

**Report to the Society for American Archaeology
by
the Task Force on Reality TV and Metal Detecting**

The Board of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) gave the Task Force this charge:

Motion 132-54.4A - The Board establishes the Task Force on Metal Detecting of Archaeological Sites in Reality TV. The task force will assess the current reality TV shows, which use metal detectors to find archaeological objects, against SAA's Principles of Archaeological Ethics. The task force will consider such topics as: (1) The use of metal detectors by non-professional archaeologists, (2) Proper ways for metal detector enthusiasts to engage with professional archaeologists, and (3) Ethical portrayals of such engagements on TV shows. The task force will prepare a one-page statement for the board's consideration that reflects SAA's position on these reality TV shows. The task force, which will consist of a chairperson and 4 members, and will provide the statement for the Board's consideration by the end of 2013. The task force will also submit a final report to the Board by February 14th.

At the request of SAA President Jeff Altschul, Task Force Chair Giovanna Peebles convened the SAA Task Force on Reality TV and Metal Detecting composed of the following individuals with relevant and extensive experience and knowledge. The Task Force met three times by telephone and exchanged many comments, ideas, and supporting information by email between January 28, 2014 and March 20, 2014. The Task Force is pleased to provide this important report to the Board. We hope that the Board agrees with our findings and acts promptly on the recommendations.

Lynn Alex. Former Director of the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist Education and Outreach Program. Former member of the Public Education Committee of the SAA.

Loren Davis. Professor of Anthropology, Oregon State University. Lead, SAA Geoarchaeology Interest Group.

Linda Derry. Director, Old Cahawba Historic Site. Member of the Public Education Committee of the SAA.

Giovanna Peebles, Chair. Vermont State Archaeologist, Vermont Division for Historic Preservation (and SHPO 2010 – 2013).

Richard Pettigrew. President, Archaeological Legacy Institute. Creators of **The Archaeology Channel**.

Matt Reeves. Director of Archaeology, James Madison's Montpelier.

Leith Smith. Historic Archaeologist, Maine Historic Preservation Commission.

SAA Staff representative: Maureen Malloy. SAA Manager of Education and Outreach.

The Task Force on Reality TV and Metal Detecting developed the following statement and opportunities for the SAA Board's consideration. The Board, should it so choose, can adopt this statement and opportunities, in whole or in part, as its position on reality TV shows and metal detecting. Attachment A provides a more detailed narrative to support the statement, opportunities, and recommendations.

Statement

Reality shows, such as the National Geographic Channel's (NGC) *Diggers*, the Travel Channel's *Dig Wars*, and Spike's *Savage Family Diggers*, form a large part of American television (TV) programming. These shows are here to stay. Based on anecdotal evidence, these programs may be impacting archaeological sites by promoting object-oriented metal detecting. However, also based on anecdotes, these shows are not resulting in a ground swell of metal-detecting. Viewer comments on the NGC website indicate that many people watch the shows simply for entertainment with no intention of metal detecting. With archaeologists many viewers share similar interests in the past and in furthering our understanding of history through metal detecting. Although the SAA and the profession cannot control nor easily change the dig-based TV shows, they can control and change the way they communicate with Americans and metal detectorists. Greater efforts to share our interesting, often remarkable, stories and to find common ground in working with metal detectorists are the most effective antidotes to the digger programs. On-going respectful and collaborative engagement with TV executives and producers will create better programming over time. The SAA will energetically oppose and protest any program that violates human remains under the pretence of unearthing history.

Three Opportunities stand out:

1. The SAA, as an organization and with the commitment of individual members, will strive to transform the way it communicates using traditional and twenty first century tools. It will expand and accelerate efforts to share our profession's passion, enthusiasm, discoveries, collaborative experiences, trials and tribulations, personal relationships, and other stories with the many Americans interested in the past. It will energetically support colleagues who already are working hard in public education and outreach.
2. Many metal detectorists are passionate about history and share values and interests similar to those of archaeologists. Many dislike the diggers' shows emphasis on objects and their lack of historic context. They want to contribute to the better understanding of history but they find few opportunities to do so. As in every endeavor, there are "rogue" metal detectorists who simply are going after artifacts for their monetary value but these are in the minority. The profession can affect and change some things more easily than others: changing our relationship with metal detectorists is achievable. We must gain each other's trust and respect by talking with each other, finding the shared language, and learning from each other.
3. Reality TV shows, including the various "diggers" programs, are popular entertainment for many Americans and will continue to occupy a significant segment of television programming. The SAA and individual professionals must continue to engage with and influence executives, producers, directors, and actors to help the programs evolve. Tidal waves of criticism and letter campaigns will neither take the shows off the air nor create conditions conducive to dialogues with the shows' producers and directors since they are extremely lucrative for the corporations. On-going conversations with the National Geographic Channel can hopefully create a better program that helps bridge the very large gap between archaeologists and metal detectorists and demonstrate the common ground.

Recommended Actions:

The Task Force recommends that the SAA Board take these actions:

- Create and implement a comprehensive SAA communication plan that covers print media, radio, and television, and incorporates all the available 21st century tools such as social media, YouTube, new media such as smartphone apps, video-streaming, and so forth.
 - Seek information and ideas from SAA members through a member survey (for example, their use of various social media, level of public engagement, knowledge and training in various media, interest in and facility with outreach, and so forth). A preliminary fast and useful survey can be ready for distribution at the Austin meeting.
 - Within six month, jumpstart plan implementation within the SAA with improved presence on social media, a communications section in each issue of the SAA Archaeological Record, actions by the SAA Board, the Public Education and Media Relations Committees, and individual members.
 - Obtain data on a variety of topics germane to the issues identified in this Statement and narrative (Attachment A) with the goal of creating effective communication strategies. For example: Who are the digger show audiences? Do they participate in metal detecting? What is their actual impact on the archaeological record? What are the existing federal and state laws pertaining to metal detecting? What opportunities will allow metal detectorists to engage with archaeologists?
 - Create our own archaeology reality shows, using new media for distribution, for example, **The Archaeology Channel** and YouTube.
 - Sponsor annual SAA sessions as well as training on social media, new media, story-telling, video-production for new media, TED talks, joint sessions with metal detectorists (include SHA), and so forth.
 - Identify experts in particular archaeology topics and professionals with an interest in participating in media programs. Post as a resource on the SAA website.
- Draft a "Best Practices for Metal Detectorists," working with the partners identified in Attachment A, the NGC Diggers team, metal detectorists, representatives from the National Association of State Archaeologists (NASA), cultural resource consultants, state archaeological societies, and other stakeholders.
 - Post the Best Practices on all key websites (including the SAA, Society for Historical Archaeology, NGC Diggers, NASA, the Task Force for Metal Detecting Rights Foundation, MineLab, treasure-hunting websites, National Park Service, and everywhere else possible.
 - Recent changes to the SAA website [Metal Detecting page](#) are a great step. Work with metal detectorists to ensure that the website is a useful resource to them. Include a link to the NASA listing of all State Archaeologists.
- Working with NASA and the various partners, create and provide, or at least support, training opportunities for metal detectorists such as the Montpelier, Virginia, model.
- Consider reviewing and revising the SAA ethics principles to emphasize collaboration and respectful brokering with non-professionals who themselves are passionate about the past. Also emphasize the prescription that archaeologists support colleagues who already are actively engaged in public education and outreach.
- Support the National Geographic Society and the NGC by acknowledging the many changes they have already made to the show and website and continue to work with the NGC to put some of the "back-end" changes into the final programming.

- Partnering with sympathetic and cooperative media organizations, such as Archaeological Legacy Institute and Oregon Public Broadcasting (producers of *Time Team America*), secure funding for and create alternative reality TV programming and twenty first century distribution options (including but going beyond cable TV) to deliver content driven and acted by archaeologists.
- Identify an SAA Board or staff person to take the lead on continuing to seek dialogue with producers of the other digger shows.
- Closely review *Teaching Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century* (SAA 2000) and identify ways that the SAA can embrace and move forward some of the recommendations for change. This gem of a volume needs to be seriously revisited by the Board and all SAA members.

ATTACHMENT A:

The Task Force singled out and examined three distinctive but intimately related issues, in this order of priority, leading to its statement, opportunities, and recommendations for action.

- Communication
- Metal detecting
- Reality TV shows

1. **The SAA, as an organization and with the commitment of individual members, will strive to transform the way it communicates using traditional and twenty first century tools. It will expand and accelerate efforts to share our profession's passion, enthusiasm, discoveries, collaborative experiences, trials and tribulations, personal relationships, and other stories with the many Americans interested in the past. It will energetically support colleagues who already are working hard in public education and outreach.**

The Task Force finds that reality TV shows focusing on metal detecting on archaeological sites largely represent attitudes and values contrary to those held by professional archaeologists and expressed by the SAA's Principles of Archaeological Ethics. Task Force members, like SAA members and many others, object to messages conveyed by these shows; we would be delighted to see these productions terminated or dramatically changed. However, we realistically recognize that we only have limited power to affect changes in these programs. We conclude that if our profession is going to make a significant impact on public attitudes towards archaeological values, we must change ourselves.

The Task Force is convinced that transforming how we communicate with non-archaeologists (SAA Ethic Principles # 2 – Accountability - - and # 4 – Public Education and Outreach) is the number one issue for the SAA Board's immediate attention. Communication is a sphere that the Board and individual archaeologists can influence and change, and over which they have a large measure of control. We identified at least two forms of communication to bring to the Board's attention.

Communicating with various "communities" and stakeholders.

As anthropologists, we want to remember that people do not all share the same values yet must be respected in spite of the differences. We are too quick to criticize those whose values are different from our own. Criticizing reality TV watchers or metal detectorists is not constructive. Once we speak with individuals, we often learn that our values are not that different. Talking with people and treating them as equals garners respect, influences peoples' values and attitudes towards archaeology, and, ultimately, the outcomes of reality TV shows. Our ethic must be to engage people. The profession must act with reciprocity and seek the opinions and knowledge of non-professionals, such as metal detectorists. We must earn and keep the respect of those who might participate with us in our work. The Director of Archaeology at James Madison's Montpelier presidential site, Dr. Matt Reeves, has created a [model, innovative training program](#) for metal detectorists that merits duplication across the country.

Communicating our stories, our discoveries, our knowledge.

Much of our outreach focuses on the process of archaeology. Archaeologists need to move beyond that and focus on their stories. We have interesting, often amazing, stories to share and we need to improve and expand the ways we tell our stories. We have stories about the past and how we learn about it; specific artifacts that offer critical clues; friends, collaborators, and colleagues that make a difference; the places in which we study; trials and tribulations of our work; and so much more. Our reality is every bit as interesting (or more!) than reality TV programs, but not if we never tell those stories to the many Americans who would love to hear them. We need to explore and implement exciting, engaging, and eloquent ways of sharing our new and ever-evolving array of information and why learning about the past is so important. For example, most professionals are not

blogging or using Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube to share their exciting archaeological discoveries, their detective work in the lab, and other stories to engage various communities who are likely interested in their work. Here are just a few good models: [The Archaeology Channel](#); [Archaeology in the Community Facebook](#); [Your History, Discovered. City of Boston Facebook](#); [Vermont Archaeology Month Facebook](#); [Project Archaeology](#); [Cooper's Ferry Site videos](#); [Montpelier Archaeology Google +](#), and [SHA Blogs comments](#).

As we aim to put ourselves out there more to share our message, it would be helpful and effective if the SAA were able to assist producers with lists of experts in particular topics as well as provide names of publicly-engaging professionals with an interest in participating in media programs. Reporters from print media, radio, or television might need to interview someone; TED may want an archaeologist on deck; and an ever-increasing crop of history and archaeology-based reality TV shows require archaeologists willing to participate (and even act!).

- 2. Many metal detectorists are passionate about history and share values and interests similar to those of archaeologists. Many dislike the diggers' shows emphasis on objects and their lack of historic context. They want to contribute to the better understanding of history but they find few opportunities to do so. As in every endeavor, there are "rogue" metal detectorists who simply are going after artifacts for their monetary value but these are in the minority. The profession can affect and change some things more easily than others: changing our relationship with metal detectorists is achievable. We must gain each other's trust and respect by talking with each other, finding the shared language, and learning from each other.**

Two Task Force members, Matt Reeves and Leith Smith, both historic archaeologists, have extensive personal experience with metal detectorists and metal detect themselves (now or in the past). Task Force member Smith had the opportunity in the middle of our process to attend a metal detecting "Summit," sponsored by [MineLab](#), a major player in the metal detectors business, and was able to speak with leaders in the metal detector business. Task Force Peebles spoke at length with various stakeholders, including Allyson Cohen, Vice President of the [Task Force for Metal Detecting Rights Foundation](#) and one local Vermont metal detectorist. Matt Reeves, in his third year of doing week-long trainings for metal detectorists at the President James Madison site, Montpelier (co-sponsored by MineLab), has had a transformative impact with close to one hundred practitioners in the last three years. Participants in these programs have returned home to their clubs to spread the word about the willingness of archaeologists to work with the metal detecting community and the value inherent in preserving sites, not just artifacts.

The Task Force Metal easily concludes that not all metal detectorists are the same. The Task Force sees stereotyping as anathema to our roots as anthropologists. The Task Force acknowledges that there is a segment of metal detectorists whom we can never reach; they are not the focus of this discussion.

Many, if not most, metal detectors have a deep respect for and interest in history; many are extremely knowledgeable about local, regional, or national history and material culture. They are enthusiastic about the process of discovery and its association with history and a particular place. We must leverage their passion and enthusiasm as a bridge to shared values. There are many parallels here with the often conflicted relationship between archaeologists and arrowhead collectors. Many of these former collectors now form the core of "avocational archaeologists" that comprise local archaeological societies. We have learned that collectors come in many stripes, that many deeply respect the past, that they are eager to work with us, and that we need to provide them with opportunities to work together and learn from each other. The situation with metal detectorists is very similar. Like collectors, metal detectorists are yet another disenfranchised "public" to whom we must reach out. We have to offer them respect and gain their respect. We can invite them to assist the work of archaeologists, as we have with the collector community. Examples of such projects already exist. The Task Force believes it is unethical for archaeologists to NOT collaborate with metal detectorists.

The Task Force members observe that non-archaeologists often see archaeologists as being self-serving, elitist, and irrelevant. It recommends that the SAA ethics principles be reviewed and, where appropriate, revised to ensure that our ethics are not simply self-serving.

- 3. Reality TV shows, including the various “diggers” programs, are popular entertainment for many Americans and will continue to occupy a significant segment of television programming. The SAA and individual professionals must continue to engage with and influence executives, producers, directors, and actors to help the programs evolve. Tidal waves of criticism and letter campaigns will neither take the shows off the air nor create conditions conducive to dialogues with the shows' producers and directors since they are extremely lucrative for the corporations. On-going conversations with the National Geographic Channel can hopefully create a better program that helps bridge the very large gap between archaeologists and metal detectorists and demonstrate the common ground.**

Reality shows are here to stay - - there are more than [1,200 reality shows](http://www.ask.com/wiki/List_of_reality_television_programs) currently on television (http://www.ask.com/wiki/List_of_reality_television_programs). As evidenced by the National Geographic Channel's (NGC) Diggers program, the shows' content and nuances change and evolve with input from various directions (professionals, audiences, advertisers, etc.) and time. Based on the posted [Comments](http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/diggers/articles/meet-the-diggers/) (<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/diggers/articles/meet-the-diggers/>), the NGC's main characters are loved by many viewers and hated by others. Ultimately, all shows change to respond to many factors. The Task Force acknowledges the various changes that the NGC has made to the Diggers show (at this time primarily behind-the-scenes) and to the website as a result of the on-going dialogue with archaeologists. The Task Force observes that there is a large gap between the great changes that the NGC Diggers show has made during production and filming and what viewers end up seeing after the final edit. On-going dialogue and efforts to work with the NGC are crucial since it can serve as a model for other dig shows as it continues to evolve. The SAA Board should strive to communicate with Spike and Travel Channel show producers, seeking face-to-face meetings, inviting them into the field and lab to illustrate various points, and going on-site to their productions.

The Task Force has identified the following key partners to help the SAA Board implement the recommended actions:

- Archaeological Institute of America
- Archaeological Legacy Institute, creators of **The Archaeology Channel**
- MineLab (Contact: Malissa Salzinger)
- National Geographic Society
- National Geographic Channel
- National Association of State Archaeologists
- National Park Service
- Society for Historical Archaeology
- Task Force for Metal Detecting Rights Foundation (Contact: VP Allyson Cohen)