

Looters hit Lewis and Clark National Historical Park

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FULL TEXT

April 18-- Apr. 18--The National Park Service is investigating the looting of an archaeological site at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park.

Investigators say artifacts were dug up and taken near the Netul River Trail on the south end of the park sometime near the end of March.

Superintendent Jon Burpee could not provide details about what might have been taken since the crime is still under investigation, but he said items at the site may be up to 100 years old.

"(The site) doesn't necessarily, at least from our knowledge, extend any further back than that," Burpee said. "A lot of items were ones that were essentially dumped there over time, but it's another layer of the overall history of the site and still very important to us."

"It has us on a more heightened stance for all of the archaeological sites we know about in the park," he added.

The looters disturbed around 1 1/2 dump-trucks worth of soil. They also impacted an area that is home to a rare salt marsh plant community that is so uncommon it is considered "imperiled" in Oregon, according to Carla Cole, the natural resource project manager at Lewis and Clark.

The National Park Service's investigative branch said evidence suggests metal detectors were used to locate artifacts and dig nine other holes.

"Archaeologists make a great effort to record the context from which artifacts are recovered to better understand their use and disposition and the wider historical picture," Rachel Stokeld, a cultural resource specialist at the park, said in a statement.

"All this important information is now lost because of this illegal excavation."

Though the park has seen evidence of digging in the past -- most recently about a year ago -- the looting off the Netul River Trail is the most serious crime to happen at the park since the theft of a bronze statue of Sacagawea and her baby, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, in 2008.

Four people were implicated in that crime. The statue, which cost around \$20,000, turned up at a scrap metal yard in central Oregon, hacked into pieces. The thieves had reduced it to about \$200 worth of scrap, Clatsop County Sheriff Tom Bergin said at the time.

The statue has since been replaced.

"Anytime you have something like this happen, it definitely hurts," Burpee said about the looting. "We're so passionate about what we do: preserving these amazing sites and also making them as open to experience as possible."

Unauthorized digging at an archaeological site is prohibited, as is the possession of metal detectors in national parks. The tools can only be in the parks if they are disassembled and stored in a vehicle.

Investigators ask that anyone who was hiking on the Netul River Trail around or before March 20, or anyone who has information that could help investigators identify the people responsible for the crime call or text the National Park Service's tip line at 888-653-0009.

CREDIT: By Katie Frankowicz

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