

“Footprints in the Past” – Angeles National Forest 2012

Driving through the desert to a PIT project in the Angeles Forest, I thought about my heritage in the southern California mountainous area between the coast and the desert. I grew up near the coast. I lived in Lancaster before it was a suburb of LA. I remember the post card view of snow clad Mt Baldy in the background with orange trees up close. But, I was not aware of the fact, people have been living here as “hunter and gatherers” for at least 8,000 years. We would be staying at a summer camp like facility with small cabins and large community room with kitchen up in the trees of the mountains and working below where the desert meets the mountains.

Doug is the Forest Archeologist and has been for years. He knows the area and he knows how to be a guide and instructor for us. My fellow volunteers were a diverse group from California, Arizona, Washington, and Delaware. The ages ranged from 25 to 70+. Half were veterans of PIT projects and other half wanted to see what archeology was all about. At the end of our two weeks, the newbie's were becoming addicted to this avocation like the rest of us. There were experts in the group: Maureen knew her geology and how to make a pine needle basket; Bob had a good perspective of the archeology like a college instructor; and everyone had the passion and energy to learn and have fun.



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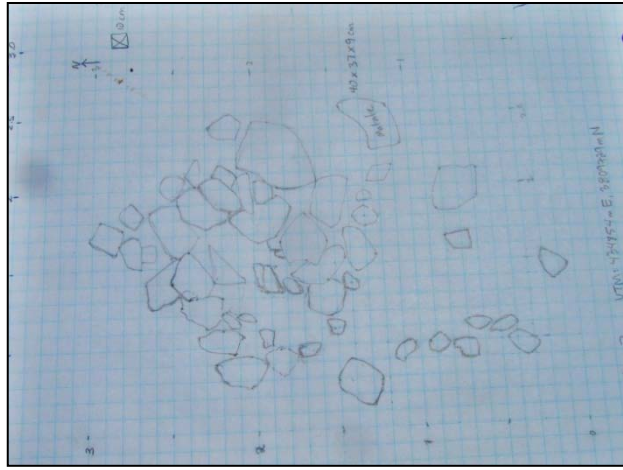
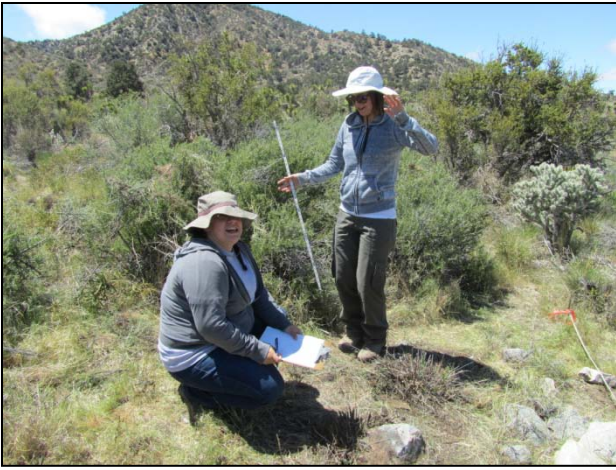
We had the chance to sample many of the daily activities of archeologists. Our main task was to examine and document prehistoric and historic settlements. Doug reiterated the first rule – always keep your daypack of water and lunch close by – many times in the first few days. We moved around the terrain. To locate sites of prior occupation or use, we walked the territory. The first day, we surveyed a flat area with a few trees, thorny bushes, and Joshua Tree cacti. After the easy day, the density of these obstacles to avoid dramatically increased. One morning we got to boulder hop across a creek to survey a high potential area in which we found nothing. On our last full day, we had to descend 800 feet watching ourselves on a steep firebreak road, then follow game trails through the vegetation down canyon, and crossing the creek when needed.

Once we found a site, we would place pin flags next to all features, stone clusters, and artifacts. The tasks at hand was mapping the boundary of the site using GPS coordinates, location and description of the features and artifacts, environment survey, photographs of the features and major artifacts, and if needed, a overhead drawing of the features. After all tasks were finished and we had a chance to think about what we saw, Doug would ask “what was the land used for” or “What is going on here”. For some of the sites, the answer was obvious, while others are perplexing.

The numerous sites we encountered ranged from small scatter of stone flake artifacts to a seasonal village near the creek. This village would be difficult to see unless one knew what to look for. The village would be used repeatedly by the early people to camp while exploiting the local resources. Found were fragments of stone manos and metates to grind and process vegetable materials. There were many cache rock clusters that were used to store pinyon nuts, yucca roots, and other foods. There was a rock circle that could be the foundation of a circular domed habitation framed structure. Projectile points and other tools have been found here from previous visits.

I know Glen's favorite activity is digging along with blessing everyone with pipe tobacco. Mine has become drawing the features. When I saw the rock circle, I volunteered to help draw it. We set up a north south measuring tape and an east west measuring tape to intersect the feature. With that, we were able to determine and measure the coordinates of the center of the larger rocks and place a dot on the graph paper. With the dimensions of the individual rock, we could draw the shape and size of the rock. With the smaller rocks we are able to guessimate the position and size. The next day, I was less selfish. We were divided into groups to draw three rock clusters. For our group, I set up the scale on the graph paper and drew the first rock. Then I stood back and let the others take turns drawing in the rest. Their sketch looked good.





The people living here were nomadic hunters and gatherers. They did not leave much behind. So every find was a discovery. The footprint or indicator they were here was the presence of midden; or trash dump, dark greasy soil from decay. It took us being down on hands and knees to find the micro-artifacts: shell beads less than half inch diameter, slate fragments with incised lines less than an inch long, and many small chert flakes. One day Ann found a broken stone bowl on top of the embankment. She was all smiles for her discovery. Later on, Jessica discovered another broken stone bowl downhill and about 100 yards away. Another happy face. Doug wanted to collect both artifacts for the Forest Service. That evening someone had both in their hands and fit them together. Another happy face!



After our hike down a steep firebreak road to the bottom of the canyon we were to document a site with cupules in bedrock boulder and quartz outcrop. Natalie, Josh, and I drew the boulder and the relative position of the nineteen cupules. Cupules are manmade ground-out circular depression. Uses by these people could be trail markers, astronomical observation markers, weather control magic (for rain), boundaries, or part of female fertility ceremonies. I did not see any deliberate patterns in the position of the cupules. Many times quartz can be used for the grinding. There were three pieces of quartz nearby and none showed wear. A few hundred yards away was a quartz outcrop (10 – 15 feet long and 8 feet high). Quartz was important to these people as it was a good stone for tool making. When I asked Doug for a complete explanation of this site, he was perplexed.



Our last day provided some the experience of using a trowel in the dirt. In the side of a hill that had been changed through the past hundreds of years by flooding and recent road building, Doug had noticed a dark layer of soil or midden (ancient trash dump). He wanted samples of charcoal so he could date the area. He sends the sample to a lab for carbon 14 dating. With proper measurement of location and ladders to assist, some of us used a trowel to scope out the man enhanced dirt. Others practiced the skill of shuffling nearby dirt in a screen. A large stone pestle was found on the surface nearby. Elsewhere, there is a rock cluster in a shape of a circle. He wanted to excavate it to determine the use, cache, stone cooking, etc. Some gained a new experience here.





Driving home gave me time to reflect on the memories of the past two weeks:

- Provided me a better understanding on how the “hunter and gatherer” people lived. These people were able to live off the land for thousands of years by only taking a partial amount of the resources at a time.
- Provided me a better understanding on the similarities and differences between the early people of California and the Southwest. These people made and used baskets, not pottery. Only one piece of pottery has been found in this area. Doug told us a story of a southwest archeologist who found it. He picked it up and broke off a piece to better examine the temper, which is a common practice in pottery country. He showed us the piece. I looked at it – too dark for Colorado Buffware and too light for Tizon Brown. Outside of my knowledge of California pottery.
- There is a new definition of wilderness living – no cell phone reception at the camp. However there would be spotty reception in the field.

Another couple of weeks in paradise!

By PIT Volunteer, Chris Reed