

Cultural Clutter - Tales In The Trash

Post-Visit Activity

Social Studies: Standard 2, Objective 1; Standard 4, Objective 1

Time: 45 minutes

Objective

Surface evidence indicating that prehistoric people lived by the Great Salt Lake encouraged archaeologists to undertake more extensive investigations. Students will list three or more types of evidence of prehistoric cultures that encouraged archaeologists to investigate the marshes around the Great Salt Lake. Students will also explain why it is important not to disturb archaeological remains.

Background

The archaeology departments of Utah's universities, the Utah Archaeological Society, and the office of the State Archaeologist joined together in the late 1980s to study the prehistoric sites on the edge of the Great Salt Lake. A number of artifacts and burial sites had been exposed by erosion as the lake rose and receded during the first half of the decade. Numerous sites were identified which contained artifacts from at least 2 different cultures. Some seemed to be temporary "camps", while others showed signs of permanent dwellings.

Because the rivers entering the lake flow over a long, gradual slope, the sediments deposited in the meanders of the lakeside marshes contain only fine silt. Heavier particles such as rocks and pebbles drop out higher up in the stream near canyons as the water velocity begins to decrease. Rocks used for fire pits, pottery shards, bones, and other artifacts are easily seen on this fine-grained surface. Any pottery pieces that have been soaked in salty water will crumble when handled,

Materials:

- Index cards with pictures and/or descriptions of artifacts found near the Great Salt Lake, such as: pottery shards that crumble at the touch, small rock chipped to a point with notches at the wide end, flakes of chipped rock (flint or obsidian), small pieces of charcoal or burned animal bone fragments, blackened stones that are too large to be transported by water
- Cultural Clutter Artifact Worksheet (1 per group)

because the salt crystals, which form inside the shards loosen the bonds between the layers of clay.

Removal of artifacts from a site can make analysis difficult or incorrect, and can destroy the scientific value of the site. This lesson introduces students to the ethics of archaeology as well as to the types of discoveries that led to more extensive surveys and excavations.

Procedure

1. Divide the students into small groups and explain that you are going to tell them a story. They should listen to the story and imagine themselves in the setting you describe.
2. Set the stage with the following (or a similar) story: " Let's take a stroll along the edge of a marsh near the Great Salt Lake and enjoy the silence away from city noises and crowds. Once in a while, a bird calls or flies overhead. The ground is very even and flat, except for the occasional ditch draining farms to the east. The soil is silt - extremely fine grained, with no rocks or pebbles. In some areas, this silt has a thin coating of fine white salt. Few plants are growing here, where the salty lake waters have been washing during the years of high water. The few scattered plants that are found grow close to the ground. Looking around you notice something different off to your right. There is a patch of darker soil that is gray in color and almost circular. A few rocks lay scattered around here, but nowhere else. Your curiosity is aroused, you inspect the area and find..."
3. Pass out an artifact card and worksheet to each group of students, showing them what they have found. Ask them to look at the card and discuss it with other members of their group, then answer the questions on the worksheet.
4. After the students have completed their worksheets, have each group describe their artifact to the rest of the class. As a class, discuss the questions on the worksheet.
5. Conclude the exercise with the following: "A man strolling along the lake shore in the 1980s found several partially uncovered graves and other artifacts. He could have made a collection of the artifacts to show his friends, or to just them put in a drawer in his house, but instead, he chose to report his finds. Archaeologists surveyed the area, and learned many things about the early inhabitants of the marshes. The gray circles were the remains of cook fires built by people who disappeared long before the first mountain men entered Utah. Some of the people had died there and were

buried near their marsh homes. By analyzing the various objects near the circles, archaeologists were able to add more pieces to the puzzle of the past. Only a few remnants of the lives of the early inhabitants still survive, and each artifact that is removed limits our ability to complete the puzzle.

6. Use the questions below to discuss why it is important to respect archaeological sites, and what we can learn from the past.

Discussion Questions

1. If you find an artifact or evidence of an archaeological site, why shouldn't you just pick it up and take it home? (Much scientific information would be lost because archaeologists can learn a lot about an object from its context; besides, it's illegal. Also, burial sites are sacred to Native Americans, and disturbing them is disrespectful.)
2. What should you do if you find artifacts or evidence of a prehistoric site? (Mark the location on a map, make drawings or take photographs of your find, and report it to the proper authorities.
3. Where would you take your information and pictures to report your discovery? (Antiquities Section, Division of State History in Salt Lake City,
4. Why do people of today want to know about people of the past? (opinion question)

Reference: Activity by Bonita Thacker

The Great Salt Lake Story, Utah Museum of Natural History 1997

Cultural Clutter Worksheet

Student's Name _____

Description of artifact:

Answer the following questions:

1. How did this object get out on the salt flat near the marsh?

2. What does the artifact tell us about the place it was found?

3. What do you think the artifact could have been used for?

4. Who might have used this artifact?

5. What would you do with the object when you found it? Why?
