sold Badger-Two Medicine oil and gas leases for \$1 per acre. John was a young man on the Tribal Council with a reputation as one who could "code-switch" between traditional wisdom and Western science.

"Elders would say things about our traditional knowledge system down through the ages, and about the Badger, that can't be translated," John said, as chronicled by Cassidy Randall in "Undeniable," a Patagonia website essay. "They asked me to study Western thought so that they could have the tools to articulate certain things."

John studied at Montana State University, earning bachelor's degrees in bilingual educa-

tion and philosophy; and then a master's degree in 1993 in adult and community education.

That same year the USFS released an ethnography study of the Badger-Two Medicine, which reportedly neglected indigenous Blackfeet stories.

"John went on to do what no one else had done before," Randall writes. "He facilitated the creation of a comprehensive ethnography that proved, in scientific terms, that the Blackfeet people had occupied the Badger-Two Med for more than 10,000 years" and that oil and gas drilling threatened the timeless Blackfeet culture.

In 1997, USFS placed a 10-year moratorium on drilling in the Badger-Two Medicine.

John went on to establish the Blackfeet Tribal Heritage Preservation Office in 2003. Then, in 2006, Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT) drafted a bill that made the 1997 drilling moratorium permanent.

In 2014, Badger-Two Medicine was designated the nation's first Traditional Cultural District.

Three years later, the U.S. Department of the Interior canceled all remaining leases in the Badger-Two Medicine—the first time such a cancellation discarded leaseholder objections.

With an array of inspired conservation partners, John crafted a new bill in 2020 to place nearly 130,000 Badger-Two Medicine acres under permanent protection.

Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) introduced the bill to establish those acres as the Badger-Two Medicine Cultural Heritage Area, a first-of-its-kind designation. The bill was still under consideration as of December 2022.

