

WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE?

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE USE OF THE 'SITE' CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT

During inventory studies, archaeologists regularly distinguish potentially important phenomena from those judged to have no value. The concepts of "site" and "isolate" have traditionally been used to organize, record, and manage valuable resources. However, even with a statewide definition for these terms, the concepts are still applied with little consistency. Unless we can resolve the underlying disputes that lead to such inconsistencies, comparative studies of land use and settlement will remain severely constrained. This paper examines the problem of inconsistent resource definition and offers suggestions for its resolution.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to talk about a four letter word archaeologists swear by. That word is "site". The term "site" is absolutely fundamental to the way we study and manage archaeological resources. But what is a site? If you ask a dozen archaeologists to apply the term, twelve different interpretations emerge. Even with official State definitions for sites and isolates, the inventory data we collect are far from comparable. As a result, meaningful analyses of land use and settlement patterning continue to be thwarted. After a while you start asking yourself, "Just how useful is the term 'site' anyway?"

In this paper I examine some of the sources of inconsistency in the way the site concept is presently used, with an eye toward resolving the disagreements on which those differences are based. Debate over use of the site concept focuses on three principal issues: (1) What are important versus unimportant resources; (2) how associations are defined; and (3) what should be considered appropriate minimum standards for inventory studies. It is my contention that all three disagreements ultimately stem from a failure to link our use of the site concept to explicit research needs.

Instead of making such linkages, most of us employ the site

concept in traditional ways that are based largely on subjective or arbitrary distinctions. While many of the premises behind such traditional use of the site concept may be valid, there is no way to judge their validity without critically examining each assumption against defined research needs. As I will argue throughout this paper, achieving comparability among inventory data will depend on convincingly demonstrating the research and management value of the way we propose to define and look for important resources.

DEFINING IMPORTANT RESOURCES

The first major source of disagreement regarding site definition concerns what kinds of resources merit archaeological attention. While no one will argue that middens or rockshelters deserve recordation, some archaeologists balk at documenting mining features, isolated artifacts, or even ditches and sparse lithic scatters. On a technical level, the State's site definition calls for recordation of any location containing at least three associated artifacts or one feature over 45 years old. However, the State's definition lumps distinctions among archaeological phenomena to only two categories (sites and isolates) of resources, and leaves room for interpretation on several grounds.

Is a piece of antique farm equipment a feature, or an artifact? Do three pieces of bottle glass from a single container qualify as a site? What about three pieces from three different bottles? How should exotic (non-native) vegetation not associated with other cultural manifestations be handled? Is a standing building archaeological? Or should we only record collapsing ones? And how do you treat artifacts or features that may, but can't with certainty be dated as over 45 years old? Various archaeologists have chosen to ignore, creatively interpret, or religiously document various kinds of cultural phenomena, largely depending on their personal perceptions of the research value of different cultural materials.

Subjective assessments of research value are hardly a sound basis for managing our fragile and non-renewable resources, however. Field decisions not to record certain kinds of phenomena are essentially a priori judgments of resource significance often made without reference to adequate contextual information. The inconsistent documentation of resources resulting from such personal biases limits comparative studies of land use to what I call the "lowest common denominator". That is, only the largest and most visible prehistoric sites are recorded with any regularity.

To reach consensus on what resources are worth recording (and in what detail), archaeological remains must be measured against the yardstick of research importance. We need to ask:

What important questions can we answer with each type of resource, and how can we best go about collecting relevant data? In previous decades there was a perception that important research was only possible at larger and more spectacular sites. Hence, only larger and more complex sites were recorded in any systematic fashion, and historic non-Indian sites were virtually ignored.

Most of us now recognize that it is naive to equate research importance with size and quantity alone. For instance, small activity areas used during a single episode of time may be very useful for resolving important inquiries when we examine groups of such resources collectively. While such small activity areas may have only limited value when viewed by themselves, each has the potential to contribute incrementally toward the resolution of important research topics. Small historic trash dumps, isolated bedrock milling features, and sparse lithic scatters are just a few examples of such resources.

Without consideration of the research value of all cultural phenomena represented on the landscape, we limit our ability to answer many important research topics in the future. It is thus imperative that we consider the research value of the full array of archaeological remains in relation to important questions rather than subjective biases.

CLASSIFICATION AND PACKAGING OF RESOURCES

The second obstacle for comparative studies of inventory data is what I call the "packaging" issue. A resource recorded as a single site by one archaeologist may be viewed as two or more sites, an isolate, a phenomenon considered unworthy of recordation, or simply a resource needing broader definition when recorded by various other archaeologists. This packaging issue has to do with the way we define associations, although it also depends on what we regard as important resources and what methods we consider necessary to discover such resources.

Deciding whether to lump or split a particular group of archaeological remains is a complex choice that we typically make either on the basis of arbitrary distance rules, or according to subjective criteria. When handled by a single arbitrary rule (e.g., 25, 50, or 100 meters between any observed remains), numerous regional and situational problems arise, and certain kinds of dispersed but clearly related activity loci may be administratively severed. Subjectively defined associations, on the other hand, result in uncontrolled variability in the treatment of resources and also may be subject to more conscious or unconscious "massaging" to suit non-archaeological agendas.

To increase the comparability of inventory data for research and management purposes, it would obviously be desirable to

create a set of standardized conventions for defining associations. Given the resource variability embraced within the state, a single arbitrary distance rule does not appear to offer a workable standard against which to consistently define associations. Rather, a set of rules will probably be needed to account for various situational factors that currently pose packaging problems. To establish such rules in a manner that will be most likely to satisfy both lumpers and splitters, I would first like to examine the reasons for making distinctions among resources. Some possible solutions to troublesome packaging problems can then be considered.

What is an "association"? At the most fundamental level, associations are relationships that we infer among the remains of past cultural activities. Such associations may be narrowly defined to encompass the remains of a single, highly specific task such as the production of a projectile point, or may encompass the physical traces of the activities of a group of people over a defined period of time. Through our definition of associations, we attempt to make sense of the patterning of past human activities on the landscape.

From a research perspective, it is desirable to employ the narrowest analytical units possible in order to elucidate interrelationships among different activities. In practical terms, however, the remains of past human activities often overlap, are mixed, and simply cannot be clearly sorted out into such small, discrete analytical units. Thus, we are often forced to define "associations" at a broader scale, to include repetitive or even temporally and culturally unrelated activities or occupational components that overlap each other. These larger management units are generally favored from a broad management perspective anyway, since it is unwieldy to keep track of multiple overlapping resource components. Both research and management considerations must be carefully weighed to arrive at workable standards for defining association.

The need for more than one rule for defining association becomes obvious when we consider various difficulties we currently face in packaging unending resources, lineal resources, and resources with related but spatially dispersed activity loci or features. The unending resource problem is perhaps the most familiar and thorny of these three issues. Both prehistoric and historic era examples of unending sites exist. For instance, anyone who has worked in proximity to a prehistoric quarry has had to cope with the "background noise" phenomenon, wherein debitage is distributed to the visible horizon without discernible interruption.

Likewise, extensive railroad logging and mining sites present similar problems for packaging. While it may be possible to cut up historic era properties using archival data and oral testimony, there are also many cases where more arbitrary

criteria will be needed to systematically approach the problem of packaging enormous areas containing a continuous distribution of material remains.

Lineal resources such as ditches, trails, railroad grades, and roads also pose management problems. When discontinuous lineal resource segments are encountered, it may be difficult to determine which pieces belong together and which should be considered separate entities. Inventory studies may only record short segments of such resources, leaving Information Center staff to second-guess their association.

Then, there are spatially separated loci and features that reflect coeval use by the same human agents. Some mining complexes, homesteads, and perhaps certain kinds of aggregated prehistoric activity loci reflect this pattern. Recording each loci separately may preserve the data we need for research purposes, but tends to pose a record-keeping nightmare. Management problems may also occur if associations among such separate loci are overlooked. On the other hand, drawing extensive resource boundaries to include areas devoid of cultural material may not be acceptable to land owners or managers.

In the absence of standardized approaches to such problems, variable treatment of associations also will continue to be aggravated by budgetary and other non-archaeological considerations. Remains may be lumped, designated as isolates, or ignored as unimportant to reduce what is perceived as a burdensome level of recordation. While budgetary constraints should not prescribe research directions, it is appropriate to ask what level of documentation we really require from particular resources to address realistic research needs. For instance, how much do we want to know about the remains of a placer operation or a ditch?

Like the resource importance issue, the packaging problem should resolve most productively by reference to specific research needs. Perhaps additional categories of resources need to be created, each with its own requirements for documentation clearly linked to research priorities. New resource categories such as "locations", "dispersed activity regions", and "extensive site areas" might help to resolve some of the foregoing packaging difficulties if standardized rules for defining association can be meaningfully devised for each.

MINIMUM INVENTORY STANDARDS

The third factor that has continued to confound comparative studies of inventory data is a methodological one. If different inventory methods are used in adjoining survey areas, the bottom line is that we cannot be assured that the results are comparable. Minimum standards for inventory studies can only be

defined in relation to the types of important resources anticipated in a given study region.

And yet, while we ostensibly recognize the need to choose discovery methods in relation to a research design, more often than not our actual selection is predicated largely on traditional assumptions that may or may not be valid. Since a primary goal of inventory studies should be to test our assumptions about where resources will be found, it is essential that we question traditional approaches if we are to reach any consensus on minimal resource discovery standards.

We commonly assume that the only resources it is reasonable or worth discovering: (1) Are visible on the ground surface; (2) will be found in the kinds of environments where sites have traditionally been found; and (3) are larger than a certain arbitrarily-selected transect interval. Although the potential fallacy of each assumption is apparent to us, we nevertheless often settle for methods we know may not reveal the full range of potentially important resources. Why is that?

We have conclusively established that many buried and concealed resources exist. For instance, forest fires have revealed many sites that were concealed by duff or brush, while trenching and underground construction activities have resulted in the discovery of buried sites. We know that discovery of concealed and buried sites during project construction limits management options, if the resources are reported at all by non-archaeologists. Yet few inventories are directed by research designs that predict the locations of such resources or employ methods specifically designed to find them. Should we consider a surface inspection adequate when we cannot see much of the ground surface, or we have reason to suspect buried sites?

Similarly, we miss resources that do not conform to our preconceptions of where sites should be. Should we not be regularly testing the validity of our traditional methods, given the very limited and unsophisticated land use analyses that have been attempted to date? And, last but not least, should we not adjust our methods to discover smaller resources that may have important information to yield either individually or on a collective basis? Ultimately, minimum inventory standards can only be defined in relation to specific regional research needs, although it may be possible to prescribe the levels of background research required to formulate research designs for inventory projects.

CONCLUSIONS

Inquiries into land use and settlement patterning require a high degree of cooperation in the collection of comparable baseline data. At present, inventory data continue to be

collected in ways that severely limit their comparability, despite a State definition for "sites" and "isolates". This is due in large measure to disagreements on resource importance, resource packaging, and suitable inventory methods, as discussed in this paper. The root cause of each of these disagreements stems largely from a failure to explicitly justify inventory needs in explicit research designs.

If we are to going to accomplish meaningful research with the inventory data we collect, we must achieve greater standardization in our approach to collecting those data. The only realistic way to set inventory standards (and get archaeologists to follow them) is to explicitly justify what we hope to accomplish with the data we propose to collect, and then choose appropriate methods, recording standards, and criteria for defining associations that clearly follow from those research needs. However, in the absence of such a comprehensive approach, I think it behooves us to over-record what we observe.