



THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BEARS EARS

R. E. Burrillo

R. E. Burrillo is an archaeologist at SWCA Environmental Consultants Inc.

I recently had the honor of giving a two-hour talk about the archaeology of the Bears Ears area to a capacity crowd at Cliff Castle Casino in northern Arizona. The talk was received with “rave reviews,” according to organizers from the Verde Valley Archaeological Center—and a repeat performance for the Montrose chapter of the Colorado Archaeological Society later that month evidently broke the attendance record for such talks at their venue. Clearly the archaeology of Bears Ears is a topic of great interest to many, and accompanying the invitations to present my talk in additional venues were a number of suggestions to put it into print. So that’s what this is.

As of this writing, Bears Ears National Monument encompasses just over 1.3 million acres in southeastern Utah (Figure 1). While its boundary will almost always be contested or controversial, it is also arbitrary. Decades of archaeological research in the region suggests that the extent of what has always been a continuous cultural occupation area originally included much more of the surrounding landscape than what’s currently shoehorned into the monument boundary. Thus, the “Bears Ears area” as defined in this piece is composed of almost every major landform in the Utah portion of the Four Corners.

A Brief History of Bears Ears Archaeology

The first person to “make a collection”—early archaeology had much in common with Indiana Jones films—in the Bears Ears area was Charles Lang in about 1880, leaving his inscription on canyon walls during these and later excursions (Blackburn and Williamson 1997). His materials were incorporated into the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and are now housed at the Field Museum in Chicago where they currently play a central role in Laurie Webster’s excellent Cedar Mesa Perishables Project (Curtis 2017).

Starting in 1890, the brothers McLoyd and Graham made use of trails cut by Mormon pioneers to launch explorations of the area. They plumbed Grand Gulch all the way to Shangri-La Canyon, excavated Perfect Kiva in Bullet (formerly Graham

Canyon, and made a number of additional excavations in upper Grand Gulch. Most of their materials were bought by Rev. C. H. Green in 1891 and subsequently made their way into the Field Museum, where they too have become a centerpiece of the Cedar Mesa Perishables Project.

Depending upon the source, the excavations of McLoyd and Graham are portrayed as either [a] scientific inquiries carried out in strict accordance with the highest standards of professional integrity for the time, or [b] wanton looting. Either way, they inspired the Peabody Museum to organize and sponsor a scientific expedition into the area in 1892, headed by Hopewell archaeologist Warren K. Moorehead (Knipmeyer 2006). The expedition was planned and directed by the magazine *The Illustrated American*, and resulted in a 14-article series titled “In Search of a Lost Race.” Although the trip itself was harrowing, and all original materials were destroyed when the magazine’s New York office burned down a few years later, the 14 short publications remain. They are now available online for free via the Hathi Trust Digital Library (e.g., Figure 2).

In the mid-1890s, Richard Wetherill and his brothers made a pair of extensive expeditions to map and excavate ruins in the Bears Ears area. While still considered controversial by some archaeologists, the Wetherills deserve an ovation for their attitudes toward Native Americans at the time. In 1888, an unnamed reader queried *The American Journal of Archaeology* on the fact that they never covered any actual American archaeology, and received this printed response:

The archaeology of America... is busied with the life and work of a race or races of men in an inchoate, rudimentary, and unformed condition, who never raised themselves, even at their highest point, as in Mexico and Peru, above a low stage of civilization, and never showed the capacity of steadily progressive development. Within the limits of the United States the native races attained to no high faculty of performance or expression in any field. They had no intellectual life. They have left no remains

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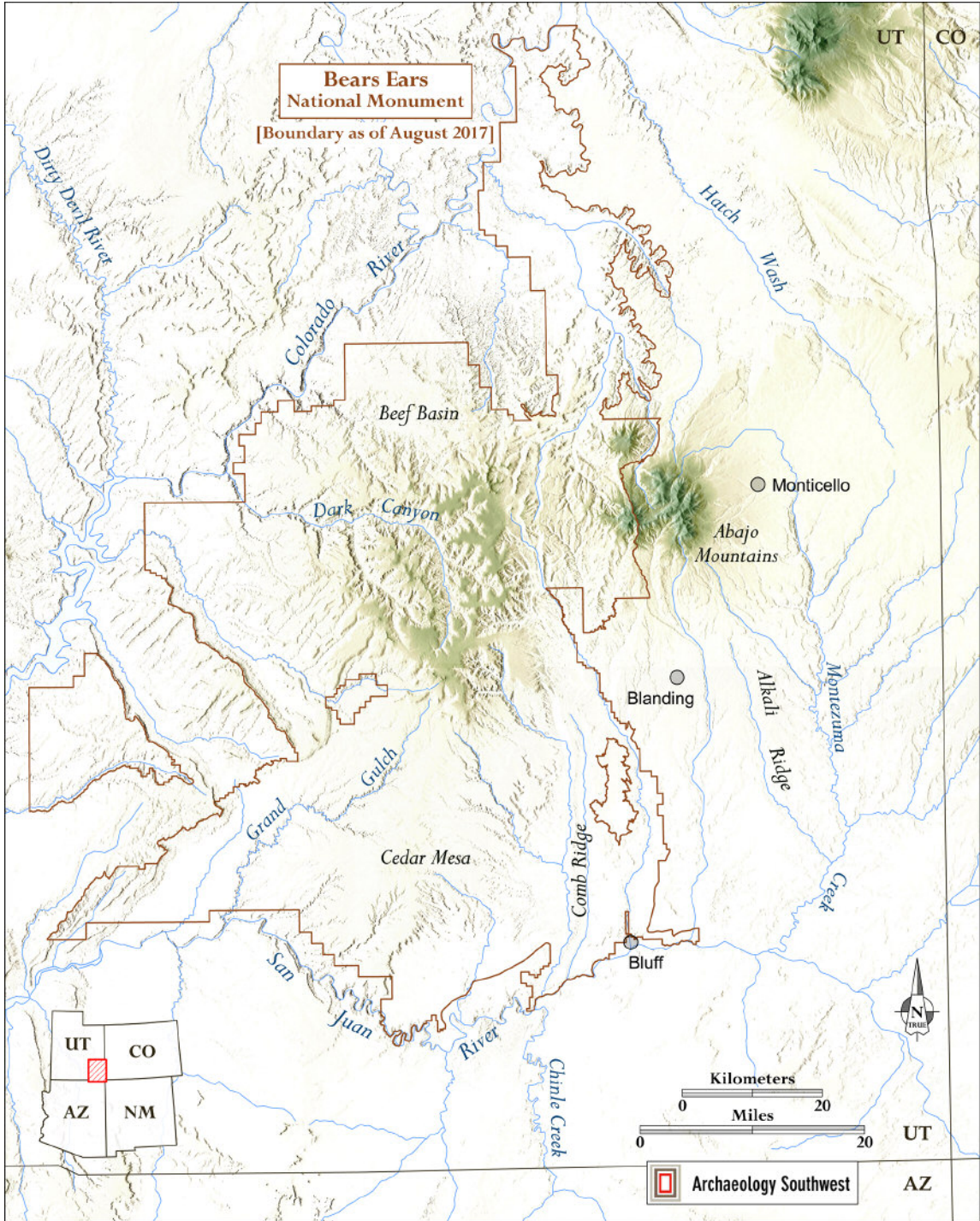


Figure 1: Map of the Bears Ears area showing major landforms and current monument boundary (courtesy of Catherine Gilman, Archaeology Southwest)



Figure 2: Monarch Cave Ruin, as drawn by a member of Warren K. Moorehead's expedition in 1892 (public domain, Hathi Trust Digital Library)

indicating a probability that, had they been left in undisturbed possession of the continent, they would have succeeded in advancing their condition out of the prehistoric state. The evidence afforded by their works of every kind—their architecture, their sculpture, their writing [*sic*], their minor arts, their traditions—seem all against the supposition that they had latent energy sufficient for progress to civilization. (Frothingham 1888:260–261)

So sayeth Arthur Frothingham, PhD, distinguished professor of history at Princeton University and cofounder of that journal. I'll return to the issue of racism and archaeology toward the end. Meanwhile, that very same year, prominent Native American figures like Wolfkiller and Mancos Jim could be found convivially hanging out at the Wetherills' ranch, while Richard's father B. K. Wetherill was busily writing letters to the superintendent of the Smithsonian Institution pleading for protection of Mesa Verde as a national park (Lister 2004).

In the early 1900s, Byron Cummings joined or led a number of expeditions in the Bears Ears area, and in 1910 sought to attract the attention of state and federal officials by deploring what was already an extensive problem with looting in southeast Utah

(Salt Lake Herald 1910). His students Neil Judd and A. V. Kidder would deplore the very same thing in their own publications shortly thereafter. These early observations would make southeast Utah a ubiquitous example in efforts to stymie pot-hunting for 100 years and counting, even while the problem itself has yet to go away.

Early expeditions in the area by Charles Bernheimer and Earl Morris also led to some colorful adventure-reading, as well as laid the foundation for the later Glen Canyon Project, to be discussed in a moment. Bernheimer in particular had a penchant for the periphrastic, feeding tales of his excursions to newspapers whose subsequent stories began with phrases like, "Some five or ten thousand years ago a community of Americans made their homes in caves carved out of the solid rock high above the floors of canyons in the Southwest" (New York Times 1929). They were off by about five or ten thousand years. Also in the 1920s, Nels C. Nelson of the American Museum of Natural History carried out a series of excursions throughout the area in order to gain a better understanding of the material collections entrusted to him at the museum; he recorded a total of 80 sites but only successfully relocated two of Wetherill's originals (Spangler et al. 2010:37).

From 1956 to 1963, the National Park Service (NPS), Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA), and the University of Utah (U of U) converged on the leviathan Glen Canyon Dam Salvage Project. When the project began, the only applicable federal laws were the 1906 Antiquities Act and the 1935 Historic Sites Act, although by 1960 the Reservoir Salvage Act partially supported the project as well (Lipe 2017). It consisted of an enormous survey conducted jointly by the U of U and MNA along the Colorado River and its tributaries ahead of the flooding of Lake Powell (Jennings 1966). Moreover, the NPS extended considerable flexibility to project personnel regarding where they should investigate. Taking advantage of this flexibility, crew chief Bill Lipe investigated much of the lower San Juan and nearby Cedar Mesa areas in the heart of Bears Ears country.

Thus began the Cedar Mesa Project (CMP). Utilizing grants from the National Geographic Society and National Science Foundation, Lipe—along with R. G. Matson and “a small army of students” (Spangler et al. 2010:41)—conducted intensive investigations on Cedar Mesa between 1972 and 1976. Their innovative research design included randomly located sample survey quadrats and systematic canyon surveys in 5 of 20 drainage units, supplemented by systematic inventories of Grand Gulch and McLoyd’s (formerly Ruin) Canyon, and augmented by judgmental selection of sites to be more extensively sampled and mapped (Lipe 2014).

Applications of CMP data are legion. No fewer than 10 master’s theses and 5 doctoral dissertations from several universities came out of the project, and more than 80 technical publications or reports have resulted from the 5-year project (nearly all of which can be viewed on Washington State University’s Research Exchange website: <https://research.libraries.wsu.edu/xmlui/>). Synthetic analyses and publications from the CMP dataset also continue (e.g., Matson et al. 2015), and the end of the project’s relevance and legacy remains too distant to see.

The Present State of Bears Ears Archaeology

Decades of research in the Bears Ears area has revealed a mosaic of human prehistory that includes populations articulating differently with different landforms depending upon time, ecology, and climate. Using the classic Pecos culture-period sequence as a platform for framing the archaeology of Bears Ears, settlement and subsistence patterns appear to interdigitate between subregions in a contiguous and continuous manner right up until the final depopulation of the area by about AD 1275.

The Paleoindian era (ca. 12,000 to 10,000 BP) represents adaptations to terminal Pleistocene environments, and was dominated by small groups of relatively mobile foragers who used

most sites only briefly or infrequently. Now-extinct Pleistocene “megafauna” were abundant on the Colorado Plateau at the time, and included saber-toothed “cats,” several species of horse, large-headed llama, gigantic short-faced bears, musk-ox, and of course woolly mammoths. While Paleoindian foragers have been traditionally cast as obligate big-game hunters, ethnoarchaeological evidence suggests that they relied on a wide array of resources (see Byers and Ugan 2005)—although hunting definitely played a central role.

Paleoindian archaeology is sparse in and around the Bears Ears area, but there are two notable exceptions. First, the so-called Bluff Mammoth is an alleged depiction of two Columbian mammoths located near the San Juan River just to the west of Bluff. The find has attracted no small amount of controversy, and has become a focal point of local culture because of that (Figure 3). Second, and more significantly, an extensive Paleoindian site was found on Lime Ridge to the west of Bluff. Its significance to local prehistory is multifaceted, chief among which is that its diversity of artifacts and lithic sources represented in a site with a relatively short use-life allows researchers to accurately characterize why people were there and what they were doing (Davis and Till 2014).

The Archaic era spans approximately 10,000 to 2,500 years BP, or between the end of the Paleoindian era and the appearance of agriculture, and is typically divided into Early, Middle, and Late subphases. The Early Archaic is usually characterized as a period of expanding dietary breadth, with increases of mean temperature and general aridity—and corresponding changes in vegetation and animal populations—compelling foragers to begin taking a broader view of “food.” The Middle Archaic is generally considered a time of mobility, as continued environmental changes reconfigured the spatial and temporal distribution of foodstuffs. And the Late Archaic roughly coincides with the global climate starting to approach modern conditions, compelling people throughout the Colorado Plateau to begin adopting mixed farmer-forager economies that eventually gave way to full-blown agriculture (see Matson 1991).

In the Bears Ears area, the Archaic period *in toto* is best represented in the Dark Canyon complex, where the site density of Archaic lithic scatters is unparalleled in the entire surrounding region. In terms of radiometric data, the best example comes from Old Man Cave, a dry shelter located northeast of Cedar Mesa where an open-twined sandal returned a radiocarbon date of about 7,400 BP. Examinations of the site revealed that it was heavily looted, but that both Basketmaker II (see below) and Archaic cultural materials were evident in the remaining deposits (Geib and Davidson 1994). The implications of this site to the broader archaeology of the Bears Ears area are vast, particularly with regard to the question of Puebloan origins.



Figure 3: Mammoth statue built and burned on the winter solstice in Bluff, Utah, in remembrance of the mammoth petroglyph controversy (photo by the author)

The Formative era in the Southwest is typically subdivided into Basketmaker II (1500 BC to AD 500), Basketmaker III (AD 500–750), Pueblo I (AD 750–900), Pueblo II (AD 900–1100), Pueblo III (AD 1100–1300), and Pueblo IV or Modern Pueblo thereafter. It is during these time periods when the aforementioned “mosaic” nature of human–environment interaction comes into clearest view in the culture history of Bears Ears.

The Basketmaker II (BMII) period (so-called by Kidder because he presumed an earlier Basketmaker period must surely have succeeded the Archaic) is marked by an increasingly sedentary settlement system, the advent of more substantial domestic dwellings, and an increasing reliance on maize and squash horticulture. Although hunting and gathering continued, there was a steady shift toward seasonal sedentism until year-round settle-

ment in loose clusters of small habitations replaced the nomadism of the Archaic period altogether. This is at least partly due to the fact that increased reliance on cultivated vegetables meant that people couldn't leave their crops unattended for too long.

Researchers recognize a number of regional Basketmaker II variants throughout the Colorado Plateau, with the Eastern (or “Durango”) and Western (or “White Dog”) traditions typifying the early Basketmaker world in the greater San Juan Basin (Lipe 1999). Studies of Eastern BMII have focused most intensely on sites in and around Durango—hence the nickname. Studies of Western BMII have largely been directed or influenced by research in the Bears Ears area, especially on and around Cedar Mesa (Matson 2014).

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The Basketmaker III (BMIII) period is generally distinguished from the preceding period by the introduction of three new cultural traits: bows, beans, and ceramics—all of which imply an even more settled and sedentary way of life. In general, comparison of the ratios of known Basketmaker II and III sites throughout the Southwest indicate that a large population increase occurred during the latter period, leading researchers to characterize it as a period of “homesteading.” In the Bears Ears area, BMIII archaeology is very well represented to the east of Cedar Mesa around Montezuma Creek and Comb Wash (Hurst and Robinson 2014), and a wealth of late-Basketmaker/early-Pueblo sites also occurs in the higher-elevation drainages around Elk Ridge to the north, all of which underscores the idea that this was a period of exploring and settling new territories. Additionally, Comb Ridge’s iconic Procession Panel (Figure 4) has been interpreted as BMIII rock art depicting congregation of a large population in a central place, signaling experiments with larger and more complex community organization preceding the transition to Pueblo I (Throgmorton 2017).

The Pueblo I period was one of tremendous variability and tumultuousness throughout the Four Corners. It included many architectural and community-level changes from the preceding period, most notably the beginnings of full-scale villages. In the Bears Ears area, all of Cedar Mesa and most of the lower-

elevation landforms in general saw drawdowns of occupation that in some places precipitated full-on abandonment. Meanwhile, the high-uplands area of Elk Ridge and the upper portions of nearby drainages experienced a concomitant boom during the Pueblo I period that complements the depopulation noted in the surrounding areas. Originally thought to represent temporary or seasonal *refugia* for low-landers, recent ecologically derived investigations by the author indicate that while a severe drought probably did propel local people uphill during the Pueblo I, they stayed there for many generations, building some of the area’s earliest village communities in the process (Burrillo 2017).

Lower-elevation Pueblo I settlements also occur on Alkali Ridge and the Dolores areas to the east, as well as Bluff and Comb Wash, suggesting a “go high, go low” strategy where some people moved into lower drainages looking for water while the rest account for the higher-uplands boom mentioned above (William D. Lipe 2017, personal communication). Interestingly, there is also a marked correlation with subsequent major population centers and twin-rock formations in the Bears Ears area (e.g., Figure 5), possibly suggesting some form of cultural remembrance for the time everyone gravitated to the Bears Ears themselves when the weather turned frightful (Burrillo 2017:131–132).



Figure 4: The Procession Panel, a petroglyph site evidently depicting the mobile nature of the Basketmaker III period in the Bears Ears area (photo by the author)



Figure 5: The Red Knobs site, one of several major population centers in the Bears Ears area built near twin-rock formations (photo by the author)

The Pueblo II period in the Four Corners is one of major demographic shifts. Around AD 890, a climatic change to cooler, drier conditions seems to have caused a shift in settlement patterns, and by the beginning of Pueblo II many people had moved out of the San Juan Drainage as a whole. During the AD 1000s, the climate shifted again to prevalently hospitable conditions, with predictable growing seasons and reliable precipitation. Owing at least partly to this, the Pueblo II period saw the emergence of the “great house” system of community organization, best known and expressed in the Chaco Canyon area of northern New Mexico. The climatic plenitude of the mid-Pueblo II period accompanied a significant population surge in the Bears Ears area suggestive of immigration, “in this case possibly including the return of families who had moved south to Chaco and other regions during the [AD] 900s” (Hurst and Robinson 2014:34). This is supported by two lines of evidence. First, reoccupation of earlier Basketmaker sites by people associated with the Pueblo II period are common, especially on Cedar Mesa, suggesting reoccupation of the area by people who already knew it. Second, Chacoan influence is recognized throughout the Bears Ears area dating to or after the mid-Pueblo II period (e.g., Till 2017).

The bountiful rains of the early Pueblo II period meant that populations had expanded to or even past average-year carrying capacity for local environments, putting them in a precarious

position should the weather turn nasty again. Thus, when a massive drought occurred in the mid-1100s (Benson and Berry 2009), the Chaco system fell apart and people came flooding back into the Bears Ears area, causing a great deal more reoccupation.

The Pueblo III period would be the final period of occupation for the Bears Ears area prior to abandonment by the AD 1270s. The locations and sizes of major settlements changed dramatically: whereas in the mid-to-late-Pueblo II period most families were living on mesa tops near the best soils for farming, by the mid-Pueblo III period they had relocated their settlements closer to reliable water sources and into canyons or cliff walls. The iconic “cliff dwellings” of Cedar Mesa and Mesa Verde alike both date to this period. Settlements often aggregated around springs, in a defensive gesture correlated with internecine tensions and warfare that popped up throughout the San Juan Drainage (Matson et al. 2015).

It’s also during the Pueblo III period that Bears Ears populations dispersed and settled the widest array of landforms, including Dark Canyon, Fable Valley, and Beef Basin—the latter of which includes such arresting examples of free-standing architecture that a portion of it is actually named Ruin Park (Figure 6). Towers also became common throughout the area, especially at the heads of canyons, and are thought by some



Figure 6: One of the most iconic structures located in the appropriately named Ruin Park (photo by the author)

researchers to be socially symbolic rather than utilitarian in nature (Van Dyke and King 2010).

For still-uncertain reasons—although undoubtedly including climate change and environmental stress—Ancestral Pueblo populations withdrew completely from the San Juan Basin by the end of the AD 1200s. This appears to have occurred on Cedar Mesa earlier than the rest of the San Juan Basin by at least a few decades, where local depopulation began to occur well before the mega-drought of the AD 1270s, casting doubt on the long-held assumption that drought alone was the prime mover in the terminal Pueblo III depopulation of the region. Meanwhile, the presence of Hopi ceramics and historic Pueblo shrines throughout the Bears Ears area indicates continued pilgrimage to the area by Pueblo peoples more or less continuously right up to the present day.

Post-1300s Native American archaeology is unfortunately still in its larval stage among Bears Ears researchers, with Winston Hurst and Jay Willian (2011) in the vanguard. The earliest tree ring-dated Navajo site in the Bears Ears area is a hogan in White Canyon that dates to the early 1600s (Spangler et al. 2010:149).

Current chronometric evidence suggests that the Ute and Paiute also first appeared in the Bears Ears area sometime around 1600 (McPherson 2009:58); however, oral histories and ethnographic accounts suggest that Pueblo, Ute/Paiute, and Navajo peoples have all used the area for much longer than the archaeological record suggests.

At present, there are about 9,000 recorded archaeological sites within the monument boundary, with about 5–7% of the area having undergone intensive systematic cultural resource inventory. Given that more than 75% of modern archaeology is conducted as a component of compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) (Lekson 2009; see below), this sampling universe is inherently biased toward areas where roads, buildings, stock tanks and fences, and other improvements are most lucrative. A limited Class II sample inventory conducted by SWCA in 2016 is the first purely research-oriented survey of the landscape as a whole since the Cedar Mesa Project of the 1970s, although—thanks to the monument designation—funding now exists among fundraisers in the private sector for much more expansive investigations. Meanwhile, based solely on the per-acre results of the CMP and

SWCA samples, a conservative projection by Lipe (2017, personal communication) estimates a total archaeological assemblage of between 158,000 and 185,000 sites. Which is to say: we have still but scratched the surface.

During the weekend of July 22–23, 2017, a group of about 40 archaeologists and conservationists gathered together in Bluff, Utah, to share their knowledge about archaeology in Bears Ears National Monument. The monument itself and its controversial status was not the focus topic, given that both pro- and anti-monument experts were invited. Instead, the weekend was an extended workshop devoted to amassing cumulative knowledge about the area's archaeology; what the current and future research and conservation priorities are; and how best to create a successful, integrated research community that includes the tribes, agencies, other archaeologists, and the public. The results of the meeting are formally presented in a beautiful 51-page report (Doelle 2017) accessible to the public on Archaeology Southwest's website: https://www.archaeologysouthwest.org/pdf/Bears_Ears_Report.pdf. The meeting and consequent report emphasize the holistic nature of Bears Ears history and prehistory, where the landscape represents a rich tapestry of interrelated places and stories.

The Future of Archaeology at Bears Ears

In a characteristically piquant observation, author Vine Deloria Jr. (1969:78–82) once compared anthropologists to a plague of locusts that descended upon indigenous communities each summer, living off grant money and gathering information for articles and books that were at best unintelligible and useless—if not outright insulting—to the indigenous community members from whom they'd gleaned their data in the first place. While exaggerative in nature, the charge is essentially valid. Anthropology's checkered history includes having begun as an instrument of imperialism designed to help understand native peoples in order to better subjugate them, and the scars of this early phase are still evident.

The biggest change to this behavioral culture phase occurred in the 1960s with the passage of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and NHPA (especially Section 106), both of which prescribe consultation with tribes as a component of any archaeological undertaking that occurs on public land. This didn't have an especially tumultuous impact in every region, but in the Southwest—where, in places like southeastern Utah, people identifying as Native American comprise up to 60% of the total population—it was enormous. Even bigger was the impact of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), which, as Steve Lekson put it in his wonderful *History of the Archaeological Southwest*, “effectively shifted control of the past from archaeologists to Native peoples” (Lekson 2009:180).

A combined effect of these laws meant that archaeologists needed to steer their research in directions that were as inoffensive as possible with regard to the tribes, who've never been very keen on the type of social science that, as Navajo Senator Eric Descheenie put it in a 2015 public lecture, “dehumanizes its subjects.” Which makes quantitative archaeology a non-starter, in many people's eyes. And again: the biggest impacts of this were felt in the Southwest, while the processual revolution continued more or less unabated in places like the nearby Great Basin. This regional disparity culminated in a conceptual no-man's-land between Southwest and Great Basin researchers, called by Winston Hurst (2014, personal communication) the “Jennings Curtain” after Glen Canyon Project director Jesse D. Jennings.

Nonetheless, common causes often unite even better than common enemies. My own graduate program was distinctly steeped in quantitative behavioral reconstructionism, yet my colleagues and I enjoy full and friendly support from both the Bears Ears Intertribal Coalition and the local archaeological community. Nor is this atypical for the place. In a particularly moving public lecture titled “What ‘Sacred’ Means,” Hopi archaeologist and author Lyle Balenquah told a crowd of over 300 attendees at Celebrate Cedar Mesa last March that Bears Ears archaeologists are to be uniquely lauded for their unfettered cultural inclusiveness vis-à-vis the local tribal communities. Balenquah noted the following as shining local examples: Dr. Laurie Webster, Ben Belorado, and me. I've never been so flattered.

And that's the real legacy of Bears Ears archaeology. The history of our science and its relationship with Native Americans is a tricky one, largely characterized as a steady evolution from imperialism through racism to inclusion. This last step is reflected increasingly well in the private sector on projects like the Animas-La Plata, where upwards of 60% of archaeological field work was carried out by locally hired members of Native tribes (Lipe 2017); however, with regard to convergent conservation, preservation, and research goals, there is no place that compares with Bears Ears.

Conclusion

I can think of no other place with so storied a history, so storied a prehistory, or so storied a history of the study of its prehistory. From the first forays into the area by Paleoindian foragers, to the land management battle that makes headlines to this day, the human story at Bears Ears is one fraught with splendors and drama. The latest developments in Bears Ears archaeology foretell a future where history will once again be made in terms of dissolving the ever-shrinking lacuna between Western scientific archaeologists and local indigenous communities. The current state of conservationism and resource preservation at Bears

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Ears is up in the air, and is frankly a topic best reserved for its own dedicated article. But regardless of its ultimate land management status, the trends emergent from—and contingent upon—anthropological research and researchers in the Bears Ears area are ones unlikely to change course anytime soon.

The author is indebted to Drs. William D. Lipe and R. Kelly Beck for their invaluable review and edits.

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