THE NATIONAL PARKS have long played a leading role in advancing archaeological research, says Bill Lipe, noted scholar and past president of the Society for American Archaeology. Today, however, he believes the agency's preservation successes may threaten the flow of knowledge and, ironically, the reason for saving sites in the first place.

“When a building is preserved,” he says, “it stands as a highly public representation of the qualities that make it worth preserving. For most archaeological sites, preservation is only the starting point.” He believes that study, including judicious excavation, is essential to realizing a site's information potential, and hence its value to the public. Since digging destroys sites, however, the idea strikes at the very heart of preservation.

In the 1950s, sites were often completely dug up, sometimes yielding only a brief report with little possibility for more. Today, however, the "sherd-to-word ratio" is far better, so that much more can be learned from a smaller slice of earth. Despite these advances, he believes, little or no excavation is being conducted in most parks; as a result, information is going out of date. For comparison, Lipe points to current work at Crow Canyon Archaeological Center (a private research center in Colorado) which is spawning a sizable literature based on excavating less than one percent of a few sites in the region.

“I realize it’s easy for me to sit outside the parks and pontificate about it,” says Lipe, while lauding recent Park Service research projects. The problem, he says, is encouraging more of them.

Here he discusses the far-ranging implications for all our public lands—and beyond.

COMMON GROUND: Why is archeological research on public lands important?

Lipe: The people of the past are gone, the words they spoke and the things they did, but the artifacts that shaped their lives are still here, and stand as a direct link between us and them. When I take people to Mesa Verde or Chaco, they want to know whether a wall or building is real or restored. In Britain it makes a huge difference to realize that a wall was once part of a Roman fort. Research makes these connections. The earliest stone tools are...
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"The earliest stone tools are mere lumps of stone. But knowing they are two million years old is a telling fact. This kind of authenticating information seldom is self-evident. Yes, written history and oral tradition provide ways of knowing the past, but archeology has its own voice.

COMMON GROUND: How does preservation affect the issue?

LIPE: I believe there are problems in how preservation is being carried out in most federal agencies. These problems are rooted in the social value of archeological sites, and in the way preservation programs deal with that.

Archeology's main contribution to society is producing and disseminating information based on systematic study of what's left in the ground. Most sites gain value according to their potential to contribute knowledge. Therefore, one measure of a preservation program's success is whether anything useful is learned. Excavation is one of the main ways we go about learning. No question, excavations must be frugal. Digging destroys sites. Nevertheless, what justifies preservation is the ability to use the archeological record to gather new information. Archeology is more than excavation, but an archeology without excavation cannot fulfill its social role.

Sometimes our zeal to be good preservationists, and follow the letter of the law, undercuts why we're protecting sites to begin with. We need to consider both the means—preservation—and the ends—understanding—and not assume one will take care of the other.

COMMON GROUND: What's the research role of the Park Service as you see it?

LIPE: The Park Service preserves and interprets our cultural treasures—archeological sites, standing structures, historic battlefields and landscapes, traditional properties important to Native Americans and other groups. Stewardship of course is essential. But research and interpretation are too. The three work together. If you have great resources you have great opportunities for interpreting them to the public, and research feeds the dynamic.

There's also an implied responsibility. Since the Park Service is charged with protecting these resources, it has a responsibility to lead. Archeological stewardship by itself doesn't accomplish anything. It just makes it possible sometime in the future to do research and interpretation. If they don't get done, stewardship is left without a real goal.

COMMON GROUND: What are the barriers?

LIPE: At least in some parks—and this is generally true in federal agencies—there's a tendency to think that research should be postponed until excavation techniques get better. In the past, I've made that argument myself. There's a good reason why this philosophy evolved. In the early days, methods were very crude. Many sites were completely dug up, precluding future research. Although preservation remains a good policy, it can be carried to an extreme. What you're saying is that we're preserving sites
today so better research can be done tomorrow. However, if the field continues to improve, we’ll always be in that position. So you’re always postponing into the future. This is an unwise stance. If you simply cut off research for the next century, you weaken the puzzle-solving process by hiding some of the pieces. Techniques, questions, and knowledge need to evolve together.

COMMON GROUND: How does this policy play out on the ground?

LIPE: Park managers are often overly cautious in approving projects that involve even minimal intrusion. So certain kinds of research seldom get done by inside-the-park archeologists. When it comes to outside researchers, the same policies apply, but there’s also a demanding proposal-and-permitting process that can take months if not years. What does get done are projects designed to meet the demands of the National Historic Preservation Act—when a site is threatened by a new road or pipeline, something like that.

Pledging to dig only on threatened sites has the unintended effect of trivializing archeology’s contributions to society. Essentially, what we’re saying is that any other socially approved activity, like putting in an access road, ranks higher as a reason for excavating than the prospect of learning something.

My own research, done with colleagues from the Crow Canyon Center, focuses on AD 1150-1300 Puebloan communities in southwest Colorado and southeast Utah. These sites may have 50 to more than 500 structures, and many are on public property. Most of the Puebloans lived here during that time. Learning about these sites is essential to understanding life at that time. Yet they’re not threatened by public projects, because they’re too big. If we had to wait for a pipeline to go through, we’d be in for a long wait.

Our methods go very light on the land. We’re combining surface survey, remote sensing, and sampling-based excavation, which affects less than one percent of a site. I think this is a perfectly justifiable conservation model that can be used in the parks and elsewhere.

Let’s face it—research, even when it involves excavation—is one of the smallest threats to the resource.
COMMON GROUND: Could you talk about the synergies you see among stewardship, research, and interpretation?

LIPE: Public understanding is not automatic. When the visitor encounters a site, the implied question is what does this mean. Interpretation requires an intellectual context. Research provides that. The context evolves as we learn more about the places and objects that have miraculously survived from the past. Archeological research is not the only source of interpretive information, but it's an important one.

COMMON GROUND: So how does this foster stewardship?

LIPE: Fulfilling the public good, helping the public gain some perspective is the ultimate goal. Stewardship is essential so that the real things from the past can be preserved and studied and displayed. Interpretation is the user-friendly interface between the visitor and the artifact. Research, by feeding interpretation, keeps the reason for stewardship alive.

COMMON GROUND: Can you cite some NPS projects that are maximizing the connections between stewardship and research?

LIPE: Many park archeologists have found ways to get research done alongside strong preservation policies. Larry Nordby's work at Mesa Verde, for instance—gaining insights into how cliff dwellings were built and used through detailed architectural studies and tree-ring dating. Larry is working with Jeff Dean at the Laboratory of Tree Ring Research at the University of Arizona on these studies, which do very little to disturb the larger setting.

COMMON GROUND: How is that work stimulating interpretation and stewardship?

LIPE: Nordby's project is producing new maps, new interpretations of sites that have been on display for generations—Cliff Palace, Balcony House, Spruce Tree House. In general, the parks do a good job of synthesizing regional research when they revise exhibits. My point is that this is increasingly based on research outside the parks, because that's where most of the work goes on. Archeologists are sometimes involved in making their field accessible to the public, but for the most part that job is done better by specialists—journalists, TV producers, museum exhibitors, teachers, park rangers. Nordby worked with writer David Roberts to publish a piece in Smithsonian. This really expands a park's ability to interpret its resources. A lot of work is going on to improve this interface. The Society for American Archaeology is developing a number of K-12 programs, and has a media relations committee that's working to bring researchers together with the press.

COMMON GROUND: How do you think the research potential can be realized?

LIPE: There are lots of opportunities for the Park Service to leverage its personnel and dollars. They should, first, integrate research and management and, second, collaborate with other organizations, other agencies, non-profits, academic archeologists.

Many parks are surveying huge chunks of land, something rare in research outside the parks. Those surveys are incredible opportunities to learn how people used the landscape, and to spot relationships among regions in the past. The recent work at Bandelier National Monument is a good example. Other projects haven't been so successful in getting beyond piling up site forms. You know, park archeologists are more than capable. It's a matter of giving them the mission and the time. Give them a couple of months instead of a week to design the inventory. I've seen inventories that, with very little or no increase in cost, could have made much more substantial contributions to knowledge.

One major missed opportunity has to do with assessing the damage of the recent fires in the Southwest. This work tends to focus on known sites—documenting the damage and threats from erosion. But it often doesn't look at sites discovered due to the fires.
You see in the newspapers about how many new sites came to light. At Mesa Verde, there were hundreds. What you don't see is that little is being learned about them. What's needed is a broader vision of how the dollars are spent. Maybe it would cost too much. Or maybe some out-of-the-box thinking would give us more value.

**COMMON GROUND:** Can you expand on the idea of encouraging collaboration between park archeologists and academics?

**Lipe:** Mesa Verde recently issued a permit for its first research-oriented excavations in decades. Ken Wright, a prominent hydrologist who's explored past uses of water at Machu Picchu and elsewhere, examined the prehistoric reservoir at Morefield Canyon, demonstrating there was a long history of sophisticated water management there. He brought expertise as well as funding, and his limited excavations produced a great deal of new knowledge. Working with both park and outside researchers, he also put together a workshop that explored whether Mummy Lake was a reservoir or a dance plaza. The answer seems to be that it was a reservoir, but probably not a very useful one. This kind of investigator-initiated research provides much of the dynamism in scientific fields. Park staff could leverage their own efforts by collaborating more.

I'll give you some other examples. A recent *American Antiquity* was devoted to an NPS project on Chaco Canyon from the 1970s and '80s. Park Service archeologists Tom Windes, Peter McKenna, and Joan Mathien all contributed, along with scholars from academia, museums, and the preservation field. I recently read a couple reports by academic archeologists taking the chemical fingerprints of construction beams at Chaco. They want to see where they were cut down and how far they were carried. This research can have a great impact on what the public knows about the park.

**COMMON GROUND:** What are some of the obstacles to such collaborations?

**Lipe:** It's a two-way street. One is receptivity on the part of the parks, putting a higher value on new knowledge. The other is for researchers to fit their interests into the parks' constraints. My experience with the Canon Park Scholars Program shows some of the problems. This is a great program—where else can an archeology grad student get $25,000 a year to support dissertation research? Yet in many years the number of applications has been surprisingly low.

Maybe students and advisors see the topics as too management-oriented. With some exceptions, they are missing the possibilities. Last year's topic was the effects of fire on cultural resources. Fire has affected the archeological record for hundreds of thousands of years. You can't get much more basic than that. Seems to me it's a lack of communication between the parks and the academic community. The physical and life sciences had lots more applications.

**COMMON GROUND:** Why was that, do you think?

**Lipe:** Those fields have a tradition of ties with academia. These relationships are more weakly developed in archeology.

**COMMON GROUND:** How can collaboration be encouraged?

**Lipe:** By putting the issue on the table, like we're doing now. Promote networking so outside researchers understand what projects will work in the park. Make publishing research a bigger part of the park archeologist's job. Get behind programs like the Canon Scholars.

**COMMON GROUND:** And what if the research flow continues to dry up?

**Lipe:** The parks, as stewards of our cultural treasures, have an essential role in showing how our lives are linked with the lives of the past. Research raises questions and stimulates new methods. If the research stagnates, so does our understanding of ourselves.

As this interview takes place, the NPS archeology and ethnography program is developing a distance learning course on archeology for park rangers and other interpreters, to foster the dynamic among research, stewardship, and interpretation. The course will be on the program's web site, www.cr.nps.gov/aadl. For more information, contact Barbara Little, NPS Archeology and Ethnography Program, 1849 C St., NW (NC210), Washington, DC 20240, (202) 343-1038, e-mail barbara_little@nps.gov.

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