

Volunteers work to save fragments of the past

Forest Service program catalogues dozens of ancient pueblo sites

FREDONIA, Ariz. – History can be found in a variety of places by those interested enough to seek it out. Museum display cases, interpretive signs and thick volumes on library shelves come to mind. But before those facts, dates and stories can be made so accessible, someone has to gather all the little pieces and figure out how they fit together.

For history buffs fortunate enough to visit the Arizona Strip, those “pieces” are often still found scattered in the dust where they’ve sat undisturbed for many lifetimes.

“To think that you’re probably the first person to touch this in 1,000 years; that gets me every time,” said Brent Layton, as he held up one of many small, textured pottery fragments scattered about an ancient pueblo site on the North Kaibab Ranger District.

Layton, a St. George-area resident and volunteer site steward, was one of 22 participants in this year’s Passport in Time project on the North Kaibab district. The group spent the week of Sep. 14 under the guidance of Kaibab National Forest archaeologists surveying previously uncharted pueblo sites for the benefit of future historical inquiries.

Passport in Time, commonly known as PIT, is a volunteer archaeology and historic preservation program that occurs annually on national forests around the country. On the Kaibab, projects alternate between the north and south sides of the Grand Canyon every year.

This year’s project was facilitated by the Kaibab Vermillion Cliffs Heritage Alliance (KVCHA), a nonprofit group funded by the Grand Canyon Trust, which partners with public and private agencies to protect and interpret the cultural resources of the Arizona Strip.

The project area was brought to the district’s attention after a hiker reported stumbling across what appeared to be a pueblo site. By the time project volunteers finished working, the details of multiple adjacent sites had been found and recorded.

The information will be logged in a database and a site steward, like Layton, will check on the site periodically to report whether any vandalism or looting has occurred. One of the foremost goals of these projects is preservation, not just of the artifacts, but of the information they can provide.

“Understanding the bigger picture takes time,” said Connie Zweifel, North Kaibab Ranger District archaeologist. “We basically have more sites than we’ve been able to catalogue and that’s why these volunteers are so important.” Zweifel added that the Forest Service and other land management agencies have a variety of archaeology programs that are always seeking volunteer support.

Many of the sites surveyed by the PIT group are thought to date to around 1100 A.D. and are attributed to what is called the Ancient Puebloan peoples. The Ancient Puebloans likely grew their own corn, beans and squash and hunted deer and rabbit in the hills surrounding their farms.

To the untrained eye, a pueblo site may appear to be nothing more than nature’s random distribution of rock and boulder across a hillside. But with little effort archaeologists see the remains of small rock buildings, where ancient people may have slept, cooked, worshipped or stored their food.

The sites are usually surrounded by bits and fragments of old pottery, distinguishable by colored patterns and artistic textures, still prevalent after centuries of exposure to the elements. The pottery may have been used to store food or water, to cook with or for other purposes. Nailing down specifics about these fragments can often be tricky business, but modern science is providing clues.

“Now we can analyze blood, pollen and other proteins on the artifacts to help determine what they were used for,” Zweifel said.

In addition to the formal work of measuring off sites, sketching their likenesses into notebooks and entering their locations into laptops, the projects also provide an opportunity for archaeologists and volunteers to just come together and share information.

“Some of the best parts of the week are the evenings when everybody comes back to camp excited to talk about what they did that day,” Layton said with a smile. “As you can imagine, we sit up talking around the fire till all hours.”

“It’s the human connection that drives everybody,” said Rose Houk, KVCHA coordinator, writer and camp cook. “It’s really wonderful to watch the archaeologists when they sort of let their guard down and start talking passionately about what they’re finding and what life might have been like there.”

Houk makes the point that history is always changing, based on new and updated information. She hopes that projects such as this one will help write the next chapter.

“Little by little things are coming together,” she said. “Now we just need to find a way to get it all into a volume.”

To learn more about the U.S. Forest Service’s Passport in Time project, visit www.passportintime.com. To learn more about the Kaibab Vermillion Cliffs Heritage Alliance, visit the [Grand Canyon Trust](http://www.grandcanyontrust.org) website.

For additional information about the North Kaibab Ranger District, please contact Patrick Lair, Public Affairs Specialist (928-643-8172).

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