

The Collection and Sale of B.C. Artifacts:

Position of The Archaeological Society of British Columbia (ASBC)

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The Archaeological Society of British Columbia (ASBC) was pleased to receive Jim Stafford's invitation to participate in the session on the Collection and Sale of B.C. Artifacts. The absence of consensus among archaeology aficionados has become more obvious with the appearance of artifacts for sale on the world-wide-web. And, the ASBC, a society of avocational archaeologists founded in 1966, includes as many contradicting perspectives as any other segment of British Columbia. However, Executives of both the Vancouver and Nanaimo ASBC agree with, and uphold, the ethical code of professional archaeologists. We do not measure the value of artifacts in dollars but, rather, in the cultural links they provide between people today and those who lived in the past.

We are often asked to identify artifacts that have been found or inherited and have noted an increase in requests for monetary evaluation. Some say it is for insurance purposes; others hope they are holding a windfall and plan to sell. We have succeeded in changing the intentions of some, although many think we are "nice enough people – but not very bright about money."

The ASBC opposes any collecting of artifacts, except under permits from the province and First Nations. We would like to see the law changed so there are no grey areas that can be exploited by collectors or sellers. In the meantime, we are willing, even anxious, to be actively involved in developing and providing the means to stop illegal collecting at known sites. We suggest something similar to the Warden Program originally approved by the BC Heritage Conservation Branch in 1975 to safeguard prehistoric sites in B.C. Through that program, the Branch trained Volunteer Regional Advisors, at the time appointed from ASBC members, to monitor communities and protect sites in liaison with the Archaeology Branch. The program lasted for twelve years until eliminated by provincial budget cuts in 1987.

One solution to the present problem would be to appoint volunteer site wardens or stewards. They would monitor archaeological sites, especially those targeted by collectors, and collect eroding artifacts under the direction of archaeologists holding appropriate permits. I was encouraged that Al Mackie, of the Branch, could think of no legal obstacle to obtaining monitoring permits. As the ASBC's members are concentrated in Vancouver and Nanaimo, it would be essential to involve non-ASBC members in other communities in B.C. So, I was also encouraged by the many First Nations' voices advocating First Nations leadership of such an initiative.

After the session, Mary Sandy of the Nicola Tribal Association suggested I carry the idea forward and seek collaboration with the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. So far, the Vancouver and Nanaimo ASBC Executives, at their November meetings, have unanimously approved going forward. With their enthusiastic support, I can now contact the Union of BC Indian Chiefs and offer the ASBC's full support. Hopefully, in collaboration with the Branch, the means to counter illegal collecting and to protect archaeological sites will be developed. I would appreciate hearing from anyone interested in becoming part of this initiative.