

# Perspectives on Curation and Tribal Collaboration in Texas

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## Abstract

Texas A&M University recently held archaeological field schools in northwestern Montana in the homeland of the Kootenai people. Students learned how to accession archaeological materials at a federally funded tribal curation facility on the Flathead Reservation. Assistance was provided by tribal curatorial staff and museum specialists to address cultural preservation according to Kootenai values, beliefs, and cultural traditions. Artifacts were registered into a database using both scientific and traditional terminology, including functional descriptions. Tribes and other groups with a history in Texas may find common ground with archaeologists if they are encouraged to participate in the curation process.

## I. Introduction

Passing legislation for unmarked graves protection is the greatest singular challenge faced by cultural heritage managers in Texas today. Denying tribes or groups the right to protect their ancestors' graves or to take action against offenders has undermined the educational role of public archaeology.

A version of this paper was first presented in 1997 at the First Annual Red Voices Conference in Austin, Texas, for a symposium entitled "Art or Artifact" (Clabaugh 1997). Although the present conference, "Common Ground: The Twelfth Year Conference on Protecting Unmarked Graves in Texas," has a different focus, this paper is relevant to the broader issues and concerns that we share to protect Texas' cultural heritage. The "Common Ground" conference, and the publication of this journal issue, offers an important forum for consensus building and for planning future strategies to pass this long overdue legislation. To further these efforts, there are new directions in archaeology that may help build stronger alliances among the many constituents who are concerned about cultural resources management in this state. The curation process is one way to maintain continuity in archaeology and support grave protection, thus resulting in a symbiotic relationship between archaeologists and Native Americans. Symbiosis is defined as "the living together in more or less intimate association or close union of dissimilar organisms" (Mish 1985:1195), especially where this is mutually advantageous or beneficial to both, "a cooperative relationship (as between two persons or groups)...between the resident population and the immigrants" (Mish 1985:1195).

In practice, cultural resource managers, archaeologists, and Native Americans use very different approaches for preserving the past. Although cooperative and mutually advantageous relationships exist between

archaeologists and Indian groups nationwide, there is considerable need for improvement. Sharing a mutual respect for the past can have important benefits for archaeologists, descendant groups, federal and state agency regulators, landowners, and the public at large. As the 21st century approaches, cultural preservation strategies should be collectively planned, to as great extent as possible, if success is to be had in carrying out the enormous responsibility of protecting the past. Acknowledging known descendant groups as valued participants, and inviting them to take part in public archaeology through the curation process, is one strategy worth considering.

Unfortunately, archaeological curation has been seriously underfunded or not funded at all. Many archaeological and ethnographic collections are still housed pro bono throughout the state in museums and repositories. However, efforts are underway to secure funding for curation of many of these held-in-trust collections from governmental agencies who have title to or legal ownership of them. Besides fulfilling professional museum standards in collections management, curation affords an opportunity to collaborate with tribes or groups who are culturally affiliated or have patrimony with these collections. To the greatest extent possible, the identification of sacred objects, objects of cultural patrimony, or any culturally important items that may require special handling and treatment should be made available to Indian people who have the knowledge to advise on such matters. Collections that contain culturally sensitive materials should be considered for curation with the collaboration of the descendants. If no effort is made to endorse this kind of symbiotic partnership, we will continue to lose sight of the people whose evolving cultures and traditions are intrinsic to the material culture in our care.

## II. NAGPRA: Setting Collaboration in Motion

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA, Public Law 101-601) requires the return of culturally sensitive materials, especially human remains and associated grave goods, to affiliated tribes. NAGPRA requires a long overdue collaboration between archaeologists, museologists, and Native Americans over the disposition of culturally affiliated remains. NAGPRA made public the dissension within the scientific community on the issue of cultural ownership and ethics. The fact that a Texas unmarked graves protection law does not currently exist undermines any progress on repatriation issues in the state. An opportunity is available through NAGPRA and the curation process to initiate a more unified approach to the consultation process. Accepting historic fact and working toward reconciliation is imperative to the success of NAGPRA in Texas and elsewhere.

In reality, the vast majority of material culture recovered from archaeological sites is not associated with burials or unmarked graves. In fact, a very large proportion of curated material is non-cultural in origin, like paleoecological samples (e.g., soil matrix, radiometric samples, control samples, etc.). Ideally, the archaeological collections that are held in trust should have clear title and be in compliance with accepted standards such as those established by the federal government, the Council for Texas Archeologists, the

International Committee on Museums, the American Association of Museums, or the Texas Association of Museums, just to name a few.

### III. Background for Collaborative Curation

Using the curation process as a cornerstone for collaborating with Indian groups in Texas developed from my experiences in Montana through the Texas A&M University Northern Rocky Mountains Field School. There were many people who made this possible. Of the Kootenai Indians, I acknowledge the efforts of Pat Lefthand (religious leader, spokesperson, and elder of the tribe); Lorraine Caye (liaison for the U.S. Forest Service and field monitor); and Gloria Trahan (curator of collections), who were all instrumental in establishing a cooperative atmosphere. Of the Salish tribe, I acknowledge the efforts of Francis Vaderberg (an ethnobotanist, language teacher, and former curation technician) and Shelly McClure (former Director of the People's Center). Also, Mary Beth Livers (curator and museum consultant) and the archaeologists, Becky Timmons (U.S. Forest Service); David Rice (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers); and Alston Thoms (Director of the Center for Ecological Archaeology and Principal Investigator for the Northern Rocky Mountains Field School), who brought their professional expertise to the program. This group of people, along with so many others, had the vision and the courage to support a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that sanctions a dynamic and cooperative working relationship between federal agency regulators, archaeologists, and Indian people.

In the early 1980s, following the success of the Colville Confederated Tribes' cultural resources management program in Washington, Pat Lefthand (of the Kootenai tribe) and Becky Timmons (U.S. Forest Service) envisioned a collaborative heritage management program in Montana. This program would eventually set a precedent for cooperative management of archaeological resources on the Kootenai National Forest. The perseverance of Lefthand and Timmons led to the construction of a tribal curation facility on the Flathead Reservation of the Confederated Salish, Pend d'Orielle, and Kootenai tribes. Members of the Kootenai and Salish tribes were formally trained in museum curation and were chosen to handle daily operations of this state-of-the-art repository and research facility. The space was originally intended to house archaeological collections recovered from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Libby Dam Project and from Kootenai National Forest lands. However, the facility also serves as a repository for ethnographic collections and tribal archives. Artifacts and replicas housed here are used in museum exhibits at the tribal museum, known as the People's Center. These objects are also used as educational resources and as teaching aids for many of their instructional programs, according to each tribe's world view.

### IV. The Texas A&M University Northern Rocky Mountains Field School

In 1994 and 1995, Texas A&M University, through the Center for Ecological Archaeology (CEA), held summer field schools on Kootenai National Forest lands. For the past five years, I have been fortunate enough to

work with Salish and Kootenai tribal members in their museum curation program. As laboratory director and curation liaison for CEA, I interface with archaeologists, tribal council members, tribal administrators and educators, federal administrators, museum professionals, and students regarding Kootenai material culture. Under provisions set forth in the MOU, CEA is working with students and the tribe to prepare and accession all field school-related collections into the tribal curation facility. In addition, CEA has on loan from the People's Center other collections from the Libby Dam project that will be incorporated in the field school research.

Student training in the field was done in the presence of a tribal member, Lorraine Caye. As the field school progressed, she also monitored laboratory operations, including artifact processing. Lorraine reported her observations to the U.S. Forest Service archaeologists, Pat Lefthand, and to the tribal council. She carefully observed how we handled artifacts, although to my knowledge she never touched the artifacts. Lorraine explained that certain items were not meant to be touched or seen by women in her tribe, and she was conservative even when it came to handling paleoecological remains such as sediment samples or charcoal. Lorraine was very interested in our ability as archaeologists to interpret the sediments and asked thought-provoking questions of the archaeologists and students. Our answers gave her a better understanding of what we were doing. The students gained a unique respect for Lorraine's world-view and came to appreciate the opportunity to hear a Kootenai perspective on cultural preservation. In turn, the staff and students felt free to ask their own questions about the tribe and often engaged in lively discussions about their chosen field of study. This friendly discourse between representatives of the scientific community and Native Americans was as much a means of reckoning with the past as it was groundwork for a more positive future. Often times, these discussions continued well after work ended and into the night around the campfire.

#### V. Tribal Curation and Collaboration with Archaeologists

I worked with staff members at the tribal curation facility to become familiar with their standard operating procedures for accessioning collections and cataloging artifacts, and to learn to use their museum database system. I began by working on Kootenai National Forest collections, mostly isolated finds or artifacts collected during survey or testing projects. These items had been in temporary storage since the mid-1970s. I was immediately impressed with their accessioning system because I found it to be both very logical and user-friendly. The catalog contained detailed information transcribed from original notes, field forms, and laboratory records. Each object was packaged and labeled using archival materials and organized in Space Saver cabinets for easy retrieval. A flatbed scanner was used as a reference and control to create images of artifacts and records. Eventually, each artifact would be digitally photographed and archived in the catalog records.

In addition to the state-of-the-art equipment, most impressive was the way material culture was described in the catalog system. Artifacts were not only classified and coded using standard archaeological terminology, but also

using the Kootenai language and according to tribal perspectives. Their accessioning manual included traditional names and functional descriptions for common artifact types identified by tribal elders. According to the museum staff, the elders told many stories as they examined each artifact. Some tool types were familiar to them because similar items were used during their lifetimes, or they remembered their parents or grandparents using them. In other cases, they reported having heard descriptions of these tools and could remember enough to make an identification. A word list was also compiled to document many other terms unrelated to the artifacts per se, such as words and concepts dealing with subsistence patterns, including plant and animal names, animal body parts, as well as details about how the tools were used or made. Thus, an important development that came out of the elder interviews was that many of their words and memories are now available both visually and audibly through a Kootenai heritage exhibit on permanent display at the People's Center.

One topic currently being discussed among tribal curators is that although they have been trained to accession artifacts according to sophisticated museum standards, they have almost no experience in archaeology; hence, they rely heavily on archaeologists to identify artifact type, material type, etc. As I worked within this system, I found that some of the elders' functional descriptions were very different from the scientific classifications with which I am familiar. For example, a hammerstone might be identified as a Kootenai gaming piece, a rock wrapped with a rawhide string and thrown across the ice to hit another rock, much like a croquet ball. A smaller hammerstone was identified as a top that spins in place. A deer antler described as a flint knapping tool by the archaeologist was an awl to the elder who identified it. Flint used to make fire was called dust by the Kootenai. They had many different names for projectile points based on size and shape, not unlike archaeologists who also assign different names to point types based on their morphological attributes. An important distinction that the elders made between point types and their function directly related to the size of game being hunted: small points were used for small game, and large points for large game. While this may seem inaccurate to an archaeologist, there was no doubt that it was common sense to the elders. Most of the artifacts, however, had essentially the same identification and function as used by archaeologists.

The more familiar I became with their classification system, the more I could appreciate the idea that cultural patrimony is tied to material culture. Those traditional terms and expressions should be documented and considered just as useful as the scientific interpretations. Certainly the elders should be recognized as authorities on Kootenai material culture. As a research collection, these data sets were valuable because they would be used by the tribe in ways that a purely scientific database could never be used and vice versa. The fact that the artifacts are interpreted both scientifically and ethnographically turns this research base into something mutually beneficial. Valuable insight is often lost because archaeologists are reticent to consider traditional perspectives, while tribes do not want to be told about their own cultures by outsiders. The truth, however, is that if it were up to Kootenai people, archaeological sites would be left unmolested. But in reality, there is a strong commitment on

everyone's part to care for these collections once they are removed as a result of a legally mandated recovery.

As part of field school training, the opportunity arose to train students in museum curation at the tribal facility. This undertaking allowed students to meet and work with the people whose cultures and traditions they were addressing in their studies. Tribal representatives spent time talking with the students about the material culture they were handling, explaining the importance and significance of cultural preservation from a tribal perspective. They attempted to impart an awareness about the responsibilities the students were taking on by participating in archaeology. It was a valuable experience, and despite the complexity of the situation, the students came away with a better understanding of the concepts of cultural heritage and self determination. This experience put all of their field and laboratory training into a much broader context.

Today, the field school collections are temporarily housed at Texas A&M University for research and analysis, as is another collection on loan from the People's Center. The tribe expressed great concern over the transport and storage of their artifacts in Texas. They did not want the materials to leave the reservation for fear that they would never see them again. As it turned out, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers delayed funding for final analysis, and these collections remain at CEA.

Recently, two tribal representatives, Lorraine Caye and Gloria Trahan, visited CEA to inspect the collections and report back to the Tribal Council on their condition. They were instructed by tribal leaders to cleanse our collection room with tobacco smoke and to say prayers for the safe return of the artifacts. We satisfied all of their requests and made their visit as pleasurable and informative as possible. We took a side trip to San Antonio to visit the Texas missions, and while there met with some Indian people who are members of a group known as American Indians in Texas at Spanish Colonial Missions. The Kootenai representatives were very appreciative of the level of curatorial care that they witnessed at CEA, and left Texas confident that the collections were secure and were being handled with respect. Back at CEA, we continue to prepare the field school collections for final curation, and will be returning those materials to the tribe during our next planned field school season.

## VI. Collaboration with Indians in Texas

Managing archaeological collections for Texas A&M University and the CEA has been a challenging and rewarding experience. Since I took the position in 1993, I have witnessed slow but steady progress toward the inclusion of Native Americans with a history in Texas into the archaeological process. Although NAGPRA was a catalyst for the university to move in this direction, there were other efforts being made at CEA that were conducive to establishing better relations with these groups. For example, as part of our post-NAGPRA consultation process, CEA reviewed its list of publications to determine which reports would be most relevant to the tribes and other Indian groups. I called or wrote them to determine their interest, and as a result, we sent out many reports to their libraries and culture committees. Our publication mailing list now

includes all Indian groups who have expressed an interest in the archaeological work we do in Texas.

CEA's research focus is on human land-use studies and paleoecology, including subsistence and settlement patterns, site formation processes, environmental change, and so forth. This kind of research offers many possibilities for collaboration with Native American and other groups who have an interest in these subjects. I recently conducted an informal survey asking tribal and group representatives if they had any interest in a workshop series, sponsored by CEA, that would examine past land-use in the Texas Post Oak Savannah region. This ecological area, reaching from San Antonio to Tyler, represents an ongoing research area for CEA staff, and also includes many Texas Indians who have historical ties to the Post Oak Savannah region. Positive responses from the tribes and interested groups were overwhelming.

Given that CEA holds several archaeological collections from the Post Oak Savannah and will likely acquire more, there will be many opportunities to work with Indian people during the curation process. Word lists and functional descriptions of artifacts could be compiled and used in much the same manner as described above with the Kootenai people. Documentation of geographic locations and place names in Texas that are culturally important could be included as part of the workshops and added to the catalog. There are many directions to explore in curation, and as the process develops, we envision a wide range of cultural perspectives that would become part of the archival record.

Archaeology becomes more tangible if presented with relevance to everyday life patterns. For example, the archaeological record may contain botanical remains identified as subsistence foods. Identifying food remains from ancient cooking facilities is of interest to a wide audience. Food resources and their uses are important in any cultural study, and provide a solid foundation for understanding land use patterns and past cooking behavior. These studies have led to experimental archaeology whereby traditional foods are gathered and cooked just as they were in the past. Other materials related to past hunting and gathering lifeways are also part of the archaeological record and the curated assemblage. Workshops and training courses on collections management and curation will bring together representatives as well as diverse world-views of the material culture.

Assistance and training is being provided by the federal government to build tribal facilities capable of long-term curation of important tribal artifacts with significant cultural and ceremonial traditions. Given that tribal curation facilities are becoming increasingly common, and that collaborative efforts in collections management are recognized as mutually advantageous, curation strategies in the future must include provisions for education. Exhibits developed from this kind of participation would have a positive effect on the state's public archaeology program, and would likely generate much needed support.

## VII. Conclusion: Collaboration is a Long Term Commitment

Fundamental changes are underway in archaeology and cultural resources management with regard to how Native American heritage is perceived. In response to those changes, archaeological collections are being acquired and treated differently than only a few years ago. The treatment and handling of material culture are both Indian and non-Indian issues involving very complex world views. We who are legally responsible for managing cultural resources must balance our efforts through a movement to accurately understand history and to respect the cultural beliefs of the people we study. In fact, this is mandated in the 1990 American Anthropological Association, Revised Principals of Professional Responsibility:

Anthropologists' first responsibility is to those lives and cultures they study. Should conflicts of interest arise, the interests of these people take precedence over other considerations. Anthropologists must do everything in their power to protect the dignity and privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research or perform other professional activities. Their physical, social and emotional safety and welfare are the professional concerns of the anthropologists who have worked among them (Fluehr-Lobban 1991:274-75).

Texas Indians have a very rich history, and many diverse cultures called this state "home." Texas was the homeland for as many as 23 different tribes during the 19th century, including many who arrived as a result of Anglo-American colonial expansion (Murry 1992:1). Today, at least 18 different tribes with a history in Texas are included in the 1990 census (Stanush 1994:15). In such a dynamic cultural context, there are no cookbook solutions for assigning affiliation to the material culture in our care. Texas Indians represent a historical continuum of traditions, such that it is judicious to consider as many perspectives as possible. The collaboration process represents a long-term commitment. Because of this commitment, curation can serve as a bridge for maintaining an objective record of this continuum for future generations and can help establish a symbiotic relationship between all parties. Collaboration through curation can provide common ground to make this a reality in Texas.

## GLOSSARY

**Archaeological collections:** Made up of cultural and non-cultural material, and must include all supporting documentation or associated records concerning that collection.

**Museum accession:** An object or group of objects (and their associated records) obtained at once from a single source. By accessioning a collection, a



museum or repository takes custody, and legal title to an object or group of objects, and generates a record of it (Reibel 1997:14).

**Catalog:** A reference containing a descriptive record, object by object, usually cross-referenced to associated records or files that are accessioned as part of the collection.

**Curation:** A management practice that preserves collections according to professional museum and archival standards. Once a collection is curated, it is housed in perpetuity, considered to be at least 50 years.

**Held-in-Trust:** Collections generated from public lands owned by the state or federal government that receive museum/repository stewardship.

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