Exploring Maroon Cliffs

Archaeological resources tell a story about past human life and activities.

Maroon Cliffs is a late prehistoric site east of the Guadalupe Mountains and Pecos River in southeastern New Mexico. Most of the professional work done in the area in the past by contract archaeologists has been to provide clearances for well pads, pipelines and such things as potash evaporation tanks.

There is little known about the rich cultural archaeology at the Maroon Cliffs. The complex site is thought to be made up of nearly a dozen closely spaced archaeological localities occupying a series of low bedrock rises and dunes.

A large scale archaeological resource excavation request was proposed to the Bureau of Land Management through a federal permit application under the Archaeological Resources Protection Act in the mid-1980s by Dr. John Speth of the University of Michigan, Museum of Anthropology.

However, Speth did not follow through with his research proposal in the Maroon Cliff area, so no study had been done until now.

Archaeological resources are best explained as any material remains of past human life or activities which are of historical and archaeological interest. These resources on public lands and Indian lands are an irreplaceable part of the nation's heritage. Looting and stealing of these resources is punishable by law, resulting in fines, penalties and imprisonment.

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Geo-Marine archaeologist Leonard Kemp uses a low tech one-eighth inch screen to shake the materials dug out of the trenches in the rich cultural area of Maroon Cliffs. A team of archaeologists has been contracted to study the area through a collaborative effort between the Bureau of Land Management and the Center of Excellence for Hazardous Materials Management.

Peter Condon, principal investigator archaeologist for Geo-Marine Inc., was contracted by the BLM to conduct testing at the site. The contract study, which included trench digging, was made possible when BLM and the Center of Excellence for Hazardous Material Management (CEHMM) entered into a memorandum of agreement.

Private industry contributes money for archaeology study and testing to CEHMM. Following discussion and sharing of ideas, money is earmarked for equipment such as digging instruments, materials and other supplies such as GPS units, analytical software and lab analysis.

"The collaboration between CEHMM and BLM has been a good one and good for the resource," said Doug Lynn, CEHMM executive director. "It works good for industry also and industry is contributing to the management of resources."

On projects such as this, CEHMM conducts independent audits to make sure everything goes according to the agreement. All expenditures for projects are scrutinized, which results in 100 percent accountability, explained Lynn.

"We can assist BLM in any capacity. The money that comes in locally goes right back on the ground to manage the lands," Lynn said.

"Maroon Cliffs is a special management area with 17,700 acres to protect," said George MacDonell, BLM archaeologist and assistant field office manager.

MacDonell said Dawson Geophysical, a seismic company, is currently in the process of surveying this same area in 15 meter blocks. The survey data they receive will provide the BLM with more information and could possibly redefine the boundaries of this special management area.

Condon and fellow archaeologists Michael Stone and Leonard Kemp were finishing up the digging of six trenches this past week. They found burnt organics and rock as well as fragments of freshwater shells and shards of brown and also black on white pottery and bones of cottontail rabbits, jackrabbits, deer and bison.

"There's been about a 1,000 years of occupation, very intense occupation," Condon said explaining, occupation from foraging people with high mobility who didn't stay in the area for long periods of time.

"Few sites have the depth of burnt material that this site has and there's evidence here of bison remains," he added, noting the two occupation areas in the site they have concentrated on.

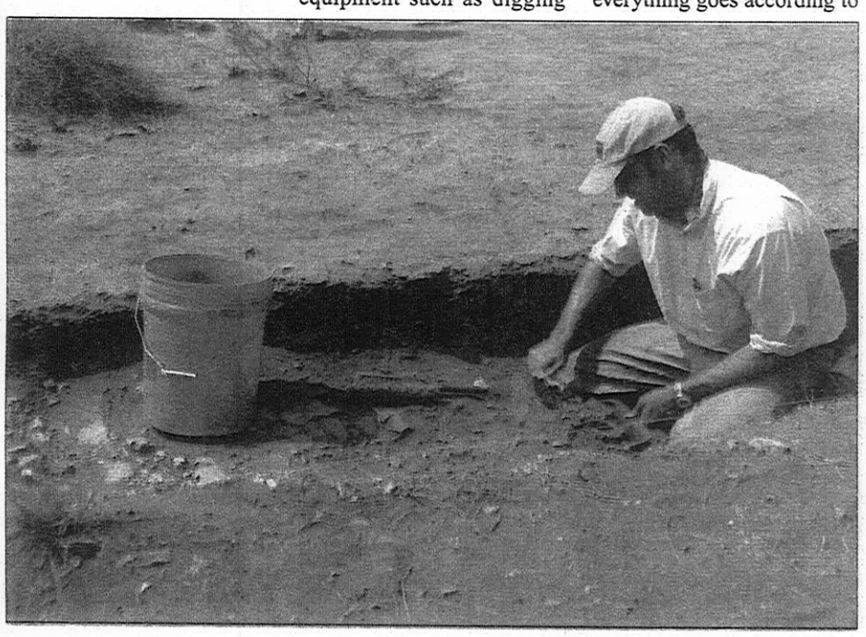
Condon explained that the environment seen here today is not necessarily what it was then that attracted people. The arroyo was possibly a wet marshland and low-lying areas were possibly grasslands with trees. And no doubt viable springs in the area were the main attraction.

The American Indian culture known as the Mogollon lived in the southwest from approximately A.D. 500 until sometime between A.D. 1400 and A.D. 1450. Condon believes the intense occupation was that of the Jornada Mogollon Indian, however, he indicated that is up for debate.

"We are in the eastern Jornada Mogollon region. This is very unique. It is its own cultural area," Condon said, adding that he also thinks there were influences from all over.

"We didn't find any structures," Condon said making reference to pit houses. "I don't doubt there are structures here – we just haven't found them yet."

Pit houses, he explained, are subterranean with top structures built to protect inhabitants from the elements. Although he believes



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Geo-Marine archaeologist Michael Stone uses a brush and trowel to loosen and gather materials from one of six trenches dug in the rich cultural Maroon Cliffs complex site. Burnt organic material and rocks will help piece together the story of the people who occupied the area many years ago.