CULTURAL RESOURCES OF WESTERN COLORADO

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The cultural resources of western Colorado, both archaeological and historical, are threatened with destruction as a result of the impending oil shale development of the Piceance Creek Basin. Participants in this conference share the responsibility for the salvage or preservation of these remains with the state and federal agencies that manage lands in the region.

The Office of the Colorado State Archaeologist recommends that a regional study and inventory project be formed and funded by the respective land owners—private, state, and federal—in a proportion relative to their respective ownerships. Such an inventory is needed to provide the basic prerequisite for wise management of these cultural resources. In addition, such an inventory carried out prior to oil shale development would provide information useful in the selection of areas either to be mined, studied, or set aside as cultural reserves. The need for a regional study is imperative in that the prior inhabitants frequently practiced seasonal migrations. Therefore, study of remains on isolated lease tracts will never provide a balanced understanding of prior regional land-use patterns.

So far, only preliminary surveys have been carried out at two locations within the basin. The Naval oil shale reserves have been surveyed by a party directed by Dr. David Breternitz of the University of Colorado. The recently leased Ca and Cb tracts have also been surveyed by a party directed by Dr. Calvin Jennings of Colorado State University. These efforts have covered about 10 percent of the lands within the Piceance Creek Basin; the majority of the oil shale lands are as yet completely unknown in terms of their archaeological and historical potential.

On the basis of studies of surrounding regions, we may anticipate that the remains of several major cultural groups will be found within the basin.

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The earliest peoples were hunters and gatherers who moved from place to place throughout the year, often occupying rock shelters. Their camping areas date as early as 5,000 to 6,000 years B.C.

Later, peoples in the region adopted agriculture of corn, beans and squash and began living in permanent villages of pithouses and above-ground masonry rooms. Known as the Fremont culture, these peoples lived in the region from 500 to 1200 A.D. They are perhaps best known for their art since they both painted and pecked designs on the sandstone cliffs of the region. Large standing human figures wearing elaborate headdresses are the best known. Other designs include handprints, shield figures and animals. Within the rockshelters, which they also occupied, we also find perishable remains—cordage, basketry, and even remains of the headdresses. Use of pottery was another common Fremont characteristic. Most striking perhaps is the evidence we have found that the Fremont peoples also practiced cannibalism.

Later peoples shifted back to a hunting and gathering economy and occupied temporary campsites on the ridge tops, rather than permanent villages. These later peoples include the historic Utes, some of whose pole structures, termed "wickiups," still stand.

Finally we have evidence of the immediate ancestors of the current occupants of the region. The remains of mining camps, line shack, corrals, and horse traps are all part of Colorado's historical heritage, a heritage that must not be destroyed in our search for additional sources of energy.

Our estimate of the size of the project required includes a summer field party of about 30 people and a permanent laboratory staff of 10. The total costs would therefore be in the vicinity of $150,000 per year for 5 years of field work, followed by $100,000 or more per year for 5 years of laboratory analysis of materials recovered and research report writing. The total costs thus anticipated are about $1½ million.