

WHAT DO I REALLY WANT FROM A RELATIONSHIP WITH NATIVE AMERICANS?

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Last winter, Kurt Dongoske and Larry Zimmerman invited me to participate in a panel discussion at the SAA conference in Milwaukee. The topic was “What Do Archaeologists Really Want from a Relationship with Native Americans?” I sensed that Kurt and Larry wanted to move beyond the usual set of “Archaeologists and Native Americans Working Together” conference presentations—a topic that has been and will continue to be very important. They weren’t asking what we want in our relations with Native Americans, but what we *really* want—a big difference.

There are, of course, many different approaches to their question, based on everyone’s individual experiences and desires. This was certainly reflected in the variety of presentations by panel members. For my part, I took their question literally, and then offered, as I do here, a personal and very candid and honest perspective on what it is that I really want in my own relationship with Native Americans.

To put my comments into context, for the last 14 years, I have directed a university-based program in Indigenous Archaeology on the Kamloops Indian Reserve in British Columbia (Figure 1). During this time, I have worked with Aboriginal people from many different parts of western Canada, but primarily with the Secwepemc (Shuswap) First Nation. As I have explained in a previous “Working Together” column (15[2]:9–11, 1997), this has been a very rewarding, but often challenging, experience.

Over the years, I’ve observed first-hand the emergence of different types of relationships between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples. I have also discussed archaeological issues with Native American students, community members, and chiefs and have been impressed by their awareness of some of the more problematic aspects of the discipline. Some Secwepemc translate *archaeology* into Secwepemctsin as “ec re tsíq-le7cw es e sxeqpenwéns le tsuwet-s le q’eses te qelmucw” (“digging around in the ground to find out the activity of the old people” [Mona Jules, pers. comm., 1998]). This definition echoes the functionalistic approach—what did people do, what did they eat,

in the past?—that characterizes most archaeological inquiry. But Secwepemc community members are also fully aware, in postprocessual fashion, that archaeology carries with it assumptions, biases, and power inequalities and that what archaeologists do can have a very real impact on their land claims and traditional beliefs.

The relative isolation of my campus has given me much opportunity to think about not only what has been unfolding around me regarding archaeology and descendant communities, but also what it is I personally want from my relationship with Native Americans. This essay provides me with the opportunity to share my thoughts on five things I seek in this relationship: Insight, Recognition, Responsibility, Encouragement, and Honesty.

Insight

I am an archaeologist because I am fascinated by cultural diversity, both in the present and the past. Throughout the world today, we observe the many ways that different societies address similar problems. This diversity is less obvious in the archaeological record, but it is certainly not absent. Robert Kelly (1995), among others, has promoted recognition of social and economic diversity of hunter-gatherers as a vital element in understanding the prehistoric lifeways that comprise so much of the archaeological record worldwide.

I thus seek insight into the social organization, economics, and land-use practices of past hunter-gatherers by searching for evidence of cultural diversity in the archaeological record. But the type of understanding that I most desire relates to those non-Western perceptions found outside of my own limited (and limiting) worldview. Archaeologists observe, record, and measure things and learn much about the human condition in the process. We can relate Nunamiut annual and lifetime range (Binford 1983) to archaeological site distribution patterns in a region. We can reconstruct the long-term dietary composition of past societies through faunal analysis or isotopic studies. However, it is not until we compare the minimalist lifestyle and



Figure 1: SCES-SFU Field School in Indigenous Archaeology. 1998 Excavation of EeRb-144, a multiple-component river terrace site on the Kamloops Indian Reserve, Kamloops, B.C., with occupations spanning more than 6,000 years.

material culture of the Ngatatjara of Australia, for example, with the complexity and elegance of their kinship system and worldview that we realize how little we actually know about this living group, let alone about their prehistoric counterparts.

Some cultural aspects of past landscapes that I am interested in are completely outside of the realm of contemporary Western understanding—they are literally alien landscapes to Westerners. The worldviews of Cree, Navajo, or Pintupi are comprised of perceived relationships to the land that are radically different from mine and which may guide traditional land-use practices in ways outsiders do not expect or can not understand. Community-based knowledge of these practices, whether obtained through informal conversations or ethnoarchaeological projects, may reveal very important elements of past lives, and help us discover alternative ways of seeing and of interpreting what we encounter as archaeologists. There is no doubt that the effects of colonialism run wide and deep, but we cannot ignore the fact that some aspects of traditional knowledge are remarkably durable.

I also desire a more complete understanding of the effects that archaeology has had on descendant communities when archaeological “truths” challenge beliefs about origins (Nicholas 2004). At the same time that some members of a community see archaeology as an important tool in pursuing land claims, others proclaim that “we don’t need archaeology to tell us what we already know” (anthropologist Julie Hollowell notes [pers. comm., 2004], “It may be absolutely crucial for the future of archaeology to understand what people really mean when they say this”). What can we learn from the tensions that develop

when different ways of knowing exist side by side? How can we become more responsible in conducting our research into other people’s lives? And how does one answer the charge that archaeology is still a colonialist enterprise? These questions can only be pursued by working directly with Indigenous peoples.

Recognition

I was in the Yucatan last year with my family, visiting Mayan sites. As we toured Tulum with a Mayan guide (Figure 2), my wife Catherine Carlson (also an archaeologist) and I independently noted something remarkable. Our guide repeatedly told us “the archaeologists discovered this” or “we learned that from archaeologists”—phrases we frequently heard or observed on signage. At Chichen Itza, for example, the English portion of a trilingual sign reads:

The Archaeologists have worked in the investigation, consolidation, and rehabilitation of the material remains found in the Archaeological zone you are about to visit. Through the help of specialists, various pieces, paintings, sculptures, and sundry objects have been restored. Physical Anthropologists have analyzed and interpreted the bone remains found during excavations. All have contributed important knowledge concerning our Pre-Hispanic past and have helped make this Archaeological zone a touchstone of our historical, cultural, and ecological heritage.

This was notable because we had so seldom heard this kind of acknowledgment from Native Americans in public settings in North America. In classes with Aboriginal students or in conversation with band members, Catherine and I have each been thanked for our contributions and know that the work of archaeologists is valued. In public, however, Indigenous peoples often seem guarded in making such comments for reasons that can relate to tribal politics, pending legal claims, and relations with various government agencies. As a result, many archaeologists may feel that their endeavors are unappreciated. In addition, most have encountered critiques of the discipline by Native Americans who have been angered, frustrated, or offended by real or perceived offenses by archaeologists.

Between the ethical and legal challenges stemming from the Kennewick controversy, and the larger issues associated with NAGPRA, many archaeologists may feel resigned to a never-ending adversarial relationship. Yet at the very time that the Kennewick drama was unfolding in the courts, the discovery of the frozen remains of a 500-year-old man, Kwaday Dan Ts’inchi (“Long-Ago Person Found”) in northern British Columbia led archaeologists and local First Nations communities in a very different direction. The use of archaeological methods to recover and analyze the human remains and artifacts has deepened the



Figure 2: Tulum. Mayan tour guides and tri-lingual signs at this and other sites acknowledge the contributions of archaeologists.

appreciation for archaeology among the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations. As full research partners in this project, the Champagne-Aishihik have identified specific questions that are directly relevant to the community. For example, samples of Kwaday Dan Ts'inchí's DNA were recovered and analyzed with the goal of locating descendants in order to determine his cultural affiliation.

Greater recognition and appreciation by Native Americans of the products of archaeology might encourage archaeologists to work more closely with them and thus foster better working relationships and more meaningful collaborations.

Responsibility

I would like to see both archaeologists and Native Americans assume greater responsibility for their actions. As a discipline, we have all too often taken from Native Americans without offering much in return and have sometimes acted as though we had, or should have, *carte blanche* on their lands. The development of new models of collaboration has been hampered by archaeologists failing to acknowledge the historical or continuing shortcomings of the discipline or not knowing how to rectify problems that exist. Archaeologists have also been slow in responding to requests to loosen their control on the past by those people who have an inherent interest in it.

The situation is clearly improving, as reflected in a growing number of accounts of successful collaborations (e.g., Donogoske et al. 2000; Nicholas and Andrews 1997; Swidler et al.

1997). Today, there is not only greater participation by descendant communities, but the development of protocols and agreements by which Native Americans now directly oversee heritage sites on their lands. However successful new forms of Indigenous cultural resource management may be, there are problems. Double standards may exist. For example, in Canada, some First Nation governments have required outside developers to adhere to requirements of protocols, with high standards for archaeological work, but when individual bands have carried out development projects on the reserves, little if any archaeology was done.

Problems like this may occur when Indigenous organizations make an honest effort to meet the challenges of heritage management but lack adequate financial resources or skilled personnel. On several occasions, former students have told me that their bands, which funded their participation in our summer field school, wanted them to become the Band Archaeologist—something even the students recognized they were not qualified to do despite their demonstrated aptitude, skills, and knowledge. All Aboriginal communities I am familiar with have a very sincere interest in their heritage (Figure 3), but the reality is that they are often overwhelmed with meeting the immediate needs of the community—issues of health care, employment, or land claims understandably take precedence over archaeological sites.

While we need standards that can be employed equitably by the growing number of stakeholders in archaeology, defining and employing them will be very difficult. To do so requires all



Figure 3: Randi Hillard, Nuxalk First Nation, examining 3,000-year-old shell midden at an ancestral Secwepemc archaeological site.

involved parties to address some very difficult questions: What alternatives can descendant communities offer to standard models of cultural resource management? Can or should the archaeological community assist Native Americans in developing protocols? Can stewardship and co-management strategies provide a basis for equitable sharing of the responsibilities of caring for heritage resources? In a practical sense, the goal is to ensure that the archaeology being done adheres to standards set by stakeholders. How does this translate into practice?”

Encouragement

While my experience in teaching and working with Native Americans has been very positive, it has not always been easy. Those of us working in this realm face the challenges of having to make do with limited resources and facilities, of wondering if the years spent working with First Nations students and communities really amount to much, and of dealing with tribal politics and with archaeological colleagues who still do not get what the fuss is about. I have sometimes been tempted to move on to easier, more rewarding things. However, the challenges faced by Native Americans who want to become involved in archaeology are many times greater and appreciably more difficult to overcome. These individuals may have limited education opportunities, lack family or tribal support, or face other hurdles that non-Indians are unaware of. There is also the risk of being labeled “apples”—red on the outside, white on the inside.

As much as we would like more encouragement from our Native colleagues, they very likely wish the same from us and probably need it much more. Creating opportunities for members of descendant communities to get involved in archaeological projects, in meaningful ways, is very important—so are the Arthur C. Parker scholarships offered by the SAA. But the most meaningful encouragement clearly comes from individual archaeologists who take the time and incentive to really talk (person-to-person) with Native Americans.

Honesty

Finally, I *really, really* want greater honesty in our relationship. After many years of working with Indigenous peoples, I am tired of the politics and the posturing, however necessary both sometimes are. We need more open, honest dialogue between Native Americans and non-Indigenous archaeologists. We need to avoid revisionism, paternalism, stereotyping, political correctness, and double standards but also need to talk about the “dark side” of this relationship if some hard-earned lessons are going to have lasting value. This requires more stamina and thicker skin than most of us, including myself, are generally comfortable with—and it can even be harmful, whether one is applying for permission to work on tribal lands or seeking academic tenure.

It is not just a matter of “wanting to be friends,” because, as



Figure 4: Sharon Doucet, Ehattesaht/Nuu-chah-nulth Nation, represents one of a growing number of Native Americans who see archaeology as a vital bridge between past and present.

Randy McGuire (2003) says, essential cultural and historical differences and power inequalities intercede. I agree with his prescription that by accepting “the tensions and contradictions that exist between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples,” we can then move forward to more realistic and profitable working relationships. At the same time, we need to stop thinking about all of this as two-sided: “us” and “them,” “Indians” and “Whites.” Such dichotomies have lost much of their meaning as the composition of the archaeological community becomes more diverse and as everyone begins to recognize how complex the issues are.

Finally, we need to be more honest about our motivations, about why we do archaeology in the first place (Figure 4). We must be willing to share our knowledge and enthusiasm about the field with the many who genuinely desire to know why we are so intrigued by what are often seemingly trivial aspects of past people’s lives.

These then are five things that I really want. 📷

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