



TOP: Complex interbedding of volcanic ash layers and ancient campfires at Cascade Pass. Photo published in *Archaeology in Washington* by R. Kirk and R. Daugherty, 2007, University of Washington Press.

RIGHT: Microblades from Cascade Pass, dorsal and ventral views. The longest is about 3 cm. The two to the right are made from quartz crystal.

Archeology at Cascade Pass



Even today, there are anthropologists who assert that Northwest Native People were so river and ocean oriented that they all but avoided the mountains—but archeological data from Cascade Pass directly contradict this historically popular myth. Artifacts associated with ancient campfires reveal that Native crossings of the rugged North Cascades began at least 9,600 years ago, and recurred with such consistency that crossings became a traditional cultural activity embedded in the histories and oral literature of many bands living on both sides of the range.

Beginning with the earliest crossings, people carried with them stone tools made from rock types found on the Columbia Plateau, fifty miles to the east, and the Skagit River Valley, 20 miles to the west and north. Volcanic ash deposits (at least eight distinctive layers erupted from four Cascade volcanoes) buried their campfires, but they built new ones on top of the ash. Although it is the oldest well-dated alpine site in the State of Washington, Cascade Pass is not likely to be unique, but this supposition will be tested by future archeological investigations.

Current Status

Exploratory archeological excavations at the pass were completed in the summer of 2011. Excavation results will be published in a refereed professional journal article that is currently in preparation. Selected and preliminary results have been published already in several books and articles.

Discussion

Cascade Pass is the oldest radiocarbon-dated archeological site in the park and the only well-dated alpine site preserving five separate cultural layers and time periods. The artifact assemblage is dominated by microblades (tiny stone blades with razor-sharp edges) made from small, clear quartz crystals. Analysis of charcoal particles from the ancient campfires shows that pine wood was used as fuel in all time periods, but interestingly, pine trees do not grow at the pass today. Elderberry is the most common seed type identified from the campfire remains. The discovery at Cascade Pass of volcanic ash from Mount Baker marks the farthest known wind deposit of Mount Baker ash, an important finding utilized by geologists in preparing hazard studies that are consulted by emergency management agencies when planning appropriate responses to future eruptions of Mount Baker.