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## Technical Brief 19: Archeological Collections and the Public: Using Resources for the Public Benefit

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## Technical Brief 19: Archeological Collections and the Public: Using Resources for the Public Benefit

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*This technical brief outlines some of the public benefits of archeological collections as seen by the managers of collections repositories across the nation. Case studies show many ways that curators find archeological collections to benefit audiences with different interests and needs. Using archeological collections also benefits the repositories themselves by offering opportunities to demonstrate the significance of the holdings, reinforce the importance of proper management, provide a valuable public service, fulfill institutional goals of outreach and research and, most of all, activate the potential of archeology to benefit the public.*

### Introduction

Archeological collections are rich resources for building outreach programs that engage the public, in exploring the depth and diversity of the past. The collections provide building blocks for acquiring skills and knowledge that are useful in modern life by investigating the material evidence of past peoples and learning lessons from their experiences. In these ways, archeological collections open avenues of inquiry for new approaches to old problems and enable professionals to assess the relevance of curatorial practice in contemporary society.

Outreach programs have a wealth of material available to them as a result of archeology, perhaps even more than some curators realize. Beyond artifacts, archeological collections can include many other kinds of materials, such as soil samples, photographs, maps, research and excavation reports, project notes, oral histories, ethnographic records, and other information pertinent to an excavation. They tend to be managed by federal and state agencies, tribes, and local constituencies in many kinds of repositories, including libraries, historical societies, parks, museums, colleges and universities, and even private collections. Note, however, that many other places care for archeological materials, including tribal heritage centers and cultural resource management companies. Members of the curatorial staff within the repositories, however, are not necessarily archeologists and may demonstrate a lack of understanding about archeology. This lack of familiarity impedes their ability to explore the full potential of archeological collections for outreach and education.

Archeologists and non-archeologists alike must seek creative applications for the collections they curate. Outreach provides an outlet to educate the public and encourage questions about the past

and present. Whether well-versed or new to archeology, museum professionals should understand that responsible curation involves making the resources of archeological collections available as a means for everyone to learn about the past.

### **Finding a Purpose for Curation**

Archeological curation faces many difficulties, among them the roles for collections to play after an archeological project is complete. Many repositories find that the acquisition of archeological materials far outpaces their use (Sullivan and Childs 2003). Although curation and conservation are often considered the final step in processing excavation materials, these processes actually prepare the collections for future uses. Rooting the purpose for curation in archeological outreach helps to define why archeology places such emphasis on the appropriate and diligent care of collections. The current crisis in curation investigates why repositories should keep archeological collections and also inspires the development of ways to manage collections effectively.

Many collections managers, particularly those who are not archeologists, perceive archeological collections as tedious to work with, expensive to process, and taking up a lot of space - all for little benefit. Some curators' attitudes indicate unawareness of the applications and benefits of archeological collections by questioning what the collections are good for beyond archeological work. They are concerned with whether or not the curation of archeological collections is worth the expense and time spent. Archeologists who have tested this question find resounding evidence that putting effort into the curation and accessibility of collections is, indeed, worth it, as shown in the case studies in this technical brief.

The curation crisis has brought to light some disturbing questions. For example, why do many archeologists ignore older collections when doing their research? Or consider curation to be less important than excavation? S. Terry Childs and Lynne P. Sullivan (2004: 16) note that an increasing number of archeologists, interpreters, educators, culturally affiliated groups, and members of the public ask why collections should be kept if they are not accessible for activities such as research, interpretation, heritage programs, and exhibition.

Making collections available and useful is one critical way to communicate the benefits of collections. Many curators, be they archeologists or not, know how to catalog and shelve archeological collections, but require guidance on the myriad of creative possibilities that collections hold for conveying the relevance of archeology in the modern world.

### **Audiences for Collections**

Archeological collections can be incorporated into the daily experience of many people who would not ordinarily think of archeology as pertinent in their lives and work. The expansive

benefits of archeological collections overlap all ages and professions. For the purposes of this technical brief, I address two general audiences. One audience is familiar with collections and their potential value, be they archeologists or not, such as employees and volunteers of historical societies and museums, collections managers, and administrators. The second audience includes people who might not ordinarily think of using archeological collections in their work, including educators, college and university professors, researchers from various fields, interpreters, artists, local communities, and descendant groups.

Researchers from fields outside of archeology are a large, diverse audience to whom curators can promote the value of their archeological collections. James J. Krakker et al. (1999: 11) from the National Museum of Natural History, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., write that archeological collections "are like a library filled with books written in languages no one completely understands. People examine objects again and again for different purposes, and as time passes understanding grows ... The collections act as vouchers for existing scholarly literature, and remain actively used for research." Since the majority of archeological collections are the result of systematic fieldwork conducted by professionals who use carefully-documented, consistent procedures, the collections provide researchers with a measure of reliability (Krakker et al. 1999: 10). These qualities can make the collections appealing to researchers in other sciences. For example, ecologists use archeological collections to understand past environments and the relationships of ancient people with the world around them. Ecologists use archeological data to model future environmental conditions and to inform policy. (Read The Public Benefits of Archeology: [Ecologists](#).) Additionally, historians can use artifacts and field data as primary source data to complement the sources traditionally consulted. Even though many historians might not realize it, historical archeologists have a close relationship with history. Archeological resources offer historians the potential to change the way modern society understands itself. (Read The Public Benefits of Archeology: [Historians](#).) For researchers, working with published descriptions of archeological materials is no substitute for hands-on examination of the objects and can lead to entirely new ways of looking at old problems.

Educators can incorporate archeological materials in learning-by-doing exercises for teaching all kinds of academic subjects to learners of all ages. Additionally, students interacting with collections as future professionals gain important skills in thinking about the development and application of typologies and classification systems in general. They learn from seasoned professionals about how to do collections management and benefit from their knowledge of materials, manufacturing methods, and cultures. Even students with a casual interest who do not intend to follow archeology as a profession can benefit from the unique skills and perspective on the world that archeology provides.

Archeological collections hold a predominant place in programs for grade school students, in particular. (Read [For Teachers](#).) Many cultural institutions mesh their outreach education programs with state standards for learning, and archeology offers an effective and enticing set of resources and perspectives. Archeological collections in K-12 school education programs offers hands-on learning that connects the abstract process of acquiring new information with applying it. For example, the Center for Community Research (CCR) at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio offers programs for middle and senior high school students to work with college students on mid-19th century sites. The CCR responds with archeology to a need identified in the community, stating, "Students in our educational system often lack the opportunity to engage in field-based learning experiences. As a result, they report loss of the connection between what they are learning and how the concepts are applied to the 'real world,' to their homes, communities and work lives, both now and in their future" (Lewine et al. 2002: 18). In addition to the skills gained by students, the CCR finds that, "To learn the history of the family residence, of the neighborhood, and of the place where one goes to school connects the student and the subject studied in a very direct and personally meaningful way" (Lewine et al. 2002: 19). Processes of handling, cataloging, and considering the archeological materials encourage the students to think about the past as being relevant to their lives as a way to look at their community.

Many archeology-based projects instill a sense of place by combining local history with archeology in education kits that describe many different people and perspectives. The Burke Museum in Seattle, Washington collaborates with three Puget Sound tribes and with the county to find ways "to teach the public that archaeology can have important impacts on our everyday lives" (Phillips 2004: 138). The development of an education kit took input from the outset from the community, which insured that multiple kits could be produced and integrated into tribal programs. The kit includes replicas of artifacts rather than authentic artifacts; these were made by an archeologist who used the same traditional materials as the originals so users would understand how they felt (Phillips 2004: 139). Unexpectedly, a variety of audiences has used the kit, from grade school classes to a local day program for homeless people to a cultural resource training program for professionals (Phillips 2004: 144). Users of the kits take away new understandings of the community's Native heritage through the use of archeological data in collections. The process of working through and with archeological materials can instill skills that are important for building communities, such as forging partnerships and encouraging dialogue. The tangibility of archeological materials offers communities a sense of "connecting" with the past and that history is real. (Read [The Public Benefits of Archeology: Communities](#).)

Archeological collections have great potential, but collections managers must first know what they have, curate it appropriately, promote it, and work not to let archeological processing be the final step in the life of the collections. These materials become part of education programs, community outreach projects, and research projects by professionals and students. Artists,

interpreters, docents, and exhibit designers find inspiration in collections to create stories and presentations about the past. Access to the artifacts as type collections offers a research library for comparing evidence between fields. They can also inform administrative decisions and provide information for policy statements and management reports. These projects exemplify the effects of using collections, to facilitate the ability of communities to build skills in communication and teamwork, to foster a heritage preservation ethic in youth, and to create networks between ethnic groups. The results of research using archeological collections can also significantly impact the public's conception of the past by challenging traditional assumptions or interpretations.

## **Case Studies**

The following case studies present how various institutions use their archeological collections for public outreach.

### **Nevada State Museum, Carson City, Nevada**

The Nevada State Museum is the repository for archeological materials collected from federal lands in Nevada and houses a very large number of objects and the associated records in permanent storage for various federal agencies. The collections appear in exhibits at the museum and off-site. Students, academics, private contractors, and federal and state archeologists all use the collections as resources for their projects. The museum welcomes volunteer assistance, and students can also gain experience through internships.

The collections follow the full range of archeological materials from the Great Basin. In addition to ancient stone tools, chipped stone and ground stone objects, the Nevada State Museum also retains woven plant textiles from 9,000 to 10,000 years ago, wooden objects such as digging sticks, and textiles. The climate of Nevada enables organic materials to last remarkably well and their care as collections makes these special materials available for study. For example, federal archeologists are conducting ongoing research on textiles and masters-level students are doing thesis projects on ancient Native American baskets and hats. The collections of more recent times include materials from various ethnic groups, especially Chinese immigrants and modern Native American groups. Collections at the Nevada State Museum are invaluable to researchers for the breadth and depth of past life they represent.

In addition to attracting researchers into the museum, public outreach programs enable the public to interact with the collections. One special program is a behind-the-scenes tour of the anthropology and natural history collections. The tour grew from the enthusiastic response to Archaeology Awareness Month, sponsored by the State Historic Preservation Office. The public had such an overwhelming response to the tour during the month of activities that it was made into a regular event. The public sees materials not on exhibit and learns more about selected

collections. Tours help the public to appreciate the wealth of materials and archeological collections at the museum, and to understand their uses beyond public exhibits.

Collections manager Alanah Woody sums up what she sees as the public benefits of collections at the Nevada State Museum: "The main benefit is educational - the public is generally fascinated by the past and if you allow them to get a glimpse of it, their lives are enriched. Nothing does this better than collections and allowing people to see them up close and personal" (Email communication, November 4, 2004). Encouraging the use of and participation in collections thus enables the museum to expand the educational uses of the archeological materials.

### **Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, St. Leonard, Maryland**

The Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory (the MAC Lab) at the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum (JPPM) cares for archeological collections from research-driven projects, projects undertaken in compliance with state and local historic preservation laws, and privately donated avocational assemblages. These materials help the archeologists at the museum to conduct public outreach projects in local communities to emphasize the history and heritage of southern Maryland.

Over 7 million artifacts represent 12,000 years of how people have lived across the landscape in southern Maryland. Approximately 40% of the collection consists of Native American materials ranging from the Paleo-Indian period to the contact period in Maryland. About 59% of the collection involves early 17th through the 20th century assemblages from post-contact Native American, European-American, and African-American archeological sites. The artifacts come from all kinds of places, including the rural residential sites of landowners, tenants, and slaves; urban domestic and commercial sites; and industrial sites such as mills, furnaces, and kilns. About 1% of the collection comes from underwater archeological investigations of historic sites, including an 18th-century shipyard and a rare crosshead steam engine from a steamship sunk in 1850. Staff at the MAC Lab and JPPM use the collections for educational, research, and exhibit purposes.

Research programs at the MAC Lab and JPPM address local heritage and a sense of place and time. An ongoing research project focuses on the reconstruction of the Chesapeake landscape since the late Woodland period. The project involves reexamining existing collections and their records to challenge older models of cultural change and persistence in the Chesapeake. Visiting researchers also make use of the collections in their own research. These users include students, scholars, and contract companies. Researchers have examined lithic and ceramic technologies, past ecological climates through faunal and floral remains, and colonial cutlery to interpret the relationships between function and social status.

One of the most extensive uses of the archeological collections by the staff is in community outreach to address what JPPM staff sees as a real issue: the loss of a sense of place and heritage due to suburban growth. Southern Maryland is the fastest-growing region in the state. Many of the new arrivals who settle in this outlying suburban area of Washington, D.C. have no knowledge of the region's cultural heritage. The Public Archaeology Program provides both members of local communities and volunteers from across the nation with opportunities to experience archeology in the field and in the laboratory. The primary purpose of the program is to allow the public to work directly with archeologists on real sites with real artifacts, and a secondary purpose is to enhance the community's understanding of, and relationship to, local history. The Public Archaeology Program helps new residents gain an appreciation for the place in which they now live.

Rebecca Morehouse, collections manager/registrar for the facility, believes that, "Collections are the essence of the primary public benefit of archaeology itself: making the past come alive in a tangible way. Of course, archaeology, and the collections it generates, produces new knowledge about the past, which is important in itself, but it is the 'stuff' of the past that excites the public. An artifact is much more 'real' than words in a book, and so people place great importance on these objects" (Email communication, October 4, 2004). The archeological collections at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum bring the past and present closer together through the uses of archeological collections.

### **Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, Kodiak, Alaska**

The Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository uses its collections "for everything," says Amy Steffian, the Deputy Director (Email communication, September 21, 2004). The Alutiiq Museum is an outgrowth of the Kodiak Area Native Association's Culture and Heritage Division, which aims to foster island-wide archeological research, to develop educational programs on Alutiiq cultural community, and to promote workshops on Alutiiq language and arts. The Alutiiq Heritage Foundation, through the museum, preserves traditions of the Alutiiq people and promotes a greater awareness of the rich cultural legacy of the indigenous peoples of the greater Gulf of Alaska region. As archeologist and Deputy Director Amy Steffian notes, the collections "are at the heart of our organization and are essential to all our public programs" (Email communication, September 21, 2004). Public outreach at the museum is as broad as its collections policy. Students, teachers, artists, and families can use the collections for a range of purposes.

The collections policy of the Alutiiq Museum is broad, allowing materials relevant to the ancient, historic, and contemporary cultural history of the Native peoples who settled the Alutiiq Nation to be accessioned. The museum is primarily an archeological repository and cares for over 80,000 artifacts, including faunal materials, ethnobotanical samples, sediment samples, field notes,



photographs, and maps. It maintains a teaching collection of modern objects, artwork, artifact replicas, and artifacts with little or no provenience for use in presentations by Alutiiq organizations, researchers, and educators. The museum permits these objects to be handled, used in traditional ceremonies, and loaned for educational outreach purposes (Alutiiq Museum 2004).

Students at all levels examine the collections for projects ranging from art to history to dissertations. Artists view pieces to learn construction techniques. Teachers use the collections for curriculum development or to incorporate the museum's teaching materials into their own classroom projects. Families explore collections to gain an understanding of their histories; organizations borrow objects from the teaching collections for use in traditional ceremonies, and more. Patrick Saltonstall, Curator, writes that the knowledge is sent back into the Alutiiq community in the form of educational exhibits and papers presented to the community (Email communication, September 17, 2004). Conventional researchers also use the collections. An Alutiiq artifact from Kodiak Island provided the oldest documentary record of ancient volcanic eruptions in Alaska to volcanologists investigating modern activity (Alaska Volcano Observatory).

The Alutiiq Museum also uses its collections for community-building among the Alutiiq. Volunteers in the Community Archaeology Program excavate threatened sites in the Kodiak region. Alutiiq people and other locals participate in the program, which helps fulfill many of the museum's public outreach goals and allows the people whose material heritage is being excavated to participate actively in making their ancestors' histories known.

Amy Steffian reflects, "I think the benefit of our collections to the public is that they allow personal exploration of Alutiiq heritage - people are really moved when they work with and view real objects in our holdings - it helps them consider their link to Alutiiq heritage. The collections also aid in the larger process of building respect for Alutiiq traditions, and promoting pride in Alutiiq heritage" (Email communication, September 21, 2004).

### **Archaeology Collection, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania**

The holdings of the Bryn Mawr College Art and Archaeology Collections support the curriculum at the college. Two of the main benefits of the Archaeology Collection to the College community are its ability to complement and satisfy the research needs of faculty and students and the opportunity for students to gain experience with archeological curation and collection management.

The Collections are accessible to anyone on campus interested in using them in their research, as well as outside scholars. The archeology holdings include artifacts from Europe, the Americas, the Mediterranean, the Near East, Asia, and the Pacific. Students, faculty, and other scholars

access the collections via examination for class papers, articles, presentations or technical workshops on subjects such as print processes, weaving history, or ceramic analysis.

The evidence of the value of archeological collections grows as they become integrated into everyday academic practice. Students and professors who use the collections are more likely to advocate for them; they bring visibility to the curatorial program and emphasize its value to the College. Integrating collections and making them useful demonstrates to administrators that the planning for and preservation of these resources for learning is as important as building libraries for books or laboratories for experiments.

A major benefit of the Archeology Collection is the exposure of students to curatorial practice and public service. The collection is staffed by a curator and a registrar, who employ eight to twelve work-study students, and two graduate assistants/interns. Students are trained in all aspects of museum management and work directly with the staff for a hands-on experience. They learn about collections care and preservation, cataloging, entering data, object photography, and how to develop and install small-scale exhibitions. Students also develop skills in providing services such as tours and talks for classes and school groups, and working with visiting scholars.

From their experiences with the College's Collections, several collection assistants have built professional careers in museum studies, conservation, archeology, education, administration of galleries and auction houses, fine art, and photography. They also use these experiences to inform their work in law, higher education administration, political science/government, and medicine. Curator Carol Campbell and Registrar Tamara Johnston point out that it is not surprising that such a wide range of choices are made after working with archeology collections. Consider that students are exposed to complicated laws such as NAGPRA and the UNESCO convention, and they undertake detailed scientific inquiry such as materials analysis and conservation practices.

Campbell and Johnston observe that, "For graduate and undergraduate students alike, working for the Art and Archaeology Collections provides the foundation and format for the melding of many disciplines that may be of interest for students. This factor indicates that the Collections have a value beyond training specialists in the field. Collections are a basic part of the academic process and raise the conscience of the College community to appreciate the value of primary materials." (Email communication, June 6, 2005).

### **Midwest Archeological Center, National Park Service**

The Midwest Archeological Center (MWAC) curates archeological collections for over 50 units of the National Park Service located throughout the central United States. The scope of the collections reflects the diversity of the people who have lived in the region over thousands of years. The MWAC archeological collections benefit professionals who seek a broad data set to

consult and members of the public who want to learn more about the archeology of the region. Staff members at the facility also develop public education projects with archeology.

NPS regional curatorial facilities have significant study collections that provide a vast amount of material for regional or comparative studies. The MWAC collections offer data for improved understanding and interpretation of park resources, and serve as a permanent scientific data bank for archeological sites threatened by development or natural processes.

Volunteers and students participate in the processing and analysis of the regional archeology collections. Students often have a role to play in the artifact laboratory and this process serves as job training for them. Regional facilities, like the MWAC, provide internships for students at the undergraduate, recent graduate, or graduate levels. Each year the MWAC enrolls several students from the nearby University of Nebraska-Lincoln to assist staff archeologists with the analysis and reporting of materials generated by fieldwork. These internships frequently help students decide if archeology is a career path they want to take. From seasoned professionals they learn artifact processing, data entry, and other skills. The range of materials at the MWAC also means that students have considerable learning aids for addressing research questions. Graduate students use the collections for their research, often dovetailing their investigations with those of the staff. Staff archeologists routinely sit on students' thesis committees to ensure that their work becomes useful to the larger field of archeology and to the NPS units that own the collections. Additionally, volunteers assist on projects on-site and at the repository.

The MWAC develops and disseminates information and materials designed to educate the public about the nature and value of archeology and archeological resources, including archeological collections. Several small exhibits maintained in the MWAC facility were specifically designed to feature park archeological collection materials. Center staff members talk about archeology at schools and in other public presentations. Rather than using irreplaceable parts of collections, a small quantity of unprovenienced material is kept for public interpretation. In addition, the collections may serve as a cultural heritage resource for contemporary groups who have a traditional association with a particular park or site.

Archeologist Bruce Jones notes, that, "The archeological theories are all well and good, but the public wants to see the artifacts themselves. Our collections thus become a primary education tool - without them, archeologists would be so much hot air! ... [T]he Center's collections of broken bottles and chert flakes and pot sherds and charcoal samples and window glass enable the public to much more accurately understand the true nature of archeological data - how it must be approached, how fragile it is, and what it can tell us about ourselves. For us this means that the public can more easily appreciate what archeology can tell about human beings, and can become

stronger advocates for all kinds of historic preservation" (Email communication, January 26, 2005).

Archeologist and Curator Jan Dial-Jones reflects on the public benefits of collections, "The objects included in collections provide a tangible link to the human past that I think can be appreciated by everyone. However, archeological collections are used primarily for research purposes and the artifacts are only rarely and selectively displayed for public appreciation. As a result, the value and relevance of archeological collections to the general public also lies in the interpretation of their broader informational content, conveyed to the public in any number of venues, which allows people to place their own present existence into historical context. Such an historical perspective enhances quality-of-life and informs the contributions that individuals then make within their own society" (Email communication, February 11, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Archeological collections are rich resources for many different people and projects yet their potential is frequently underestimated. Archeological collections can help people to develop skills, increase public engagement in learning about the past, and provide valuable research materials to a range of fields. The public benefits that collections may have beyond the institution should help inspire diligent and responsible curation.

Childs and Sullivan (2004:16-17) outline actions for archeologists to take to improve the perceived value of archeological collections. These actions include acquiring the habit of identifying in publications where the collections are stored, making grey literature reports more accessible and better known as resources, using existing collections to test new hypotheses, valuing and promoting collections research for graduate student work, working with museums to identify the collections they curate and encourage use through the web and publications, and teaching and inspiring students about their stewardship responsibilities for collections. Collections offer students a foothold in learning practical and academic skills in working with the evidence of the past. They offer professionals from all disciplines data in addition to what they may be accustomed and new perspectives on old problems. Archeological collections can also inspire a sense of place and an understanding of how an area has changed over time.

Collections managers and archeologists agree that collections help make the past come alive for the public. Artifacts have a "wow" factor when they're freshly excavated and still dirty, and integrating the processed materials into exhibits gives authenticity and authority to archeologists and archeology. The discipline tends to have an air of mystery, but archeological collections can offer insight into the process of archeological inquiry and have the power to dispel commonly-held misconceptions about it.

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