

WHY PRESERVE THE PAST?

edited by:

Daniel G. Foster and Brian D. Dillon

April 14, 1999

Note: This article is an adaptation from the excellent pamphlet written several years ago by Charles McGrimsey and Hester Davis for the Arkansas Archaeological Society. Written for a national audience, McGrimsey and Davis did a terrific job in delivering an important message to landowners and other land stewards – explaining why archaeological sites are important and why they should be protected. Foster and Dillon wrote a few additional paragraphs and made editorial changes to the original piece. These revisions were made to address land ownership and stewardship issues evaluated by foresters and other resource professionals working on privately-owned lands in California. This edited version was prepared for use in the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's Archaeological Training Program for Registered Professional Foresters. The citation for the original pamphlet is:

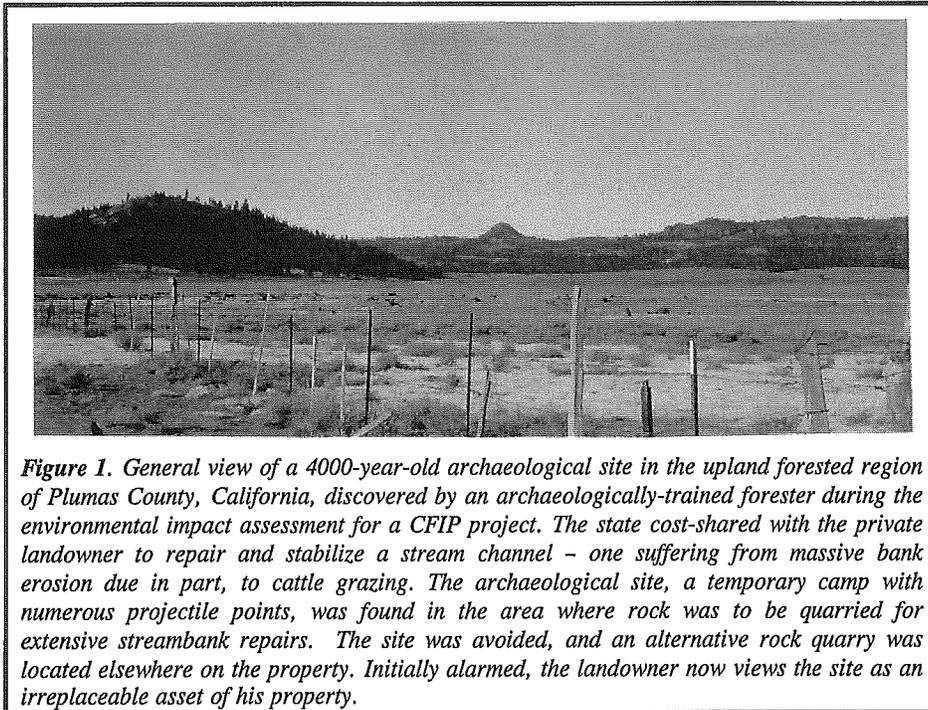
McGrimsey, Charles R. and Hester A. Davis, n.d. "These are the Stewards of the Past". A publication of the Arkansas Archaeological Society, on file at the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Archaeology Office, Sacramento, CA.

California was tremendously rich in archaeological resources prior to extensive development of its landscape. The sites that survived these massive changes are precious, irreplaceable relics of California's prehistoric and historic past. Although California's archaeological resources are perhaps not as famous or as visually impressive as many of the spectacular sites found in Egypt, Mexico, or Europe, they are of equal importance. The California Indians left no written records. Most of the information concerning them lies on the surface or just below ground level in the form of archaeological sites. Unlike timber, rangeland or wildlife, these are *not* renewable resources. Once an archaeological site is destroyed, the information is lost forever. If you own land or operate a business affecting land, you should determine whether there are any Indian sites or other locations of historic interest on your property. Should disturbances of any of these areas become necessary (by logging, building, tree-planting, thinning, grading, or burning) then it is important to carefully survey the area and evaluate the potential for any disturbances to archaeological and historical resources. You also can endeavor to use your land in a manner that protects or causes the least possible disturbance.

Unlike standing timber, a load of logs, or an acre of forested ground, you cannot put a dollar value on an archaeological site. It is equally hard to assess the value of other cultural intangibles such as art, music, literature, amateur sports, local or family history, and so forth and so on, but these are the things that enrich our lives in modern society. The understanding of our past is one of those priceless things. Archaeological sites contain the irreplaceable evidence to reconstruct the past. Without archaeological sites, we would be ignorant of the very long and diverse archaeological record that makes California stand apart from its neighbors, and helps us locate ourselves in time and space within our state.

Our own lifetimes are but a drop in the bucket compared to the total time human beings have lived in what we now call California. California has a uniquely varied archaeological

record, and one as old as anywhere else in North America. Hundreds of different prehistoric cultures have been and are still being found within our state, most of them discoverable only through archaeological methods. However, unless we can recognize the fragile traces left behind by these earlier peoples and take steps to protect and preserve them, we can accidentally destroy the only remaining evidence of those who came before us. California's timberlands are the last great treasure-trove of reasonably intact archaeological sites within the state. Most of the biggest and most spectacular sites in our state's valleys have already been damaged or destroyed through agricultural operations; those along the coastal strip have in most cases been covered over by development. In the deserts, most sites were located near reliable sources of water, just where modern settlements have also grown up, similarly damaging or destroying them.



In most cases, the preservation and wise management of an archaeological site, feature, or artifact is accomplished with little or no outlay of funds and minimal diminution of timber harvest yield, often none whatsoever. The only constant investment in archaeological preservation is the staff time expended by archaeologists and archaeologically-trained foresters and other resource professionals that search for archaeological sites and make determinations regarding the best way to protect them (Figure 1). Unlike trees, our favorite "renewable" resource, archaeological sites are finite and once gone, can never be replaced. Unless they are identified and protected, they are likely to be destroyed, sooner or later by some project. Once identified, they must be protected, not just once, but every time they are threatened with destruction, or else we will lose the most precious links we have to California's prehistoric and historic past.

Everyone alive today is a steward of the past. The choice is ours - whether we will preserve the archaeological sites, manuscripts, objects, and other sources of information from which future generations may learn about those who preceded us - or whether, intentionally or through neglect, we will allow our heritage from the past to be destroyed. If we do not

preserve this information, all future generations will have lost forever the ability to experience and profit fully from the past. Professional archaeologists, foresters, and other resource specialists can assist landowners exercise a stewardship over these resources with vigor and a sense of urgency. Much information about the past still lies buried in the ground awaiting investigation, but technical achievements over the past 50 years and the great increase in population have enabled us, in fact have forced us, to alter drastically much of the surface of the earth. The rate at which the landscape is being changed is ever increasing and there is reason to believe that within another 20 years very little land in the United States will remain totally untouched. Some remnants of the past will survive, of course, but unless we take appropriate steps now, the scattered evidence that will remain will not be enough to permit scientists to recreate a full and meaningful picture.

The Past Belongs To Everyone

Knowledge of the past is a part of everyone's basic heritage. Such knowledge is essential to understanding the present and preparing for the future. Availability of this knowledge can be viewed as one of the basic rights of each of us. Because this knowledge does belong to all, it should not be within the power of any individual or any organization to deprive everyone else of essential segments of that knowledge unless there are overriding public concerns - yet that is what happens when prehistoric or historic sites are destroyed without record and without adequate reason.

Often, of course, this destruction is not done deliberately or with malice, but simply because the logger, the bulldozer operator, the farmer, or the engineer is not aware that a portion of the past is being destroyed. Yet it lies largely within the power of the landowner, the forester, the logger, the contractor, and others who actually control or work the land, to destroy almost totally this basic heritage which belongs to everyone. They alone cannot be held responsible, for it is the responsibility of everyone, including government agencies such as CDF, to assist in preserving a reasonable portion of our common heritage, *Everyone is a Steward of the Past*.

A Non-Renewable Resource

The principal source of information about prehistoric and most early historic settlement in this country is in the ground. Whenever there are no written sources, or when these sources are inadequate, we must rely on physical cultural remains in the ground, and a knowledge of their exact location-their relationship to a house floor, to a storage pit, to a cemetery - to provide an adequate record. Archaeological artifacts themselves are important only because of what they can tell us about the activities of the people that made and used them. Almost any activity of man in the past that has disturbed the soil can now be detected in the earth by careful observation of changes in color, by chemical analysis, by differences in density and compactness of the soil, and by special photography. If these past soil changes are disturbed before they have been investigated, this evidence may be lost.

Archeologists themselves disturb the ground as they dig, but through the use of special and detailed techniques they are able to investigate, recover, and record the information *before* they destroy it. Through careful and scientific excavation it is possible to learn of the

achievements, the failures, and the knowledge of those who lived in this land before us. From the sites, features, objects and other information in the ground, the past can be brought to life again and can become a part of the education of our children.

The Present Emergency

Logging, road-building, farming, plowing, leveling, construction, or other modification of the land has always been capable of destroying information about the past; but it was not until recently, when machinery increased in size and capacity to dig deeper and faster, that the rate of destruction of archaeological objects and information became of really serious concern. A mule-drawn plow or a dirt road built for horse and buggy travel did not disturb the earth to any great extent or to any great depth. Since the end of World War II, however, the rate of destruction of sites has increased manifold.

Early Efforts

Indians normally lived near water, and one of the first cries of alarm concerning massive and total destruction of archaeological evidence came shortly after World War II with the construction of huge reservoirs on major waterways-reservoirs which flooded river valleys where hundreds of Indian and early White settlements had been located. The U.S. Government recognized its responsibility in these Federally constructed reservoir projects, and, as the dams were being built, a small number of dedicated archeologists conducted surveys and some test excavations within the future reservoir bottoms trying to salvage as much information as possible about the prehistoric inhabitants of the area before the land disappeared beneath the water. In California, limited archaeological surveys and excavations preceded dam construction at Shasta, Oroville, Millerton, Folsom, and Trinity reservoirs. During construction of the interstate highway system, federal funds were also provided to help salvage some of this irreplaceable information from sites that are located in the rights-of-ways across the country. However, archaeological sites on privately-owned lands were usually not included in these protection programs prior to the passage of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of 1970, and, in commercial logging operations, not until the passage of the archaeology forest practice rules in 1991.

Destruction Is Increasing Everywhere

The present crisis lies in the extreme mechanization of all forms of agricultural and of construction activity: in land leveling and subsoiling in the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, in flood control work in the tributary basins, in urban sprawl where housing developments are spreading far into what was countryside 10 years ago, in strip mining in the Midwest, in irrigation projects in the far west, in any and all of the many ways in which the land is now being altered, including commercial timber harvesting. To cite one example, the Soil Conservation Service estimates that *all* levelable land in Arkansas will be leveled within the next 25 years. Two-fifths of it has been leveled and that has been accomplished only within the past 10 years. The shore of San Francisco Bay was once ringed by several hundred large shellmounds and village settlements, but only four of these remain.

The crisis lies also in the unpredictability of much of the work which destroys the sites. It may take five or ten years to build a dam, so there may be a sufficient length of time in which to plan and to salvage the information which will be inundated by the reservoir. But a farmer may decide to plow a field with a subsoiler one day, and do so the next. A land developer may purchase and level 100 acres within a few months. In alluvial valleys the small ridges upon which the Indians lived and earthen mounds which they built inhibit efficient use of large farm machinery, so they are leveled. Modern subsoilers can dig as far as 3 feet into the ground-far enough to churn up and destroy irrevocably the major portion of almost any Indian site which might be present.

The increase in the rate and amount of land alteration, and the fact that there is often so little time between when the work is planned and when it is accomplished, are the principal causes of the present emergency.

Private Gain - - Public Loss

One other type of destruction must also be mentioned-that of the relic collector. Just as lethal to an Indian site as a bulldozer is the person who digs for objects rather than for information. Every shovelful of earth turned in searching for Indian artifacts destroys some of the story of the past. So zealous are some of these individuals that they have destroyed whole mounds and villages just as effectively as a huge machine. Yet a stone bowl mortar or collection of projectile points are, by themselves, with no information as to where they came from or with what it was associated, are almost worthless in terms of telling us anything about the people who made and used those objects. Digging or collecting without maintaining proper records - and the buying and selling of Indian artifacts which often provide the impetus for that activity - probably destroys as much of our heritage as do the reservoirs, highways, construction, and other land management projects.

The future of the past depends in some measure upon each of us. While some individuals continue to ignore these heritage resources, there now exists an army of archaeologically-trained foresters and other resource professionals assisting in the preservation of California's history. Without the aid of these and other interested individuals, the professional archeologists would have little hope of preserving an adequate portion of the record. What can be done?

Landowners

If you own land you can determine whether there are any Indian sites or other locations of historic interest on your property. If disturbances of any such area become necessary you can endeavor to use and manage the land in a manner which protects or causes the least possible disturbance to archaeological sites. A site preserved for future investigation can, in the long run, be of even greater ultimate importance than one that must be excavated hastily just prior to disturbance. You can also protect a site from vandalism by others, or you can donate the site to an appropriate public agency and at the same time obtain a significant income tax deduction.

Individuals

The individual may contribute time and perhaps specialized talents to archaeological field surveys, excavations, and laboratory investigations by joining a local archaeological society, county historical group, or other organization active in managing and interpreting California's prehistoric and historic past. In every state there are individuals, often organized into groups, who spend long hours locating and recording archaeological information and making this available to the public either through their own publications or by giving the information to the appropriate agency within the State. The concerned person may also alert others to the need to preserve a meaningful portion of the past, and encourage public and private efforts to recover and preserve the fast disappearing record.

Everyone

The one way in which every individual may serve as a *Steward of the Past* is by actively supporting local, state, and federal programs which accomplish this purpose. The problem is too big for individual landowners, companies, or private institutions to meet alone. Publicly supported programs and agencies which represent the indirect contribution of everyone are essential if we are to accomplish the amount of research which is necessary in order to recover a significant amount of information before it is destroyed forever. The future of the past depends upon each of us. If it is to have any future, each individual, in his or her own way, must be a force for its preservation, not a force contributing to its destruction. We who are alive today possess the last opportunity to save, preserve, or somehow record a meaningful portion of the long record of man's experience and achievements. Our children cannot preserve the past for their children, or even correctly tell the story of the past, unless we help preserve and interpret it for them. By tomorrow, yesterday may be gone.