

6. Issues of Sensitivity

Introduction



Tomacito, a Navajo who lived in Chaco Canyon for over sixty years. (George A. Grant Collection, Harpers Ferry Center, NPS)

An interpreter or archeologist needs to be sensitive to the fact that archeological resources have multiple intangible meanings to different peoples. He or she must approach audiences from multiple points of view, act as a facilitator and motivator, and make interpretive connections that are broad based and accessible both intellectually and physically.

At a very young age we learn to define and adapt to color, language, age, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, and ethnicity in ways appropriate to our experience in our own societies. Many of these experiences, in turn, are shaped by the privilege and power that is part of the social structure in which we live.

We learn and define our perceptions by observing differences and similarities among people and by absorbing the spoken and unspoken messages about those differences. Both subtle and overt forms of prejudice and bias have a profound influence on our developing sense of self and others. It is important to recognize that this bias exists, and to identify and remove it from NPS interpretive programs, educational programs, and curricula.

Removing it cannot be done simply by being sensitive. It must be done systematically, by understanding the methods used in archeological research and analysis, and through applying ethnographic and ethnohistoric study and analysis. Removing and controlling this bias promises substantial payoffs. It increases the likelihood that youth and adults who visit NPS sites will have a positive interaction with the resource. These current and potential audiences will thus have greater access, both mentally and

physically, to meanings and relevance of our park stories.

Try It Yourself

Module 201: Identifying and Removing Bias from Interpretive and Educational Programming

This NPS training module helps interpreters develop "bias-free" programs.

Color, language, age, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, economic status, and ethnicity are among the many issues of sensitivity of which interpreters and archeologists must constantly be aware of when working with the public. Sensitivity to the ideas, emotions, and circumstances to park visitors and past peoples is critical for the effective interpretation of archeological resources.

The sometimes narrow scope of traditional archeology's strictly scientific approach to past peoples has often alienated descendant groups. Archeologists have overlooked women, children, African Americans, Native Americans, and other minorities. However, in the last few decades archeological approaches have combined with ethnographic and ethnohistoric approaches, and in other ways have enhanced minority consultation and participation. In doing so, archeologists have affirmed the right of different special interest groups-descendants of colonized peoples, indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, women, and the working class-to speak for themselves, in their own voices that are accepted as legitimate. The increase in gender- and ethnicity-base studies underscores the new directions within American archeology (Thomas 1998:507).

Through ethnography, ethnohistory, and other approaches archeologists have benefited from perspectives and interpretations that come directly from descendants of people who once occupied a site or the area around a site. The contributions of these descendants to our understanding arise from elicited traditions and stories passed orally from generation to generation, and from deeply felt spiritual and cultural connections (Nichols:xiv). In many instances, these connections emerge from active collaboration and participation by these descendants. These connections inspire living descendants to ensure that their culture and ancestors are properly respected, interpreted, and protected.

Through the application of ethnography and oral history, some archeologists have been able to employ approaches that elicit not only human knowledge and decisions, but that also integrate religion and spiritual practices with the symbolism of material culture. Through ethnography and ethnohistory, archeologists have thus been able to chronicle the individual's power to resist and affect change. The approaches assume that these experiences can be studied for their own sake and can be used as clues for finding meaning in the human past.

Ethnographic studies make it possible to ensure that the cultural knowledge and experience of associated groups is considered when planning archeological research and permitting activities, management approaches for culturally sensitive archeological resources such as human remains and grave goods, and treatments and disposition of such materials in archeological collections. Archeological studies may also provide data on the cultural affiliation of contemporary Native American and ethnic groups to archeological resources, human remains, and objects in collections.

Every archeologist and interpreter must be sensitive to the needs of all people who visit the national parks. He or she must also respect the cultural traditions of those whose histories are interpreted in national parks. Each park interprets ethnicity and gender in specific reference to its unique resources. Two examples of sensitivity to specific cultural groups are offered below, but there may be other cultural groups with specific ties to particular parks.

Consultation with diverse populations will improve interpretation because it

- Ensures appropriate content and accuracy
- Identifies multiple points of view and potentially sensitive issues

Acknowledging multiple points of view does not require interpretive and educational programs to provide equal time or to disregard the weight of scientific or historical evidence.

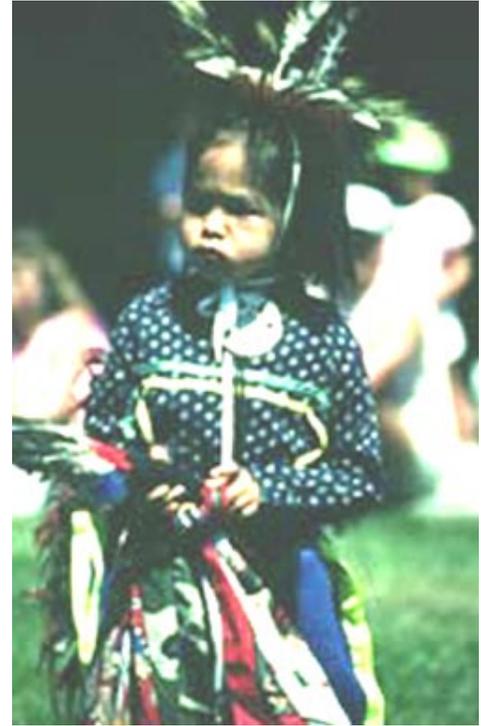
For Your Information

Cultural Groups

This web page provides links to other sites reflecting how the values, beliefs and achievements of numerous cultural groups have helped to shape America and continue to shape our parks today.

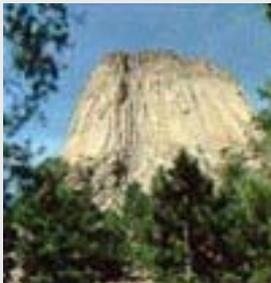
Sensitivity to Native American Cultural Traditions

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) formally affirms the rights of lineal descendants, Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations to custody of Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony with which they can show a relationship of lineal descent or cultural affiliation. In enacting this legislation, Congress and the President acknowledged that over the course of the nation's history, Native American human remains and funerary objects have suffered from differential treatment as compared with the human remains and funerary objects of other groups. They also acknowledged that the loss of sacred objects by Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations has negatively impacted Native American religious practices. They further acknowledged the failure of American law to recognize concepts of communal property that were traditionally and still are in use by some Indian tribes.



Nez Percé tribal traditions are preserved at Montana's Big Hole National Battlefield. (NPS)

Fun Fact



At Wyoming's [Devils Tower National Monument](#) at least six tribes still perform traditional ceremonial activities that demonstrate the sacred nature of the site. These activities include prayer offerings (bundles and cloths), sweatlodge ceremonies, vision quests, and Sun Dances.

Devils Tower National Monument (NPS)

Case Studies

Kennewick Man

This web site links to resources on the human skeletal remains of "Kennewick Man", found in 1996 and claimed by Indian tribes, local officials, and some members of the scientific community.

Native Americans at Mojave National Preserve

This web site describes how local tribes were contacted and given the opportunity to present their own story.

Sensitivity to African American Cultural Traditions



The Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site in Washington, DC commemorates Mary McLeod Bethune, who worked tirelessly to influence legislation affecting African Americans and women. (NPS)

The archeology of African American people has included particularly the studies of African American cultural group diversity, the African Diaspora, and slavery. This archeology has grown rapidly over the past few decades and is a major interest in American archeology. In addition to research, many social, political, and intellectual forces have spurred the growth of African American archeology. These forces include: increasing numbers of African American archeologists with interest in their own heritage; black activism; passage of historic preservation legislation; archeological interest in immigrant ethnic groups; and the increased use of archeology, ethnography, and ethnohistory in public interpretation of historic sites such as urban settings and plantations (Thomas 1998:531).

Effective interpretation of archeological resources associated with African Americans depends on sensitivity to public emotions about and understanding of issues such as slavery and racism. Evidence of these issues in the archeological record presents educational opportunities for archeologists and interpreters. African American contributions to American history are also well documented in the archeological record and serve equally to educate visitors. African American social traditions, religious practices, and oral histories are rich resources for archeologists and interpreters developing research designs and educational programs.

Case Studies

Our Shared History: African-American Heritage

This web site features many exciting and innovative sites related to African American heritage available across the NPS web site, nps.gov.

African-American Households from Manassas National Battlefield Park

This web site describes how archeological excavations revealed a diversity of cultures and social classes that lived in what is now Manassas National Battlefield Park before and after the Civil War, particularly the enslaved and free African American community members.

Using What You Know: *Assess Your Knowledge* (#7 of 10)



- Using what you have learned about archeology, how would you facilitate connections for modern populations to highlight the relevance of archeological work to modern life contexts?
- What controversial or sensitive issues impact interpretation at your park? How might you use archeology as a medium to address a history of sensitive issues? As a medium for including traditionally under-represented populations?

References

Portions of this chapter were adapted from:

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