

**National Geographic Society and National Geographic Channel
Meeting on Archeological Preservation, Avocational Metal Detecting, Ethics of
Archeology
Friday, May 4, 2012 - 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM
Washington, D.C**

Participants:

Jeffrey Altschul – President-elect, Society for American Archaeology (SAA); Chairman of the Board, Statistical Research Inc (SRI), Arizona.

Michael Barber – State Archaeologist, Virginia Department of Historical Resources.

Thomas Barritt (Moderator)– Partner at Ketchum Inc., a global public relations firm.

Joseph Balicki – Assoc. Director, John Milner Associates, Inc.; Representative for the American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA).

Alsdair Brooks – Officer of the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA); Teaching Fellow of Historical Archaeology, University of Leicester, UK.

Ian Burrow – President, Register of Professional Archaeologists (RPA); Vice President and Principal Archaeologist, Hunter Research Archaeology in New Jersey.

Christopher Espenshade – Principal Investigator and Archaeologist, New South Associates in Greensboro, NC.

Charles Ewen – President-elect, Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA); Professor, Department of Anthropology, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.

John Francis (Chair) – Vice-President of Research, Conservation, and Exploration, National Geographic Society.

Robert Freeman – Director of Sales, Minelab Americas.

Terry Garcia – Executive Vice-President for Mission Programs, National Geographic Society.

Abby Greensfelder – Co-Owner and Founder, Half Yard Productions in Bethesda, MD.

Peter Herdich – CEO, Archaeological Institute of America and Publisher, *Archaeology* magazine.

Fred Hiebert – Archaeology Fellow, National Geographic Society.

D. Bambi Kraus – President, National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (NATHPO).

Jonathan Leader – State Archaeologist, South Carolina.

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David Lyle – CEO, National Geographic Channel.

Mike O'Donnell – Founder, O'Donnell Publications.

Matthew Reeves - Director of Archaeology, James Madison's Montpelier.

Nancy Schamu – Executive Director, National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.

Douglas Scott – Chief Archaeologist, Little Big Horn Battlefield, National Park Service.

Daniel Sivilich–President, Battlefield Restoration and Archaeological Volunteer Organization (BRAVO).

Christopher Thornton – Program Officer, Committee for Research and Exploration, National Geographic Society.

Joe Troy – Avocational Metal Detectorist.

Melinda Zeder –Committee for Research and Exploration, National Geographic Society; Curator, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; SAA Board Member.

Opening Remarks and Introductions

The day-long meeting opened with a series of short framing remarks by conference organizers. Terry Garcia provided participants with an understanding of the relationship between the National Geographic Society and the National Geographic Channel. He focused on the challenges National Geographic faces in advancing core NG goals through a variety of media channels, including the highly competitive world of commercial television. NG commercial cable television programming seeks to engage a broader and previously largely untapped audience; the Channel also provides a significant revenue stream for the full spectrum of NG activities. He explained that the goal of the May 4 conference was to bring together a broad cross-section of the archaeological community (professional and avocational) to advise National Geographic on how to frame Channel programming in a way that engages the cable television audience, while also consistent with core ethical principles of cultural heritage documentation and preservation.

John Francis underscored the on-going role of NGS as an enabler of world class research and a source of great story telling, highlighting the challenge NGS now faces in its effort at becoming more expansive in communication without losing sight of core mission and ethical principles that have always guided the Society. In this context, David Lyle outlined the Channel's interest in seeking advice from the archaeological community about the ethical guidelines that any future programming could both operate within and promote, while advancing the goal of reaching broad audiences using contemporary television storytelling.

Charles Ewen spoke to the role of the *Digger's* controversy in crystallizing attention on difficult, long-standing, issues at the interface between the professional and avocational archaeology. The key issue raised by this controversy revolves around how to engage both professional and avocational archaeologists in a shared interest in recovering and preserving the past, and how, in turn, to convey this shared passion for archaeology and appreciation for the past to larger audiences.

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and offer short remarks on their own perspectives on role of citizen scientists in archaeology, especially as it pertains to metal detecting. Moderator Tom Barritt then posed two framing questions for the day's

discussion: 1) What are the ethical parameters for archaeological partnerships with avocationalists?; 2) How can the Channel develop programming with general appeal that reflects the interests of archaeological preservation and are consistent with ethical archaeological guidelines?

Methods and Best Practices

The first general topic of discussion revolved around the question: Under what conditions might responsible avocational metal detectorists (AMDs) be given a role in archaeological research?

There was overall agreement that AMD activities should be conducted within the parameters of professional supervision. Both professional and avocational archaeologists provided examples of collaborative efforts where AMDs have played a significant role in the recovery and documentation of archaeological artifacts, in the discovery of previously undetected sites, and in their study and protection within a broader framework of supervision and coordination with professional archaeologists and organizations. This kind of oversight is key in determining where metal detecting may be conducted, how it is to be conducted, and how the discoveries that AMDs make are best recorded, reported, and utilized with the goal of recovering information about the past.

There was some difference of opinion on the degree of supervision needed. Some advocated the need for a close oversight, with the participation of AMDs restricted to highly threatened sites. Many, however, maintained that AMDs who had received training in artifact recovery, documentation, and curation could operate more independently, as long as they to work within legal and ethical parameters. The role of experienced AMDs operating entirely independently of professional oversight, but within legal and ethical parameters, was also highlighted as a way of bringing important archaeological sites and discoveries to light.

There is, however, no single “go-to” archaeological oversight body that AMDs can turn to for guidance on where it is permissible to practice metal detecting, or for information on opportunities for collaboration with on-going projects managed by professional

archaeologists. Instead, it was agreed that AMDs need to be made aware of the broader range of state and federal level oversight bodies and professional organizations that can assist AMDs in this way. These include State Historical Preservation Officers, State Archaeologists, Tribal Historical Preservation Officers, the Society for American Archaeology, the Society for Historical Archaeology, the Register of Professional Archaeologists, the Archaeological Institute of America, and a variety of not-for-profit archaeological organizations working on private lands.

On the topic of the recovery of objects discovered using a metal detector, there was some consensus that it was advisable to restrict excavation only to that needed to extract the item and only to the plow zone where the stratigraphic integrity of the object is compromised. There was concern, however, that this protocol gives the false impression that the plow zone contains no information that would help place the object in its broader archaeological context and is, therefore, open to indiscriminant and undocumented digging. While the vertical location of the object is likely disturbed by plowing, the general position of the object in horizontal space may carry important information about the distribution of structures and activities across space. At a minimum, the object's latitude, longitude, and depth should all be recorded. All agreed that context is a critical component in placing objects within a narrative about the past and that all archaeologists (professional and avocational) have a responsibility to preserve and record as much information about the context of artifacts as possible.

Participants noted that most states have official site forms that can be downloaded from the websites of their offices of archaeological and historic preservation. While the long version of these forms are cumbersome, most states also have a short form that AMDs can use to properly record the location of significant objects that they encounter. The need for more transparency on these web sites for how to obtain, fill-out, and submit these forms was stressed.

Participants emphasized the importance of post-recovery analysis, reporting, and curation. This is a particularly important interface between avocational and professional archaeologists, critical in realizing the full value of the recovered objects in reconstructing history. The model of having objects recovered by AMDs donated to local museums or other repositories where the AMD is given recognition for the discovery of the object, and where the object is made available for exhibition and future study, was

cited as a positive alternative the recovered artifacts remaining in privately held collections.

While there is no single set of best practices guidelines for avocational metal detecting in the US, there are a number of different guidelines that cover many of these core principles. The UK's Portable Antiquities Scheme (<http://finds.org.uk/getinvolved/guides/codeofpractice>) serves as once such model, although the compensation portion of the UK model remains controversial. The volunteer organization BRAVO (Battlefield Restoration and Archaeological Volunteer Organization) has also developed a set of guidelines for AMDs that includes many of the principles discussed by the group. Follow-on meetings on this topic might focus on developing a set of best practices for AMD that could be used by individual AMDs and metal detecting clubs.

Collaborative Efforts

The question that framed the second major topic explored was: Are there models of AMDs and professional archaeologists working together in the documentation and preservation of cultural heritage?

Participants discussed the many impediments that stand in the way of more effective collaboration between AMDs and professional archaeologists for these ends. Avocational participants cited the widely held concern in their community that reporting their finds to professional archaeologists will result in confiscation of recovered objects and the exclusion of the AMD from any future archaeological activity at the sites they discover. Professional archaeologists, on the other hand, cited experiences with AMDs who, although they had completed certification courses, failed apply their training and their understanding of ethical considerations in their metal detecting activities. Other professionals expressed fears that AMDs won't report sites they have discovered until they have recovered all they can from them, while still others cited concerns for the impact of the use of volunteer labor on employment opportunities for professionals. The portrayal of professionals by avocationalists as elitists trying to keep access to the past to themselves was also mentioned. There was some recognition that these concerns may, in

many cases, be an outgrowth of miscommunication between these two communities, rather than actual, insurmountable impediments to fruitful collaboration.

At the same time, there was general, though not universal, recognition of the considerable skills that experienced AMDs have in the use of metal detectors both in recovering objects and locating undiscovered archaeological sites. Experienced metal detectorists with a genuine interest in cultural heritage, it was argued, offer skill sets that are invaluable to professional archaeologists. AMDs are often on the front line of discovering sites in imminent danger of development, as well as having site specific knowledge, and their inclusion within archaeological projects run by professionals brings important skill sets and capabilities to a project. Marshaling the energies, expertise, and knowledge base of the large number of AMDs in the US and other nations offers, in the opinion of several participants, tremendous potential for achieving shared goals of documenting and preserving cultural heritage. Incorporation of AMDs and other amateur archaeologists within archaeological projects overseen by professionals, it was noted, also serves to further public understanding of and appreciation for archaeology.

Participants shared examples of more informal collaborations between professional archaeologists and AMDs. Many of the AMDs participating in the conference had effectively worked on projects with professional participants. More formal relationships mentioned included the certification or steward programs found in many states (i.e. VA, SC, AZ, FL, AR) that offer training in archaeological practice in general, and the use of metal detectors as a tool for archaeological discovery in particular. Particular standouts mentioned were the Arkansas Archeological Survey and the Florida Public Archaeology Network. The US Forest Service's Passports in Time project was another example, as was the metal detecting training course offered by the archaeological program of James Madison's Montpelier in conjunction with MineLab, a major metal detector manufacturer, and the ongoing efforts of the volunteer organization BRAVO.

Valuing the Past

The third framing question put to the group was: What are the currencies for setting value of the past – monetary, information, excitement – and is there a way to reconcile these different currencies?

Professional archaeologists at the conference were unified the opinion that the sale of historical or archaeological artifacts recovered through metal detecting was a “red line” that future NG programming should never cross. Commerce in antiquities is an anathema to professional archaeologists. Even when monetary values are small, it was argued, the sale of artifacts serves as an inducement to looting. There was also general agreement that a professional archaeologist should never offer estimates of monetary value for artifacts. When monetary value has to be set for artifacts (i.e. for insurance, tax, or legal purposes), most rely on the estimates provided by professional appraisers or auctioneers.

The Portable Antiquities Scheme serves as an instructive example of the complexities of setting monetary value on historical and archaeological objects recovered by avocationalists. The voluntary reporting scheme established in Britain and Wales for recovered objects less than 300 years old, and the mandatory requirements for reporting for older objects, has resulted in the recording of over 800,000 recovered objects recovered by AMDs in an international database. However, the element of compensation of AMDs and landowners for recovered objects is widely seen as a major inducement for people to engage in metal detecting for financial gain, labeled by some as “professionally licensed looting”.

Avocationalist participants pointed out that there is a long established, legal, and legitimate market for objects often recovered by through metal detecting (i.e. coins, buttons) that cannot be ignored in any programming featuring the activities of AMDs. NG Channel representatives also stressed the point that monetary value is a broadly accepted short hand for other more intangible measures of value that is readily understood by viewers. Accepting that objects recovered during a program could never be shown to be sold, placing monetary value on objects, it was argued, introduces an element of competition that engages the viewers interest. Archaeologist participants (both professional and avocational) also noted that demonstrating the very low value of objects recovered through metal detecting in the US might serve as a reality check for the public and an effective counter to the inflated, fictitious, values placed on objects in the *Spike American Diggers* program.

The questioned was raised whether National Geographic should accept the monetary valuation of artifacts simply because it is a widely understood concept. Instead, some

participants suggested that National Geographic could take a leadership role in reshaping concepts about the value of the past instead of simply following existing protocol. There was general consensus that NG programming needed to advance an understanding of the value of recovered objects as windows into the past and that the value these objects hold for bringing the past alive is far greater than any meager monetary value they may have. The discard of the nail in the *Diggers* program in the State Prison in Montana was raised as an example of the dangers of using cash value as the currency establishing worth of recovered objects. Even though this object has little or no monetary value, the value it carries for insight into the history of the prison may have been greater than that of other objects retained and counted toward the competition between the two leads of the program.

Instead of competing for the cash value of objects recovered, many participants felt that establishing other kinds of competitive objectives based on historical value was a better way of conveying the connection between objects and the past to channel audiences. The currencies that seemed to have the most traction with participants were: the First, the Most, and the Best - with best a more intangible value given to the object that has the most significance in solving whatever objective originally brought the *Diggers* to the site featured on the program. This value might be set by an archaeologists working with the diggers or by the landowner who had invited the diggers to their property to help them recover an object or answer a question about their property. A competition based on finding what, at the end of the program, is determined to be the “Best” object would advance the story line, while also adding a competitive element to the program to hold the viewer’s interest.

AMD Best Practices and NG Channel Future Programming

The final topic of discussion centered on how the NG Channel could incorporate the guidance of AMD best practices, collaborative models between professional and avocational archaeologists, and concepts of valuing the past into a revamped *Diggers* program (or other programming) and associated on-line materials.

NG Channel representatives listed several take-away messages:

- Appropriate archaeological organizations in states and localities need to be contacted to assure that activities remain with legal and ethical guidelines.
- Programs should revolve around an interesting question framed by an archaeologist or landowner that the diggers could investigate.
- Questions asked should have definitive answers that can be arrived at within the short time framework of the program.
- Archaeologists and historians should be consulted in framing these questions and their answers.
- Questions and contexts for the show should vary from episode to episode, ranging from working on historical/archaeological sites to finding lost family heirlooms.
- Programs focusing on archaeological or historical sites should feature archaeologists inviting the diggers onto the site and consulting with them during the show.
- Ethical guidelines for responsible metal detecting within the program need to be embedded and referred to during the program.
- Any indication of the sale of objects must be eliminated as a part of the show and other ways of valuing recovered objects for the information they provide need to be emphasized.
- The importance of historical context needs to be emphasized as the source of the real value of objects.

In addition, National Geographic will develop a companion web-site that contains more in-depth information about ethical and legal guidelines, links to volunteer programs that involve AMDs, and other portals that advance the dual goals of building collaborative ties between professional and avocational archaeology and enhancing public awareness of archaeology.

Follow-on conversations between National Geographic and the various professional and avocational groups represented at the conference will expand on the topics explored in the May 4 conference.