

## ARCHAEOLOGY

## Roundup of Utah Collectors Stirs a Debate on Enforcement

**BLANDING, UTAH**—Last month, after 16 residents from this town in southern Utah were arrested and accused of stealing prehistoric Indian artifacts from public and tribal lands, nobody was more surprised than Teri Paul, director of the state's Edge of the Cedars State Park Museum, which features archaeological exhibits on the area's Native American cultures. "I guess I just got it into my head that locals weren't doing this anymore."

The town was the center of a similar raid back in the mid-1980s. Old traditions die hard, though. Blanding, like numerous other communities in the Four Corners region, has a long-standing tradition of digging up Native American ruins for recreation and profit. The habit took hold during American archaeology's embryonic period between the 1800s and 1920s—ironically, a time when the Smithsonian Institution and others sponsored expeditions to the Southwest and paid locals to find artifacts. Federal laws now make it a crime to take such trophies from public lands and Indian reservations, but the practice of "pothunting" continues, fueled by a lucrative black market in antiquities.

This latest crackdown is the culmination of a 2.5-year-old undercover investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of the Interior that netted 24 alleged looters in the archaeology-rich region. It is renowned for Chaco Canyon's Great Houses and Mesa Verde's cliff dwellings, both grand vestiges of the Anasazi, a farming civilization that flourished from 500 C.E. to 1300 C.E. The dragnet on 10 June, *Science* has learned, extended to art dealers and collectors in a dozen cities from Tucson, Arizona, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Agents searched homes and businesses and seized personal files and computers. Two members of a family in Blanding accused of looting last week pleaded to charges and surrendered a collection of artifacts.

The case has aroused strong passions among Southwestern archaeologists, prompting many to take sides on how best

to cure pothunters of their destructive urge. Some strongly support the federal action; others take a jaundiced view of the heavy-handed police tactics and argue that such an approach will not deter determined looters, especially those who come from communities where a subculture of pothunting stubbornly persists.

Government archaeologists involved in the investigation paint an emerging picture that is as lurid as it is far-reaching. "We're talking widespread, systemic destruction of archaeological sites," says Emily Palus, a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) archaeologist based in Washington, D.C. Many of the items were dug out from Indian burials, such as a turkey-feather blanket, a copper bracelet, and a pair of ancient sandals associated with the Anasazi.

Scientists say looting of these sites is akin to tearing pages out of a history book. "If you rip out enough pages, pretty soon the book doesn't make sense," says Jerry Spangler, executive director of the Colorado Plateau



**After the bust.** Interior Secretary Ken Salazar (left) announces the arrest of Utah residents for taking artifacts from federal and Native American lands.

Archaeological Alliance, a Utah-based antiquity preservation group.

Enforcement of antitheft laws has been lax in the past, according to many Southwestern archaeologists. But Spangler believes the recent sweeps finally demonstrate "that federal authorities do consider pothunting as a serious crime." The message of the raids is unmistakable, particularly in the way they were carried out, with FBI



SWAT teams descending on homes with guns drawn and placing arrested suspects in handcuffs and leg irons, says Richard Wilshusen, an archaeologist who teaches at Colorado College in Colorado Springs: "It's the OK Corral. It's the Clanton Gang finally being taken on."

Among the Blanding citizens swept up in the 10 June raid was James Redd, the town's prominent physician, who killed himself the next day. (Another suspect from Durango also took his own life a week later.) Redd's death has since triggered an angry backlash against the federal raids, with both of Utah's Republican senators calling the investigation "overkill" and demanding that Congress initiate a probe into FBI's antipothunting operation. The backlash may feed a growing debate among experts over the use of punishment—rather than education—as a means of changing public attitudes.

### Canyons of riches

The biggest challenge, many archaeologists say, is conveying the importance of archaeological protection for scientific purposes. That's difficult enough when Indiana Jones and a treasure-hunting aura popularly define the field. The challenge is made even harder in a place like Four Corners, which is believed to contain the highest density of archaeological sites in the

country, if not the world. For example, after news spread of the raids in Blanding, one resident (whose in-laws were among those arrested) told *The Salt Lake Tribune*: "It's just something everyone does in Blanding. There are artifacts everywhere."

Overall, a history dating back at least 10,000 years can still be widely found across the landscape, from rock-art panels and arrowheads to collapsed pueblos (above-

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**No context.** The polychrome bowl (*right*) is classed as having an unknown origin, as many recovered artifacts will be.

ground dwellings) and rock shelters. In San Juan County alone, where Blanding is located, more than 25,000 archaeological sites have been inventoried. The Edge of the Cedars museum was built directly adjacent to the stone walls and kivas of a 1000-year-old Anasazi village. Paul, noting that 92% of the county is federal land, much of it rugged wilderness, says, “In any given canyon, you’ll find site after site.”

But even many of these sites are being “vacuumed” of surface artifacts, such as potsherds and arrowheads, says Paul. That eliminates vital clues to possible dwellings and other larger sites nearby, which are often buried underground. Experienced pothunters, using shovels or, worse, a backhoe, take the damage to another, incalculable level. “Digging and removing artifacts destroys their context, and it limits the information that can be obtained from a site about previous cultures,” says Laird Naylor, a BLM archaeologist in the Monticello Field office, whose jurisdiction covers San Juan County, Utah.

Spangler points out that preservation is also important because methods and science are always improving. “You want to be able to save these sites for the archaeologists that come after us 20 and 50 years from now, because they’re going to be so much more advanced than us.”

Archaeologists admit that the reasons for site protection are poorly conveyed to the general public. That’s why Jonathan Till, a contract archaeologist with Abajo Archaeology in Bluff, Utah, argues that getting pothunters to change their ways will happen through education, not prosecution. He says BLM is failing miserably because it lacks resources and labor power. Till notes that BLM oversees 800,000 hectares of public land in San Juan County and has only two archaeologists and one ranger. “That’s just absurd,” he says. “Those people are stretched way too thin to be able to do their jobs effectively and to be able to act as educators. They just cannot do that.”

Brian Quigley, acting manager for BLM’s Monticello field office, agrees that it would be nice to have more boots on the ground: “We do the best we can with the resources we have,” he says. The situation is similar in BLM offices across the state of Utah. For example, just north, in the Price field office, an area also chock-full of archaeological sites, including the world-famous Nine-Mile

Canyon under BLM’s watch, Blaine Miller is the sole archaeologist. “I’ve been the only one here for the past 25 years,” he says.

Given this shortage of labor power, archaeologists are divided over the best way to stamp out pothunting. Winston Hurst, a respected independent archaeologist who consults on academic and industry projects and lives in Blanding, criticizes the federal



**Looted sites.** Culminating a 2.5-year investigation, a coordinated sweep seized objects at many locations around Blanding, Utah.

raids as “bizarre theater” in which “the symbolism of the way it was carried out ends up trumping the substance of why they’re doing it in the first place.” Hurst says the only way to conquer archaeological looting is through “intelligent discourse, and by treating people with respect.” But if “you’re going to punch people in the nose, there’s absolutely no open-mindedness, nothing but a fight, and once it’s a fight, they’re going to retrench in opposition to you.”

Other Southwestern archaeologists are also inclined to take a softer approach. “No archaeologist likes looting, but it seems like so much overkill to do this to normal people,” says Catherine Cameron, a professor of archaeology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. “They surrounded houses early in the morning, like it was a drug bust. These are not bad people. You don’t need to do that to people like they are dangerous criminals.”

But Kevin Jones, Utah’s state archaeologist, has little sympathy for the Blanding residents who were implicated in robbing graves. “Maybe upstanding citizens are not used to being arrested that way; maybe now they will think twice about committing that kind of crime.”

—KEITH KLOOR

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## ScienceInsider



### From the Science Policy Blog

Congressional spending panels last week looked favorably on basic research programs at the **Department of Energy (DOE)** but were skeptical about innovations proposed for 2010 by the Obama Administration. House of Representatives and Senate appropriators came very close to the president’s \$4.94 billion request for the Office of Science. But they showed **little enthusiasm for Energy Secretary Steven Chu’s plan to fund eight large energy research centers**, with the House approving \$35 million of the \$280 million request and the Senate suggesting a way to spend \$44 million.

At a meeting at the U.S. National Academy of Sciences last week, **NASA Associate Administrator Edward Weiler** warned that the shrinkage of NASA’s planetary budget from \$3 billion to \$1.5 billion in the past 4 years means that “**we no longer have a viable Mars program.**” Weiler announced an unprecedented agreement with the European Space Agency to conduct a joint program of Mars missions.

The **University of California** released a plan last week that will shave \$184 million from the university’s projected \$813 million shortfall in state funding over the next 2 years. It calls for **furloughs to be scaled according to pay grade**—from 11 days, equivalent to a 4% cut, for those making less than \$40,000 a year to 26 days, or a 10% cut for those making more than \$240,000. Employees funded entirely from nonstate sources would be exempt.

**Maria Leptin**, the new director of the European Molecular Biology Organization, wants to review how to balance EMBO’s reliance on its journals for revenue with the scientific community’s desire to make the journals open-access.

**Health care workers should be first in line for inoculation** when vaccines against the **swine flu** virus are ready and approved, an expert panel at the World Health Organization concluded in a meeting last week.

For a full Q&A with Leptin and other science policy news, go to **blogs.scienceinsider.org/scienceinsider**.