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OUR VIEW: No tolerance for those who defaced pictographs

By Tara Roberts, for the editorial board

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The red-pigmented paintings of animals and shapes at the Red Elk Rock Shelter pictograph site near Lewiston are between 200 and 2,500 years old. They tell the stories of the Nez Perce Tribe and possibly other tribes who passed through the area - people whose art and stories are integral to local history and the identities of the people who live here now.

But someone recently covered those paintings in crude, pointless graffiti featuring names, initials and marijuana references.

This vandalism is more than irritating. It's an assault on a priceless piece of culture and history.

"It was straight malicious vandalism of a Nez Perce specific site. You can tell someone put some focused effort on destroying it," Brooklyn Baptiste, vice chairman of the tribe's executive committee, told the Lewiston Tribune. "It's just like vandalizing someone's headstone. It is that level of maliciousness we see."

We agree, and we're glad authorities have identified a few suspects in the case and are in the process of tracking down others. The people responsible for this cruel, ignorant act need to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

Currently, the Nez Perce County Sheriff's Office and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are investigating the incident, but Nez Perce County Prosecutor Dan Spickler has said the U.S. Attorney's Office likely would take on the case.

That's good - the site is protected by the federal Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, so the people responsible for damaging it should be tried in federal court.

Invoking the protection act, assuming the damage is assessed at more than \$500, would allow for penalties up to \$20,000 and up to two years in prison if the perpetrators are convicted.

The damage at Red Elk Rock Shelter might never be fully reversed, and that's tragic. Every time vandalism like this happens, it effects future generations' ability to see their heritage up close and in person.

The people responsible need to be made an example of to discourage others from doing such damage in the future.