

A Conservation Model for Archaeology

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In the United States, “salvage” archaeology (now replaced by the more comprehensive “cultural resource management” approach) developed in response to the ever-increasing pace of site destruction due to economic development. Archaeologists recognized that the supply of sites was not infinite, and that important sites, once lost, could never be duplicated among the sites remaining. The response was to excavate the sites most immediately threatened with destruction—to retrieve as much information as possible with the time, money, and methods available.

We now realize that all sites are rather immediately threatened, if one takes a time frame of more than a few years. In this sense, all of our archaeological efforts are essentially “salvage.” I submit that we not only need to know how to do “salvage” archaeology, but also how not to do it. The latter involves creating a model of resource conservation.

There are three positive conservation measures that archaeologists can take in order to manage archaeological resources for maximum longevity. These are public education, involvement in planning, and archaeological preserves.

First, public education and its objective, public support, are the key to the whole undertaking. If more of the public understood and respected archaeological values, greater self-restraint would be exercised, land-holding agencies would find it easier to justify the expenditures for archaeological patrols, and law-enforcement and judicial agencies would be more eager to use existing antiquities laws. The tremendous energies of avocational archaeological groups should be channeled for the benefit of archaeology, so that their members can serve as educators of the general public and as advocates for archaeological conservation. The best protectors of archaeological resources are often the people who live near the sites. The inhabitants of these areas could be of great service to archaeology by refraining from pot hunting, by chasing

vandals away from sites, or at least reporting them, and by blowing the whistle on land-alteration projects that threaten sites.

Second, archaeologists must also make strenuous efforts to acquire institutionalized access to the planning and management process whenever land-surface alterations are involved. In this way, projects can be designed so that destruction of archaeological sites is minimized.

The third basic conservation strategy is to establish and protect archaeological preserves, areas where land alteration is prohibited or at least very rigidly controlled. The guiding principle in setting up archaeologically relevant land preserves should be representativeness rather than current significance. For example,

many of our archaeologically based national parks and monuments were established on the presumption that the largest, most spectacular, and most unique types of archaeological sites were the most significant. At the time those preserves were set up, this was probably an accurate reading of both the public’s and the archaeologists’ assessment of significance. Yet today, we have increasing numbers of projects designed to investigate functional variability among numbers of sites, small as well as large, and much greater interest in the statistically

typical as well as the rare and unique. Fortunately, a number of our existing archaeological parks and monuments have been set up to cover districts rather than individual sites, so that there are resources available for a number of different research and display orientations.

A focus on resource conservation leads us to a responsibility for the whole resource base. Only if we are successful in slowing down the rate of site loss can the field of archaeology continue to evolve over many generations and thereby realize its potential contributions to science, the humanities, and society. ■



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