One Last Dissent on ROPA

Thomas F. King

I realize that ROPA is a "done deal," but I cannot let Bill Lipe's and Vin Steponaitis' latest effusion on the subject [SAA Bulletin 16(2):1] go without one last rejoinder.

If ROPA "succeeds"--assuming widespread registration of archaeologists as the measure of success--it will be a classic example of an all-too-human enthusiasm for non-solutions to ill-conceived problems.

The only plausible reason for ROPA's existence--as it was for SOPA's--is the perception that inadequate archaeology is being done by ill-equipped people. Without question, this problem is a real one in the world of applied practice under the environmental and historic preservation laws and regulations (often mislabeled "cultural resource management"). A similar problem may exist in academic practice as well, but if it does, the academic world has pretty substantial standards and quality control mechanisms already in place, which are unlikely to be much improved upon by ROPA. It is credulous to think that an institution that doesn't demand a high level of education and ethical performance as conditions of employment and tenure is going to adopt ROPA registration as such a condition.

The problem of poor quality and unethical work does exist, and needs control, in the world of non-academic applied practice, but it is only one of a complex of overlapping and interacting problems. "Solving" one problem will not solve the others; indeed, it may

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Tom King was one of the founding members of the Society of Professional Archeologists (SOPA), as was I. Although he really doesn't like the term "cultural resource management," his definition of the term "CRM" means a broad, public-oriented field that subsumes historic preservation and aspects of environmental planning. Just because Tom has been a creative and effective contributor to archaeology and CRM over the years doesn't mean he is always right. Here, he argues that problems of archaeological standards and ethics can't be fixed without fixing all the things that are wrong with the CRM field, and that in any case, archaeologists should put their efforts into improving CRM practice rather than continuing to focus on furthering professionalism in archaeology. His listing of the problems afflicting CRM provides us with some insight into what he thinks we should be doing.

For starters, I disagree with King's initial premise--that standards and ethics are primarily a problem for CRM archaeologists. One does not have to look very hard to find problems in academia as well. For example, timely reporting of field research and ensuring access to field and laboratory data after a reasonable period of time are issues more likely to arise in academic archaeology than in cultural resource management. And although there are numerous highly professional field schools run by academic institutions, we all are aware of others that succeed best in teaching students that it is okay to dig up sites
exacerbate them. On the other hand, failure to address the whole range of problems will doom efforts to solve any one of them by itself.

The problems—other than archaeological quality control—that should be of concern to practicing applied archaeologists, include:

- The entire enterprise of environmental and historic preservation impact analysis and review is perceived by many to take too long, cost too much, and yield too little public value.
- A widespread perception that "cultural resource management" is an enterprise only of archaeologists and architectural historians causes whole classes of resources—landscapes, social institutions, religious practices, historical documents—to be ignored in impact analysis.
- The public is inadequately involved in virtually all aspects of the "CRM" endeavor.
- Conflicts continue with indigenous groups and other descendant communities.
- Planning is often insensitive to the cultural concerns of affected communities while giving great credence to the interests of technical specialists and the keepers of official resource registers.
- Consideration of cultural resources continues to be poorly integrated into project and program planning, resulting in costly conflicts and missed opportunities.
- The interdisciplinary research and planning required by the National Environmental Policy Act and other authorities continues not to happen.
- The cultural resource management enterprise is widely and destructively understood to be a process of "clearing" projects already decided upon, rather than one of thoughtful planning and alternative analysis.

Will registering archaeologists solve, or even address, any of these problems? I can't see without having the time, funds, or expertise to analyze and report the results (SOPA established a program for certifying field schools, which ROPA will carry forward).

When archaeologists are working within the CRM field, many of their problems in maintaining standards and ethics stem from pressures to keep costs low, as noted by King when he says that "the entire enterprise of environmental and historic impact analysis and review is perceived by many to take too long, cost too much, and yield too little public value." Admittedly, archaeologists must diligently continue their efforts to become more efficient, set clearer priorities, recognize other stakeholders in the process, and publicize the results of their work. But in the real world, cost and time pressures will always exist and will sometimes force archaeologists to decide whether or not they can do a professionally respectable job under the constraints. In fact, professional standards and a code of ethics can help archaeologists resist the inevitable pressures to do substandard work. In a highly competitive field, the alternative may be a gradual descent into a kind of marginally profitable hand-waving, where the form but not the substance of professional archaeology applies.

King's argument that "failure to address the whole range of problems will doom efforts to solve any one of them by itself" seems to me a formula for postponing action and enshrining drift. Everything is, of course, affected by everything else, but we have to start somewhere. If Tom King or another archaeologist or architectural historian wants to begin to define and develop professional standards for the field of cultural resource management, I would be happy to cooperate, and I believe that other officers of the Register of Professional Archaeologists (ROPA) and its members will as well. But our primary
how. Rather, it will most likely exacerbate some of them. Imposition of "higher" archaeological standards will increase costs and require more time. Focusing on archaeology will encourage continuing ignorance of other resource types. Greater enforcement of such standards will also freeze out the interested public and make cooperation with descendant communities more difficult. Emphasizing archaeological priorities will broaden the gap between archaeologists and other disciplines and increase the irrelevance of our practice to local communities. Greater enforcement of such standards will also freeze out the interested public and make cooperation with descendant communities more difficult. Emphasizing archaeological priorities will broaden the gap between archaeologists and other disciplines and increase the irrelevance of our practice to local communities. Costly and time-consuming "improvements" in archaeological practice will make it more difficult to address cultural resources early in planning, and encourage late, clearance-oriented treatment of such resources.

None of these exacerbations need occur, but keeping them from happening will require thoughtful attention by ROPA's creators and proponents. Is such attention likely? I can't see any evidence that it will be.

I am not suggesting for a moment that the status quo cannot be improved upon, or that it is even tolerable. I simply cannot see how the registration of archaeologists will improve things, and I can easily see how it may have opposite effects.

ROPA's predecessor, SOPA, made some practical sense when it certified archaeologists in different specializations. This gave potential clients and employers some idea what they were getting for their money. Rather than developing and building on this useful idea, SOPA abandoned it in favor of certifying archaeologists qua archaeologists, and it is this pointless purpose that ROPA will build upon.

What would be useful, perhaps, would be a registry of cultural resource management practitioners, with registration based on charge as officers of an existing organization--ROPA--is to ensure that it carries out its mission successfully. Tom King may not think that mission is important, but I think most archaeologists would disagree. Upholding standards of professionalism in archaeology may not save the world, but it is worth doing. And that is independent of whether one agrees or disagrees with King's analysis of the problems afflicting CRM.

Unlike the sprawling and multifaceted field of cultural resource management, archaeology is a relatively well-defined pursuit with well-established methods. Archaeology's distinctive contribution to society is its ability to construct credible accounts of the human past based on systematic study of the archaeological record of that past, by means of methods developed for that purpose. Archaeologists have responsibilities to the archaeological record, descendant communities and the general public, and colleagues. These responsibilities apply whether archaeologists are evaluating sites to see if they are worthy of preservation or whether they are seeking data for a specific research problem. Archaeology is in fact a profession and should act like one. Codification of its ethics and standards is feasible and appropriate; ROPA exists to maintain a code of ethics and standards of research behavior, and to censure archaeologists who violate them. If, as King implies, there are few examples of unethical and substandard behavior in archaeology, that is well and good, but does that mean we should not try to address such violations when they occur?

Cultural resource management draws upon the expertise of a number of professions, of which archaeology is one. It is a good thing for archaeologists to contribute their expertise to this field, to help ensure its success, and to be
demonstrated knowledge of the field's interdisciplinary and supra-disciplinary method and theory. As the masquerade of a solution to a quasi-problem, ROPA will merely distract good minds from attending to real issues, and lull people into thinking that something has been solved.

I hope ROPA fails—if "failure" is defined as not conning too many people into investing time and trouble in it, or taking it too seriously. If ROPA succeeds, it will be at best irrelevant, and quite likely destructive, to the interests of thoughtful cultural resource management.

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classified about its problems, but we do not abdicate our responsibilities to behave as professional archaeologists when we do these things. If a clear set of ethical and procedural standards are ever developed for the kind of cultural resource management that King envisions, these might affect how archaeologists make their contributions to this field, but they would not remove the need for archaeologists to have their own standards on what they should and should not do as professional archaeologists engaged in studying and interpreting the archaeological record.

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