

Review of the Problem

Out there, in our country's public lands, Americans are being plundered, robbed of a history that the land has held for thousands of years. This history has been passed down to us by the people who were here before us. They have left artifacts, drawings, and remains of their way of life. Archaeologists study the remains, drawings, and other artifacts left by the early Americans to discover clues to past cultures.

Some of these areas are far off the beaten path and some have been set aside as deserving of special protection. In the past, only the hearty outdoors enthusiast made the difficult journey to these sites. Today, more roads and highways cross the land, making it easier for sites to be visited by many people—including vandals, professional scavengers, casual collectors, and tourists.

Many ancient sites have been damaged in some way. For example, looters have dug large holes and taken artifacts from the Hardaway site, a camp site important to early Native Americans. Unless we act now to save such pieces of our North Carolina past, there may not be anything left to save. Large quantities of pottery and stone tools, human skeletal remains, rock art, historic cabins, and trails, as well as other valuable clues to our past have been damaged.

The large numbers of people visiting sites are endangering their existence. Visitors climbing in and out of ruins damage archaeological evidence. Campers building campfires near sites can harm rock art. People with metal detectors who dig bullets and belt buckles from Civil War battlefields in North Carolina destroy archaeological evidence. Each shovelful of dirt that is taken out of these sites may cause a loss of knowledge about past people. Each time a skeleton is unearthed and its bones scattered, we lose another link in our American heritage. Rock art is changed beyond repair each time uninformed or uncaring people chalk over a pictograph so it can be photographed, add their own carvings to a petroglyph for amusement or chisel a part of the art away from the wall. Each time artifacts are destroyed or removed from a site, the past culture can no longer be accurately dated and studied. The worst thing about vandalism and destruction of historic and prehistoric sites is the finality of the situation; the loss of history is complete and can never be recovered.

Federal and state agencies are working to prevent this destruction, with the help of concerned citizens. As guardians of our public lands, these agencies (such as the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Department of Defense, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and state governments) safeguard these special places.

You too can help. You can learn about artifacts and their value in the search for knowledge of the past. You can contact archaeological groups or historical societies in your area to find out how you can learn more. You can teach others about the importance of archaeological sites. You can form citizen groups who watch over sites. You can help prevent further destruction of these sites and become involved in legal and meaningful archaeology projects.

There are many other solutions to the problem of archaeological resource destruction. Your creative ideas are needed now!