Catch-and-Release Archaeology: A Path Towards Solving the Curation Crisis

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Morag Kersel (2015) describes archaeology as "the production of knowledge and an accumulation of things." The accumulation of artifacts has led to a curation crisis wherein resource management and funding is limited or entirely unavailable. Removing artifacts from archaeological sites also poses the challenge of removing them from cultural context. New methods of archaeology should be utilized to minimize the impacts on resources. In this paper, I want to talk about the use of catch-and-release practices at the Apex, Arizona Archaeology Project field school as a prime example of producing knowledge and providing public education about historical archaeology without accumulating artifacts and disturbing the cultural context that they were found.

The Antiquities Act of 1906 put in place protocol for managing archaeological collections, including policies about where artifacts would end up in the long run. In an effort to protect resources, the Antiquities Act called for artifacts to be curated and accessible to the public. From the 1920s to the 1960s, the United States, especially, saw an increase in government funded archaeological projects. Archaeologists were hard at work in the field, and collections were growing rapidly. But government funding did not cover the laboratory and curation work that needed to be done. By the 1970's, archaeologists began raising flags about the difficulties of curating collections. As archaeologists created collections, the problems of storage, funding, and curation were becoming increasingly more prevalent. Museums did not have the manpower or funding to effectively curate collections. This is still a current concern. Not only are new collections being created every day, there is still the issue of old collections that have not been properly curated. In 2009, Rebecca Dobkins wrote that "existing storage facilities in many states have reached maximum capacity, even though there is an ongoing—and increasing—need for new storage." The Heritage Historical Information Survey conducted in 2014 estimates that there are over 13 billion artifacts stored across 31,290 institutions. The curation crisis has been a looming concern for archaeologists for over 40 years now. There are more solutions becoming available everyday, especially within the digital age, but we are still far from seeing the end of this crisis.

In Kersel's review of the curation crisis, she notes that collections are often lost when the management of those collections becomes too expensive, too space consuming, or when professionals responsible for the collections retire or otherwise leave the profession. Kersel believes that archaeologists have an ethical responsibility to the public to curate and maintain collections. It is also important to consider the factors that have complicated the curation crisis such as the increased interest in fieldwork over curation work. Cultural resource management has increased and new laws have been passed to protect cultural resources, but protection doesn't stop at just collecting the artifacts. Kersel also recommends catch-and-release archaeology as a

potential solution to the curation crisis while also recognizing community concerns like how future researchers will know what has already been studied.

This summer, I was fortunate enough to participate in the Apex, Arizona Archaeology Project which is a collaborative program between Northern Arizona University and the Kaibab National Forest. I mostly want to discuss the methodology we utilized, but first I'll give you some insight into Apex. Apex is a 20th century historic logging town just south of Tusayan, Arizona near the Grand Canyon's south rim. The town was set up as a temporary landing spot for employees of the Saginaw and Manistee Lumber Company and was active from 1928 through 1936. Buildings were brought in on train cars and subsequently moved out on train cars when the company moved on. During this year's field school, we focused on five loci that encompassed the family housing and administrative housing areas of the site. Apex, Arizona is divided by a set of train tracks. On one side of the tracks, single laborers lived in a bunkhouse and likely shared a communal kitchen. On the other side of the tracks, families lived in their own relatively small houses with a small kitchen. Children attended the camp's school, which consisted of two train cars placed on a foundation at the top of the hill near the family housing. The lumber that was gathered by the workers throughout the Kaibab Forest was sent to the company's lumber mill in Williams, Arizona and turned into railroad ties, mining timbers, building materials, and shipping crates. Because this site is relatively recent, most of our work and artifact recovery was surface level. What was left behind in Apex, Arizona appears to consist mostly of trash and you can spot several large trash deposits and can dumps throughout the entire site. There are still some remaining structural pieces though they have degraded significantly over the last almost 100 years.

Catch-and-release archaeology is utilized at Apex for many of the same reasons it is utilized in other places. Northern Arizona University and the Kaibab National Forest face the same storage issues that burden the whole field of archaeology—there simply is no space to store things. The program also relies on grant money to provide tuition reimbursements for field school students, housing and accommodations during the field season, and materials and supplies necessary for public tours. This year we documented several building foundations (although very little remains), two possible privies (excavating one), and over 1,000 artifacts. Because we used catch-and-release archaeology, all the artifacts we documented are still in the field and will remain there. This means we were cataloguing each artifact, taking pictures and measurements, and leaving that artifact where we found it. We also created a tape-and-compass map of each locus to document the general boundaries and any important features. This method not only cuts back on the physical collection, but it also keeps the artifacts in a place that makes sense to their cultural context. For example, we found dozens of broken Clorox bottles near the family housing. While studying the bunkhouse side of the tracks, previous years students were finding evidence of Old Dutch Cleanser. Based on the locations of these two different cleansers, we can theorize that the families (who were predominantly Scandinavian) had access to different resources than the single laborers (who were predominantly American and Mexican), or that they

had different cleaning strategies. We can document that context in paperwork and photographs, but it is incredibly impactful to see those artifacts in their original environment. Additionally, we completed a 1 meter by 1 meter excavation of a possible privy. Artifacts discovered during the excavation were catalogued by the level in which they were discovered, photographs and measurements were taken, and then they were placed aside until the end of the excavation. At that point, all of the artifacts we gathered were placed in the bottom of our excavation site on top of a piece of burlap with a 2024 quarter and buried with the dirt removed during the excavation. The placement of the quarter alerts future archaeologists to this excavation and the piece of burlap signifies that our dig ended at that point. Again, we have minimized the physical collection and established a way to notify future researchers of a previous excavation at that site.

Reflecting back on our discussion of the Antiquities Act and the goal of public access, I'd also like to look at how public access and education works with catch-and-release archaeology. Thanks to funding from Arizona Humanities, we had the opportunity to offer publics tours to over 90 people during our 3-week field school. These tours consisted of guiding the attendees around the site, describing what life was like in Apex, Arizona, showing off some of our favorite and more interesting artifacts, and explaining some of our methodology in real time. Attendees had the chance to see archaeology students excavating a privy, taking tape-and-compass measurements, and cataloguing artifacts. They even got the chance to pick up artifacts and some of our catalogued artifacts can be accredited to tour attendees. It gave the students a chance at public education, and it gave members of the public a chance to see archaeology in action. Walking through a museum and seeing pictures of excavations is educational, but it doesn't compare to seeing the excavation in person.

Overall, there is progress being made all the time to alleviate the curation crisis but the reality is that there is still a ton of work that needs to be done to solve it. There are still collections that need to be curated, there are still collections that need to be repatriated, and there are new collections coming in every day. Catch-and-release archaeology provides an alternative to typical field work that does not produce a physical collection of artifacts and can still provide a more hands on public education experience.

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