

# San Diego Archaeological Center

*preserving pieces of the past*

## **A Brief History of the Curation Crisis**

Cindy Stankowski, Director

### **Introduction**

Over the years, millions of archaeological artifacts have been recovered from public and private lands in San Diego. However, the vast majority of these artifacts were still, in effect, underground. Boxes and bags of archaeological artifacts were scattered among private cultural resource management (CRM) companies, public institutions and government agencies throughout San Diego—a true curation crisis.

The San Diego Archaeological Center, the first nonprofit, private organization dedicated to the care, management and use of archaeological artifacts, is attempting to restore these collections to cultural resource status. Our vision is to sustain an archaeological center in San Diego where artifacts will not only be cared for in a state-of-the-art environment, but where further professional research can commence and the public can enjoy learning about the prehistory and history of the San Diego region through educational programs and museum quality exhibits.

### **Why is Curation Important?**

Curation comes from the Latin word *cura*, meaning care. We define curation as the CARE, MANAGEMENT and USE of archaeological collections. Care means that you prevent deterioration, management means that collections are organized and accessible, and use means that you *use* collections for scientific research, public education or cultural use.

Curation is basically a matter of respect. Respect for the cultures represented in the collections, respect for ourselves and future generations and respect for the millions of dollars spent on the identification and retrieval of cultural resources. The public wants their history accessible, and archaeological artifacts tell the story of past lifeways like nothing else.

Curation of archaeological collections can strengthen communities. Since 1850, more than half of the people living in California today came from someplace else. Currently, 24% of the population of San Diego County is Hispanic, 6% Black and 9% Asian and other. In a recent study done by the California Council for the Humanities 65% of the respondents said that they knew only a little or nothing at all about the cultural backgrounds of the people in their community. However, 44% believed that sharing family histories is a good way to strengthen their communities. By bringing archaeological collections together and making them available to explore, people can share history and culturally affiliated groups can recapture their past.

Curated collections will be available for the next generation of investigative technologies. Collections gathered just ten years ago, deserve another look with up-to-date tools and research models. One of the basic tenants of science is that results are verifiable, archaeological theory and models can only be tested if collections are preserved. We will never build on our understanding of the past if we continue to, in effect, discard each collection after one look. Do we really understand what is “significant,” if we have no idea of the entire population we are sampling?

Curation after excavation is the only way to appropriately mitigate the negative impact of development or academic research on cultural resources. The laws and guidelines that have been enacted to protect cultural resources all contain a component of time, artifacts are supposed to be preserved for the *future*. Without curation, only one archaeologist has had an opportunity to study the collection and the public has gained nothing.

### **History of the Curation Crisis**

The curation crisis began at the turn of the century when the “salvage” collecting practices of museums resulted in the acquisition of millions of ethnographic and natural history specimens. The “Nation’s Attic,” the Smithsonian Institution, now holds more than 140 million items, more than 122 million are natural history objects (Heyman 1997). Museums and repositories were inundated with another influx of artifacts starting in the 1960s with the passage of federal and state laws aimed at mitigating the loss of cultural and environmental resources, such as the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966; National Environmental Policy Act of 1969; Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974; California Coastal Act of 1976; and California Environmental Quality Act of 1970. These laws mandated the “rescue” of archaeological artifacts and some even required curation—care after excavation.

It soon became apparent, however, that the mere collection of cultural resources was not enough to preserve them. The extent of the curation crisis was recognized in the 1980s as a result of several external forces affecting museums and repositories. Decreased funding compelled museum directors to take a closer look at collections management costs. Storage rooms were full, collections were deteriorating and conservators were recommending expensive archival-quality supplies and equipment to preserve existing collections.

With the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPPA) of 1990, museums—which had not inspected collection storage rooms in a while—were forced to do so. Inventory of ethnographic and archaeological collections was required, revealing the magnitude of disorganization. The American Association of Museums’ Commission on Museums for a New Century reported that, “Museums... have not fully lived up to their responsibility to provide adequately for the care of their holdings” (AAM 1984:1).

The federal government was just as remiss as the private sector in providing adequate collections management. The 1986 Government Accounting Office report based on a

questionnaire sent to non-federal repositories housing federally-owned collections, *Cultural Resources—Problems Protecting and Preserving Federal Archeological Resources*, revealed the following:

Twenty-four percent of the respondents had no inventory of their collections; 30 percent had never inspected them for conservation needs.

Most records of excavations on Forest Service and BLM lands prior to 1975 and 1968, respectively, had been lost or destroyed.

Although the Park Service curated most of its own artifacts and records, there was an estimated cataloging backlog of 15.5 million objects requiring \$19.7 million to rectify. (Revised 1992 figures show that the Park Service owns 24.6 million archaeological artifacts of which 16.8 million need to be catalogued. This will require \$46.9 million through the year 2000, or 20 years at the current funding levels.)

Thirty percent of non-federal facilities have already run out of room to store or exhibit archaeological objects (Childs 1995:12).

The Department of Defense was also struggling with preservation issues. Colonel James E. Corbin, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, wrote, “Over the past 15 years, the Corps of Engineers has spent approximately \$165 million on the recovery of archaeological resources, but we have rarely addressed curation and conservation needs for these collections. The result is that many of our collections cannot be accounted for; and most show considerable evidence of neglect and deterioration. In point of fact, we appear to be walking a tightrope of compliance that may unravel on us” (Trimble and Meyers 1991:1).

In San Diego, a questionnaire distributed by the San Diego County Archaeological Society in 1992 Revealed the existence of an estimated 23,000 cubic feet of uncured archaeological collections, most of these the burdensome responsibility of local CRM firms.

Why wasn’t anybody thinking about curation? The answer lies in public and professional perceptions of archaeology, perceptions based on the archaeology of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century—digging stuff up and putting it in a museum.

The Society for American Archaeology sponsored a study in 1999 to assess the public’s knowledge about archaeological issues, *Exploring Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Archaeology* (SAA 2000). In this study, 1,016 adults throughout the United States were polled about what they knew about archaeology. Most people knew what archaeology was about, although a few folks did mention dinosaurs (that’s paleontology). When asked, “What do you think of when you hear the word archaeology?” 79% of the respondents said “digging”—digging up artifacts, things from

the past and bones. Seventy-seven percent of those polled in the study assumed that artifacts automatically went to a museum or university after excavation.

These public perceptions about archaeology are echoed by professional archaeologists. The emphasis on digging is still pervasive in academic programs of today, versus studying existing collections. Very little attention was given to what would happen to the collections after recovery. The problem with this antiquated model of archaeology is that museums and universities are now full and simply do not have the resources to care for the archaeological collections amassed in the past nor for the collections of the future. To be fair, the present generation of archaeologists was taught to excavate and was not educated in the need for curation after recovery. Archaeology has changed dramatically in the past 30 years. Most of the archaeology now performed in the California is “contract” archaeology—archaeology that takes place before development occurs. Still the emphasis is placed on excavation, often the only mitigation measure offered in response to the negative impact of development on cultural resources. As Einstein said, “No problem can be solved at the same level at which it was posed.” An answer to the curation crisis required refocus on why archaeology is done, i.e., to protect and preserve cultural resources. The early 1990s saw federal, state and local government attempting to address the curation crisis with legislation and regulation, but without funding appropriations.

Once the Federal government realized the magnitude of the curation crisis, the Department of the Interior formulated curation standards for federal agencies in the *Code of Federal Regulations*, Curation of Federally-Owned and administered Archaeological Collections, 36 CFR Part 79, in 1987. Finalized in 1990, 36 CFR Part 79 establishes minimum requirements for repositories and the care, documentation, inspection and use of collections. However, 36 CFR Part 79 is an unfunded mandate. The regulation states Congress may fund a variety of curatorial activities, but does not establish appropriations.

The State of California Historical Resources Commission 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.” Unfortunately, this was an unfunded mandate as well.

The City and County of San Diego recognized that excavation alone was not enough to protect cultural resources, but have enforced their policies only to a limited extent. The County of San Diego’s General Plan has long included the adopted policy that all information and artifactual resources recorded in the environmental review process will be stored in an appropriate institution and made available for public exhibit and scientific review. The City of San Diego requires that artifacts recovered from archaeological sites that fall under the City’s regulation shall be cleaned, catalogued and permanently curated with an appropriate institution.

## Curation Funding for the Future

Curation will cost money, and no one is sure exactly how much it will cost in the long run. Funding for curation is do-able, because funding for excavation was do-able when it was first introduced as a requirement. The public, via developers and academic institutions, will foot the bill for curation as they did for excavation. This time, however, archaeological collections will be returned to the public as a cultural resource that they can understand, appreciate and value. The public has proven over and over that they are willing to preserve history when it is presented to them in a way that they can relate to.

Developers currently view mitigation of cultural resources as an expensive and time-consuming legal requirement. At the end of a project they have a large report and boxes of artifacts—that they often leave with the archaeological firm. Developers rarely get any credit for their efforts to preserve cultural resources because the public never gets to know about it. Curation would allow developers to have an exhibit in a model home, naming opportunities at curation facilities and the public's appreciation.

Funding for the curation of existing and future archaeological collections must become an integral part of the mitigation or academic archaeological process. Archaeologists, although not trained in curation, must take the responsibility to see that curation occurs. Budgets for development projects or academic research are remiss unless there is a line item for curation. Without curation after excavation, collections are lost—it's as simple and as alarming as that.

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