



# PRINCIPLES OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL ETHICS

*The nine Principles of Archaeological Ethics adopted by the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) on March 7, 2024, comprise a set of ideal values and behaviors that all SAA members aspire to uphold. The SAA principles advance archaeological behavior that is consistent with the SAA bylaws (Article 2), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (emphasis on Article 27), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (emphasis on Articles 5, 8, 11, 12, 13, 25, 26, and 31), the Hague Convention (Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict), the World Heritage Convention, and the Codes of Conduct or Standards of Research Performance established by the Register of Professional Archaeologists. Additionally, the revised SAA Principles of Archaeological Ethics have benefited from examining other disciplinary ethical codes and, most importantly, from the attitudes and concerns expressed by the SAA membership about archaeological ethics through surveys and comments from committees, task forces, and individual members. The SAA recognizes that in some situations the pursuit of one or more ethical principles may place an archaeologist or a practitioner in a position in which they are unable to advance or meet—and may quite possibly be in conflict with—another principle. In such situations, archaeologists must weigh their actions to determine the best possible course to pursue.*

*In all cases, archaeologists should abide by the norms and laws of the governing jurisdiction.*

## Principle No. 1: Stewardship

Stewardship involves the collaborative management of the archaeological record for the benefit of all people. As stewards, archaeologists are both caretakers of and advocates for the archaeological record. Archaeologists promote stewardship through research and education on existing collections and sites that help preserve the past and make it accessible to everyone. Archaeologists work for the long-term conservation and protection of the archaeological record, while respecting the rights and beliefs of Indigenous and descendant peoples to the representation of their heritage as manifested in the archaeological record.

## Principle No. 2: Responsibility

Archaeologists have a responsibility to act in a transparent and honest manner as they work with colleagues, lawmakers, descendant populations, and interested publics to create and execute plans to study the past. Archaeologists must abide by all laws and regulations in addition to collaborating, to the extent possible, with groups affected by their work to achieve results in a mutually agreeable and beneficial manner. Archaeologists have a duty to maintain clear communication with all involved parties for the purpose of establishing both mutually beneficial relationships and strategies for studying the past with consideration for the present and future.

## Principle No. 3: Commercialization

The commercial sale or authentication of archaeological objects and other data for profit must not be practiced by archaeologists. Archaeology should engage with the community to deter looting, marketing, and the selling of artifacts by framing the archaeological record as an invaluable and nonrenewable resource for telling the story of the past and present. Archaeologists should educate others of the scientific and heritage values of the archaeological record and ensure that heritage is not used inappropriately for profit. Archaeologists should be respectful of others' interests in archaeological materials and to the extent possible assist with the repatriation, conservation, and curation of archaeological materials obtained contrary to international conventions or otherwise obtained inappropriately. Archaeologists working in the cultural heritage commercial sector should provide services in an honest and transparent manner that yields objective and trustworthy information. Heritage professionals should know and abide by prevailing legislation and regulations and follow business norms and best practices that apply to the heritage field.

## Principle No. 4: Public Education and Community Engagement

Archaeologists should share what they learn with the many publics interested in or affected by archaeology. These include but are not limited to students and teachers; Indigenous and descendant groups who find in the archaeological record important aspects of their heritage; lawmakers and government officials; museums and heritage organizations; reporters, journalists, and others involved in the media; avocational archaeologists and public-focused archaeological organizations; and the general public. Public and community engagement includes all parties that have an impact on, and are impacted by, an archaeological resource and its interpretation.

Archaeologists (1) explain what an archaeologist does in culturally appropriate ways; (2) explain the importance of understanding, preserving, protecting, and interpreting the past for the present and future; and (3) listen to and incorporate the knowledge and concerns of impacted communities. At times, scientific, administrative, and/or local and descendant community objectives may conflict. In these situations, an archaeologist should conduct open communication and dialogue in a collaborative spirit with the goal of reaching a mutually agreeable solution.

## Principle No. 5: Preservation of the Archaeological Record

The collections and documentation (digital/physical) generated through archaeological research are part of the archaeological record and as such should be treated in accord with the principles of stewardship. Archaeologists should be cognizant that many descendant and Indigenous communities view the archaeological record as part of their heritage and should be included in the decisions regarding documentation and the pursuit of intellectual knowledge. Archaeologists have the responsibility to ensure that the record is archived, curated, and published, according to prevailing professional standards. Professionally curated collections should be prioritized because they provide opportunities for research, public outreach and education, and heritage uses. Collections data and information should be available and accessible to descendant populations, colleagues, lawmakers and regulators, and interested publics.

## Principle No. 6: Reporting

Archaeologists have a responsibility to share and publish results and data in a timely and, so much as possible, open access manner. The information archaeologists gain from their investigations should recognize the intellectual input of Indigenous and descendant communities SAA and other interested parties. An interest in preserving and protecting sensitive information about the past and minimizing unintended consequences must be taken into account when publishing and distributing knowledge. Archaeologists should collaborate with interested parties to ensure that what is communicated is accurate, vetted, and distributed with informed consent.

## Principle No. 7: Training and Resources

Archaeology is a multidisciplinary field that requires a holistic approach to training, research, and professional conduct. Training must encompass ethical issues in archaeology and best practices including exposure to multiple ways of knowing, understanding of differential claims to the past, and engagement with descendant communities and others impacted by archaeological work. Evidence-based research requires expertise in applicable scientific methods and theory. An archaeologist's education should include research design and planning that prioritizes analysis of existing collections, justifies new fieldwork that maximizes conservation of existing resources, and ensures proper curation and dissemination of results. Learning is a lifelong endeavor, and archaeologists must continually update their skills to conduct high-quality research and heritage management as well as to supervise, mentor, and teach students and employees. Training is not always affordable or accessible. Archaeologists working within their institutions, including universities, museums, private heritage management (CRM) companies, and government agencies, have a responsibility to work toward securing financial resources for the purpose of maximizing training, ensuring safeguards, and broadening entry into archaeological professions.

## Principle No. 8: Safe Educational and Workplace Environments

Archaeologists need to create safe and supportive environments in all areas of practice. These environments should be free of all physical and nonphysical discriminatory and violent practices, which include but are not limited to harassment, assault, or bullying. Historically marginalized groups in archaeology have disproportionately experienced these practices, and this has resulted in a loss of diversity of people and ideas. Archaeologists should conduct themselves with respect for all people, and that includes the people whose cultures we study as well as one another. Archaeologists should embrace free speech and open debate, only restricting egregious expression, such as that which falsely defames an individual, constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, or maliciously invades privacy or confidentiality interests. Archaeologists in a position of authority should be aware of existing power imbalances and be committed to ensuring respectful and inclusive work and learning environments.

## Principle No. 9: Diversity and Inclusion

Archaeologists have a collective responsibility to facilitate accessible, inclusive, and equitable opportunities and environments. Recognizing that archaeologists assume various roles and operate within an array of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, they should work to remove systemic barriers that prohibit equal opportunity for all. A commitment to inclusivity and diversity in academic, research, and professional opportunities, through mentorship and other means, will help foster an intellectually richer, more equitable, and socially cohesive archaeology.

