

CONSERVING THE SAN PEDRO RIVER VALLEY'S wealth of human history

INTRODUCTION

The San Pedro River originates in Sonora, Mexico, and flows north 160 miles where it joins the Gila River. The San Pedro is one of the few, free-flowing desert rivers remaining in Arizona. Large portions of the San Pedro River basin are undeveloped; most notably the lower basin north of Benson, Arizona. The basin holds a special place in human history as people have been living and traveling along this river for the last 12,000 years, and the evidence of much of this past human activity remains to this day. The significance of the San Pedro River basin as a relatively intact prehistoric cultural landscape coupled with the significant attention it receives based on ecological values emphasizes its importance as a national conservation priority.

Towards this end, Archaeology Southwest (formerly the Center for Desert Archaeology), in partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, conducted a workshop with invited experts to help identify and discuss cultural resource conservation priorities throughout the San Pedro River basin. The identification of priority conservation areas based on significant prehistoric cultural resource assets within the basin is the first step in a larger, community-based effort to conserve these resources for future generations.

The workshop informed by spatial information made available through AZSITE, the National Register, USFS and BLM cultural resource databases along with the extensive field inventory information on file at Archaeology Southwest based on their years of work in the lower San Pedro River valley. Information was organized by temporal periods to facilitate consideration of cultural resources across the spectrum of human history and builds on work conducted to identify priority cultural resources in other areas. Sites and Site Complexes (groupings of sites that are functionally, temporally or spatially related) will be evaluated based on National Register criteria and supplemented by additional factors related to.

Integrity – Sufficient cultural remains to convey its significance for improved understanding of peoples, places and landscapes.

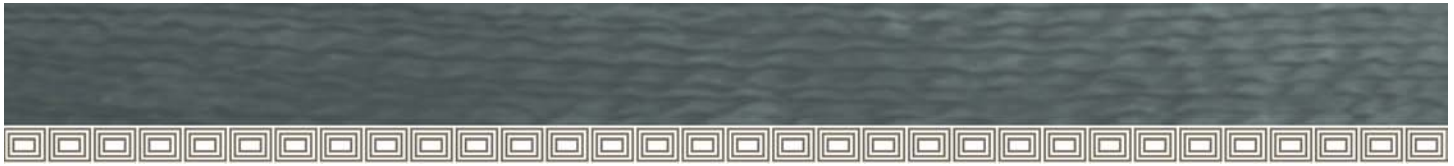
Rarity – Unique or limited occurrence

Representativeness – Excellent representative examples of particular aspects of the cultural landscape, cultural site complex or site, or site feature for a particular time period and context.

Public architecture, compound wall/roomblock villages, platform mounds, ballcourts, and significant rock alignments helped provided the primary focus for discussion. For time periods or geographic areas that do not exhibit substantial public architecture, the identification of sites was complicated by their lack of features that we can see without excavation. Known site information will be complimented where available with geomorphic modeling which seeks to identify area with high cultural resource potential. Following the San Pedro workshop more intensive discussion and in some instances field visits enabled Archaeology Southwest to develop a detailed map of high priority areas for conservation in the basin. The lack of USFS and BLM data required followup discussion with agency cultural resources staff to complement the workshop. However, the picture is less complete for public lands. Tribal lands were excluded from consideration based on ongoing tribal concerns on data sharing.

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GENERAL CULTURAL RESOURCES OVERVIEW

Paleo-Indian (Ca. 11,500 B.C.-Ca. 7500 B.C.)

Remarks: Paleo-Indian sites have been identified exclusively within the upper basin and date from the earliest known time periods for human occupation in the Southwest. Collectively, these Paleo-Indian sites are given the name Clovis, the earliest well-defined cultural complex found in the archaeological record of North America. During much of this period, Clovis groups are believed to have subsisted in part through the hunting of the now extinct Pleistocene mega-fauna, including mammoth and large bison. The most distinguishing archaeological feature of Clovis is the long, fluted stone projectile point.

The most significant concentration of Paleo-Indian sites in North America may be found in the upper San Pedro basin. Most of these sites are associated with a natural stratigraphic unit termed the “black mat” that occurs along drainages that emanate on the east and north slopes of the Huachuca Mountains and empty directly into the mainstem San Pedro River on the west side of the river. Jesse Ballenger, PhD candidate at the University of Arizona, has surveyed many of the west side drainages in the upper San Pedro River along with previously recorded Paleo-Indian sites (pers. comm. 2008). Ballenger believes that all “black mat” sites should be treated as Paleo-Indian sites regardless of whether Clovis artifacts have been found. Additional sites that are historically known include Greenbush Draw on the eastern side of the basin near the town of Naco, Arizona.

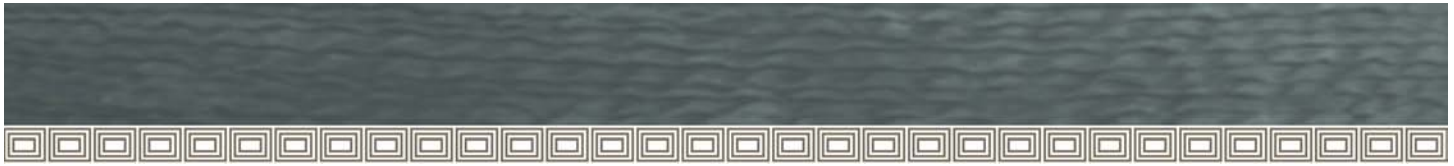
Conservation Area Identification: Sites are defined by stream reach where specific stratigraphic units have been delineated through field reconnaissance by Ballenger, including the Greenbush Draw area. Approximately 25 sites/stream reaches have been identified. The majority of these sites are within the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area or immediately contiguous with it and nearly all these sites are in “black mat” locations.. A notable exception is Greenbush Draw where the “black mat” per se does not appear but archaeological deposits are clearly associated with a dark brown mudstone that is an upper facies of the “black mat”. At all the Greenbush Draw sites the stratigraphy has been clearly correlated with other Clovis sites in the basin. (Haynes and Huckell, 2007).

Conservation Priorities: The overall significance of these sites to the understanding of Paleo-Indian cultures argues that all known sites be considered a priority for site protection. One site, Murray Springs is currently threatened by the discharge of surface water into Murray Springs Wash. It is thought that the surface water discharge is the result of displaced groundwater upstream originating from the Sierra Vista wastewater/groundwater recharge facility. The surface water is causing extensive bank erosion. Bureau of Land Management, the site owner, is aware of the problem.

Archaic (ca. 7500 B.C.-2100 B.C.)

Remarks: Archaic sites are numerous and widespread throughout the basin and cover several thousand years of human activity. These sites are defined principally by material cultural remains associated with plant and game processing stone tools, bedrock mortars, fire hearths and a few sites with rock art that has been classified as “Western Archaic” style. Priority setting among sites can be challenging because the term “Archaic” has been used as a catch all category in U.S. Southwest Archaeology which includes a diversity of site types and cultural groups over at least a six thousand year period. Many aceramic artifact scatters are often classified as Archaic from the surface without reliable dating information. Sites are relatively numerous but more so than other archeological sites their presence is often related to the level of survey intensity.

Conservation Area Identification: Several hundred sites have been recorded as Archaic within the AZSITE database for the San Pedro River basin. While sites are widespread, many of the significant sites (largely defined by size) occur at the base of the large mountain ranges that ring the valley, usually along the larger side drainages.



Conservation Priorities: Priority setting is challenged by the knowledge that Archaic sites are often ambiguously defined. Sites listed on the National Register and those determined eligible based on a comprehensive statewide assessment by the State Historic Preservation Office (Mabry 1998) within the San Pedro River basin were accepted as conservation priorities.

Early Agriculture/Early Ceramic (2100 B.C.- 500 A.D.)

Remarks: These sites are distinguished from Archaic period sites by evidence of a more sedentary lifestyle and typically includes irrigated bean, squash, and especially maize agriculture and material culture elements, particularly ceramic vessels. Sites often occur below the surface within the Holocene floodplain and are revealed through sub-surface excavation and occasionally when channel entrenchment has revealed sub-surface features. Many sites are aceramic and require material for radiocarbon dating to reliably identify. Habitation features are rare and villages are usually small in size when compared to the larger villages that characterize the Pre-Classic period that follows.

Conservation Area Identification: There are only a handful of documented sites that date from the Early Agricultural period. These include Tres Alamos where J. Clark re-analyzed Amerind excavation data to document Early Agricultural remains (pers. comm.), work by B. Huckell (1990) along upper San Pedro River in the SPRNCA and most recently a CRM project conducted by William Self and Associates along the river several miles north of Benson, Arizona. This latter project provides information that is ambiguous regarding the presence of an Early Ag occupation (J. Clark pers.comm).

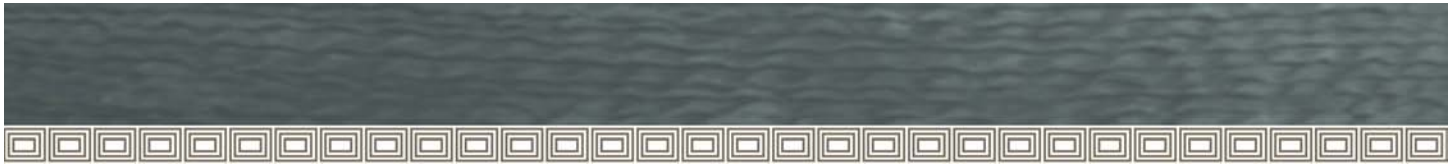
Conservation Priorities: The Tres Alamos site is a priority conservation area based on extensive pre-Classic and Classic period habitation sites. The site protection area boundary includes a portion of the Holocene floodplain that has a high probability of irrigated agricultural deposits. All of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area is a priority conservation priority area based on a complete human record beginning with Paleo-Indian up through the historic period. In addition to these sites, other priority areas are identified as stream reaches that based on natural geologic and hydrologic features as having high potential for prehistoric agricultural use. See Nials et al (2009 in press).

Pre-Classic (500 A.D. – 1200 A.D.)

Remarks: Sites are clearly indicative of a sedentary lifestyle with expanded habitation areas and canal systems present. Agriculture becomes more diversified with agave and cotton as crops. Large villages include clusters of pithouses opening on a common courtyard. Most sites in the San Pedro River basin are considered part of the Hohokam World although towards the southern end of the basin, affinities with cultures in northwest Mexico are apparent but poorly understood. The first Hohokam ball courts were constructed and served as focal points for games and ceremonies in larger communities. There is some evidence of social stratification in larger homes and more ornate grave goods. Ceramics replace flaked and ground stone as the most ubiquitous artifact class. Pottery was embellished by the addition of red and buff slips, the latter painted in ornate red designs.

Conservation Area Identification: Numerous sites have been identified throughout the basin in close proximity to the mainstem San Pedro River, often on the first Pleistocene terraces above the modern Holocene floodplain. Several sites are known away from mainstem San Pedro River on the Babocomari River, at the base of the Huachuca Mountains, along Texas Canyon, and along Ask Creek in the Little Rincon Mountains. Ballcourt villages are unknown upstream of Tres Alamos Wash.

Conservation Priorities: Priority sites largely defined by village size, presence of ballcourt or unique aspect/geographic location relative to other sites (i.e. off the mainstem San Pedro River). It is also thought that many Classic period sites have pre-Classic components below them.



(Classic 1200 A.D. – 1450 A.D.)

Remarks: Sites are predominantly large settlements that are densely occupied with small and medium-sized settlements less common when compared to Pre-Classic period. Prominent above ground, architectural features include cobble and adobe compound walls, platform mounds (in the lower basin), and masonry room blocks. Kayenta-Tusayan migrant sites (from Northeast Arizona) are well-documented in the lower basin. Although red-on-buff/brown ceramics continue to be produced, the pottery type that characterizes this phase is Salado polychrome or Roosevelt Red Ware, primarily Gila Polychrome.

Conservation Area Identification: Numerous sites are present although most occur along lower San Pedro River below Tres Alamos Wash. Platform mounds are found only in the lower basin. Several of these priority sites identified as Kayenta-Tusayan migrant sites.

Conservation Priorities: Priority sites largely defined by public architecture such as platform mounds and compound wall/room block villages. Given the extent of human occupation emphasis is placed on identifying site complexes (groupings of sites that are functionally, temporally or spatially related) including those with pre-Classic components. Defensive structures in hilltop locations are also noted in several locations.

ProtoHistoric 1450 A.D. – 1700 A.D.

Remarks: This period refers to the archaeological and historical “gap” between 1450 A.D., the end of the Classic Period, and 1700 A.D. when the Spanish began to occupy southern Arizona and visit the San Pedro area. Material remains of Hohokam culture are unknown from this period. In general archaeological materials are sparse at best with only a few documented sites associated with a group that are referred to as the Sobaipuri in Spanish Documents. Sobaipuri sites are very insubstantial with few artifacts and stand in stark contrast to conspicuous Classic period ruins.

Identified Sites: James Vint, working for Archaeology Southwest and pursuing a doctoral dissertation catalogued all known or potential Sobaipuri sites in the Lower San Pedro. Together with documented sites located in the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area less than five locations have been reliably documented as Sobaipuri sites. Some of these sites are associated with 1697 travels of Father Eusebio Kino and provide an additional layer of significance to their conservation. However the majority of sites described by Kino and Manje have not been reliably documented. It is also presumed that Coronado traveled through portions of the San Pedro on his famous journey in search of Cibola. The exact route and the many endeavors to locate traces of it, remain an archaeological chimera.

Conservation Priorities: All known, documented sites are a priority for site protection.

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Haynes C.V. and Bruce B, Huckell (eds). 2007. Murray Springs. A Clovis site with Multiple Activity Areas in the San Pedro Valley, Arizona. University of Arizona Press. 308pp.

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San Pedro River Prehistoric Priority Cultural Resources

