



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Archaeological sites are touchstones to the past. To some, they are storehouses of knowledge about the lives of those who came before us, and the world in which they lived. To others, they are the physical remains linking the living to the dead. To all, they embody cultural, historical, and traditional values that tie people to the land and speak to their place in the universe.

Archaeological sites are essential for the future. As the only science that examines the full range of human behavior over the entire span of human history, archaeology is in a unique position to help us adapt to climate change. After all, humans have been adapting to climate change for millennia; sometimes successfully, and at other times with disastrous consequences

But archaeological sites are fragile. Once damaged or destroyed, the information they contain is lost forever as is their ability to bear witness to the deeds, thoughts, and lives of our ancestors. Climate change poses a very serious threat to the tens of thousands of archaeological sites, both known and as-yet undiscovered, across the nation. The situation is perhaps most acute in coastal and other low-lying areas, where an increase in sea levels will inundate many archaeological, historical, and cultural sites.

In Hawaii and Alaska this process is already threatening sites. Soon those on the US continental coastline will bear the wrath of tidal surges, wave action, wind erosion, and, ultimately the ocean's waters, before disappearing, taking with them chapters of our common heritage. But it is not just the coast that is in danger. Fires, floods, and severe storms will become more intense and more frequent as the world's temperature increases, threatening archaeological resources far from the shorelines. The loss of these irreplaceable resources will be a disaster for future generations of Americans who wish to learn more about the history of the continent and for those whose historical, cultural and spiritual identities are tied to these special places.

We face the paradox that archaeological sites, especially those in coastal areas, bear crucial evidence for humans' responses to past climate change, but they are supremely vulnerable to present changes in climate and sea level. They contain lessons for us from the past. Will we be able to read them in time?