

CURATION

Current Situation

Over the years, millions of artifacts have been recovered from archaeological sites on public and private lands across California. These sites contain important information about how Native Americans lived in prehistory and how Indians and more recent immigrants lived in the historic period, revealing the cultural diversity, adaptations to changing environments and other circumstances that underscore our identity as Americans. Most of these artifacts were discovered during the course of development, when excavations were conducted to evaluate site significance and/or mitigate negative effects on archaeological resources in response to requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of 1970 and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1964.

However, very little thought was given to what should be done with this vast array of cultural material after it was excavated.

The result has been boxes and bags of artifacts dispersed among various private cultural resources management firms, educational institutions, developers and public agencies throughout the State. Lack of centralized or networked collection information thwarts accountability, public access and monitoring of this invaluable archaeological record. While the exact number of “orphan” collections is unknown, it is estimated that in San Diego County alone, ninety percent of archaeologists who conducted excavations from 1975 to the present have artifacts in their possession. The question must be asked, is mitigation accomplished by merely excavating artifacts and issuing a report? Does the public receive the benefit mandated by CEQA to “preserve for future generations . . . examples of the major periods of California history?”

The time has come to make conscious decisions about what to do with these artifacts.

One answer is curation. Curation (the care, management and use) of excavated artifacts returns them to the status of cultural resources and makes them available for continued scientific research, public education and cultural applications. California’s prehistoric archaeological sites reveal important information about common human heritage and the hunter-gatherer adaptations that were enjoyed by people world-wide for millennia. This evidence establishes the importance of California Indian history in the context of world history. In addition, artifacts from historic period sites expand our knowledge of how people lived when written records did not tell the whole story.

Archaeological professional ethics mandate curation. However, California state law is almost silent on the issue because when CEQA was passed the resulting creation and growth of the cultural resources management (CRM) industry had not been anticipated. (Previously, most archaeologists were associated with museums or universities and collections were stored there.) Curation is required by many lead agencies; however, spotty enforcement, lack of dedicated funding or willingness to establish curation repositories have limited the ability to care for excavated artifacts across much of the State.

The SHRC adopted the “Guidelines for the Curation of Archaeological Collections” in 1993. The purpose of the guidelines is to, “Ensure those archaeological collections and their associated records are preserved and managed adequately so that future generations might use them to 1. Enhance cultural traditions; 2. Conduct scientific research; and 3. Provide educational and heritage appreciation programs.”

It must be noted that not enough attention has been paid to what Native Americans think about the disposition of excavated artifacts. California Indians have long challenged archaeological curation as being at odds with their core cultural beliefs and values, arguing that it is their fundamental human right to make decisions about the disposition of culturally related archaeological collections considered their cultural patrimony. Many think it is their responsibility as living cultural adherents to protect and care for archaeological materials tied to their ancestors and heritage in their own culturally responsible manner. While Native American artifacts comprise the majority of existing collections, there are also archaeological collections linked to other cultural and ethnic groups, and their wishes must be considered as well.

The vast majority of these artifacts are still, in some sense, underground. Boxes and bags of archaeological artifacts are dispersed among various private CRM companies, public institutions and government agencies throughout the state. Local and state governments and private developers generate substantial collections as a result of Section 106 and CEQA compliance, yet make it the responsibility of the archaeologists to find a curation facility. The practice of leaving collections with CRM firms, universities and agencies in the past has produced “orphan” collections whose educational, scientific and cultural value has become largely inaccessible to the public.

Ideal Situation

1. Archaeological collections would be treated as cultural and heritage resources. Active meaningful consultation, collaboration and partnerships with culturally affiliated groups to reconcile the disparate views between traditional and scientific belief systems would be ongoing. The disposition of collections would be based on cultural, educational and scientific perspectives, and whether specific items and objects are subject to repatriation or other laws.
2. All archaeological test excavation and data recovery projects would be planned under the framework of pre-excavation research designs that take into account knowledge of existing collections, defined historic contexts and important research questions, consultations with and confidentiality concerns of culturally affiliated peoples, artifact collection plans, legal requirements, funding considerations and an acceptable disposition plan for the artifacts and documentation after excavation. This requirement is a component of Section 106-mandated archaeology, but irregularly practiced under CEQA.
3. Curation, if appropriate, would be consistently applied and adequately funded for long-term management as part of a project. Such curation involves the following criteria, at a minimum:

- A. Collections are maintained in a culturally sensitive manner with respect to the wishes and traditions of the culturally affiliated peoples.
 - B. Collections are consistently evaluated for items eligible for repatriation in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and California NAGPRA, and identified items are noticed and repatriated according to protocol.
 - C. Collections are managed by professionally trained personnel in an appropriate environment in accordance with professional museum and archival standards.
 - D. Associated archaeological records (e.g., catalogs, excavation fieldnotes, photographs, technical reports, oral history notes, etc.) are complete, indexed, and housed with the collections.
 - E. Collections are housed in a facility that contains adequate space to make them accessible and used for continued scientific research, cultural applications and educational programs available to the general public with respect to the sensitivities of culturally affiliated peoples.
4. Information about existing archaeological site collections from California would be readily accessible for purposes of:
- A. Informing and consulting with culturally affiliated peoples under current repatriation laws, establishing culturally sensitive curation protocols that protect confidentiality concerns.
 - B. Identifying and explicating on-going and future historical, educational and scientific research needs.
 - C. Assessing their present status (including “orphaned collections”) and planning for future curation needs across the State.

The ideal situation involves making smarter decisions about what is collected from archaeological sites and ensuring significant collections are preserved for long-term applications in suitable facilities. Documentation and preservation is fundamental to archaeology, as excavation ultimately destroys each unique site context.

How to Bridge the Gap

1. Document the Extent of Uncurated Archaeological Collections in California. The number of uncurated archaeological collections (and associated records) recovered during documented excavations in California since the 1970s needs to be quantified. This includes collections held by archaeological consultants, local jurisdictions, museums and universities, where curation is inadequate for their continued care, treatment and management. Criteria for consideration need to include: the completeness and condition of the associated contextual archaeological record; the condition and intactness of the collection; potential for further excavation due to new impacts; geographical and temporal representation; potential for continued scientific research, public education, interpretation and cultural uses; and whether collections contain items or objects that may be subject to repatriation under NAGPRA.

2. Conduct Statewide Survey and Evaluation of Available Curation Facilities. Determine how many curatorial repositories currently meet recognized criteria in the State of California's *Guidelines for the Curation of Archaeological Collections, 1993*, or *Curation of Federally-Owned and Administered Archaeological Collections (36 CFR Part 79)*.
3. Devise a Plan to Fund Curation for Existing Collections. Estimate costs and devise options to bring uncurated collections meeting the criteria established after quantification of existing collections and associated documents into true curation.
4. Establish a Statewide Collections Inventory Database. Use the existing California Historical Resources Information System (CHRIS), or another approach, to share collections information statewide.
5. Mandate and Enforce Curation Plans. Mandate and enforce curation plans, including funding for curation, for every future site testing and data recovery project in California conducted in compliance with State or Federal laws, or for academic or other research. Such plans need to be developed as part of pre-excavation research designs to meet existing legal requirements (e.g., repatriation and burial protection) as part of issuing a permit. Plans should be made in consultation with culturally affiliated groups and other stakeholders, including legally prescribed lead agencies and property owners or land managing public agencies.
6. Consult and Promote Partnerships with Culturally Affiliated Groups. Consult and promote partnerships with culturally affiliated groups as to the care, interpretation and disposition of culturally sensitive artifacts, items and objects now held in curatorial facilities and prior to devising research designs for future archaeological test and data recovery excavations.
7. Educate the Stakeholders and the Public. Educate archaeologists, property developers and responsible local agency officials regarding their ethical and legal responsibilities to determine the disposition of artifacts once excavation has taken place and how to enforce the required mitigation requirements.

Conclusion

Care for excavated artifacts is basically a matter of respect—respect for the cultures represented in the collections, respect for our history, and respect for the laws set forth to preserve our cultural legacy for present and future generations.