



Archaeology News

The weird alchemy of archaeology

The Northwest Anthropology conference yields some interesting stories about what our waste can teach us

Knute Berger

The alchemists said that you could turn shit into gold, and thus archaeology was born.

Our knowledge of the past is continually being advanced by the people who probe into what we threw away or time forgot.

That's one of my take-aways from the first day of the 63rd Annual Northwest Anthropology Conference held at Central Washington University in Ellensburg last week. Each day, conference threads cover topics ranging from talking chimpanzees (a CWU specialty) to the anthropology of the Goth subculture, from the stone knapping skills of prehistoric Northwest hunters to the dining habits of the Union soldiers who manned Oregon's Fort Yamhill.

With multiple threads of 20-minute scholarly presentations, you'd need six clones to take it all in, and more stomachs than a cow to digest it. The first day alone I listened to at least 18 presentations.

I'm sitting here afterwards with the easier task of digesting a fine dinner of fresh seafood from, of all things, Ellensburg's excellent Valley Cafe. But as I ponder, I realize that eating fresh scallops and salmon in Kittitas Valley beef country isn't as odd as it seems. Archaeological evidence tells us that since ancient times seashells were part of the native trade currency throughout the region, and, as I also learned today, fish and shellfish were part of the regular diet of Chinese laborers in Jacksonville, Oregon, during the 19th century. At least, so their antique garbage tells us. Bottom line: Good seafood has been finding its way around Cascadia for a long time, and long before the interstate

highway system.

There is much to be learned from disposable societies, which all are, in time. And also from the waste of Mother Nature. I began the morning with a lecture about the nature and source of the various gravels beneath the Columbia River, which together seem to tell a rather incredible story of that body of water, sometimes traveling hundreds of feet higher as alluvial soils build up, sometimes cutting canyons hundreds of feet deep, other times being scoured by massive catastrophic events like the Missoula floods, which pummeled the river bed with "gravel" the size of VW Beetles. If Woody Guthrie had had access to this data, his classic song might have been "Shake, rattle and roll on, Columbia." In any event, the history of a river is apparently written on its bottom.

James Chatters, an archaeologist who played a prominent role in the Kennewick Man controversy, told the story of an archaeological site near Bothell that turned out to be a complete bust. Various "artifacts" discovered there turned out to be nothing more than rocks, except for one ancient arrowhead later dug up. Chatters told how he tried to get something useful out of such an inconsequential find, especially since it was costing taxpayers some \$40,000. By checking records of where other lone arrowheads of a similar type had been found, he was able to paint a picture about the landscape and hunting habits of the natives who lived in the area thousands of years ago. This was his attempt to make gold from government waste.

Speaking of waste, Washington State Parks & Recreation archaeologist Daniel Meatte talked about the efforts to precisely

locate Lewis & Clark's westernmost camp on their expedition to the Pacific, which is somewhere close to Highway 101 on the road to Ilwaco. Sorting out the archaeological evidence for what is called Station Camp is tricky, one reason being that the Corps of Discovery's camp might have been occupied by Chinook Indians after Lewis & Clark vacated the premises, meaning expedition artifacts and trade goods might be mixed with and even underneath native ones.

And, they were only in camp for about 10 days. How much evidence can you leave in such a short time? Plenty, apparently. Meatte told me that one of Lewis & Clark's other campsites was identified by excavating hollows that turned out to be the Corps' latrines. To nail that the 200-year-old poop belonged to the expedition's heroes, an archaeologist tested the ground for mercury, which members were taking as treatment for venereal disease. Sure enough, the old latrines were loaded with it.

And speaking of 19th century bowel movements, at yet another presentation, this by archaeologist Linda Jerofke, we

Department of Corrections

In the last issue, we printed that "the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia reopened with a celebration, marking the completion of a \$55.5 Renewal Project." It should have read, a a "\$55.5 million" for the renewal.

were treated to the relics recovered from a garbage dump in Baker City, Ore., a onetime boomtown and den of corruption (crooked sheriffs, lots of gold). In this particular site, the data uncovered was mostly in the form of perfectly preserved glass bottles from the years 1860 to 1930 (people were apparently very attached to this dump). From this we learn that the well-to-do citizens of Baker city liked beer (according to Pabst, "the most nutritious food known to science"), patent medicines, and alcohol-laced "cough syrup." At least one fellow bought hair dye that was later shown to make one's hair fall out, which perhaps this sadder-but-wiser customer learned the hard way. The bottle recovered from the dump was corked and still had dye in it.

When not dyeing their hair, the Baker citizens were prosperous enough to buy Pluto water and have it shipped from Indiana. The purpose of this bottled water, and indeed of many of the elixirs consumed, wasn't conspicuous consumption but rather an attempt to cure constipation, the endemic frontier malady that could have lost the meat-and-potatoes West.

For alchemists, or archaeologists, to turn shit into gold, they must first dig up shit, or at least the bottles of laxative that induce it.

Knute "Skip" Berger is author of *Pugetopolis: A Mossback Takes on Growth Addicts, Weather Wimps and the Myth of Seattle Nice* (Sasquatch Books, 2009). He writes the "Mossback" column for *Crosscut.com*, a Pacific Northwest online daily (where this column originally ran; reprinted with permission). He also pens a monthly back page column for *Seattle Magazine*, where he is Editor-at-Large. He is a regular news commentator on Seattle's public radio station, KUOW-FM. Between 1990 and 2006 Berger did three stints as editor of *Seattle Weekly*. In 2008, he won the Washington State Historic Preservation Officer's Annual Media Award for his coverage of historic preservation issues. He lives in Seattle.

Marine and Maritime Archaeologies;

Putting the Coast back in Coastal

Richard M. Hutchings and Megan Caldwell

Researchers are increasingly turning to new marine and maritime archaeologies to enhance their understanding of human-environment interaction. Evidence for this on the Pacific Northwest Coast is the inclusion of such approaches at this year's regional archaeological conferences. For some, the end of April marked the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Canadian Archaeological Association. The 2010 meeting, held in Calgary, included the session *Marine and Maritime Archaeologies: Putting the Coast back in Coastal*, co-organized by Caldwell and Hutchings. The session was organized around the idea that the practices of marine and maritime archaeology remain fractured and marginalized. As a consequence, these sub-disciplines exist at the boundaries of the mainstream, even in regions where coastal cultures are the primary research focus. Thus, for many areas the coastal archaeological record is represented almost exclusively by terrestrial or dry sites, to the exclusion of intertidal, subtidal, and other aquatic landscapes.

For the session, we invited papers that were working towards bridging the disconnects that exist between 'terrestrial', 'coastal', 'maritime', and 'marine' archaeologies, especially through new research and the use of multidisciplinary and novel approaches. The turnout exceeded expectations, with 21 authors contributing 12 papers, with most representing the Northwest Coast. In addition, George Nicholas and Rudy Reimer, both of Simon Fraser University, acted as formal discussants, providing valuable insight into the matters at hand. Included here are the session paper titles and contributors. Specific details about the conference and the marine and maritime session, including session and paper abstracts, are available online at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/CAA2010/>. This year's Northwest Anthropology Conference also included a session on *Maritime and Near-Shore Archaeology of the Pacific Northwest*.

Session Paper Titles and Contributors

1. Reimagining Pacific Northwest Coast Archaeology, by Rich Hutchings
2. Archaeological Remains of Precontact Watercraft on the Northwest Coast, by Kathryn Bernick
3. Reef-net Site Recording with Side Scan Sonar, by Charles Moore and Andrew Mason
4. Exploration *con leche* (or Goats on Boats), by Nova Pierson
5. Settler Interaction with Island Environments and Patterns of Marine Resource use in South Pacific Archaeology, by Nadia Densmore
6. L'anse Aux Meadows (EjAv-01): An Archaeological and Ethnohistoric Investigation of Hunter-Gatherer Bird Use in Newfoundland and Labrador, by Todd Kristensen
7. Resource Control and the Emergence of Political Structures in Small-scale Societies: Contrasting Developments on the Korean Peninsula and the Northwest Coast of North America, by Colin Grier and Jangsuk Kim
8. The Relationship of Rockfish and Salmon in Nuu-chah-nulth Subsistence, 1200 B.P. – Present, by Greg Monks
9. Putting Shell Middens in their Place, by David Bilton
10. Working the Tides: Linking Intertidal Features and Terrestrial Sites on BC's Southern Coast, by Megan Caldwell, Dana Lepofsky, Georgia Combes, John R. Harper, John R. Welch and Michelle Washington
11. Terrestrial, Aquatic and Intertidal Archaeological Resources in Gwaii Haanas: Towards a More Complete Picture of Late Holocene Human Resource and Landscape Use, by Trevor J. Orchard, Nicole Smith, Iain McKechnie and Daryl Fedje
12. Thoughtful Scavenging: Archaeological and Anthropological Notions of Scavenging on the Northwest Coast of North America, by Robert Losey
13. Discussants, George Nicholas and Rudy Reimer

Rich Hutchings is a PhD student in interdisciplinary studies at The University of British Columbia. His research focuses on marine and maritime archaeologies and coastal land use. Megan Caldwell, a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Alberta, is currently studying the ties between Northwest Coast intertidal fish traps, clam gardens, and shell middens.
