

## A BRIEF LOOK AT TWO PREHISTORIC SITE TYPES ON THE MODOC NF

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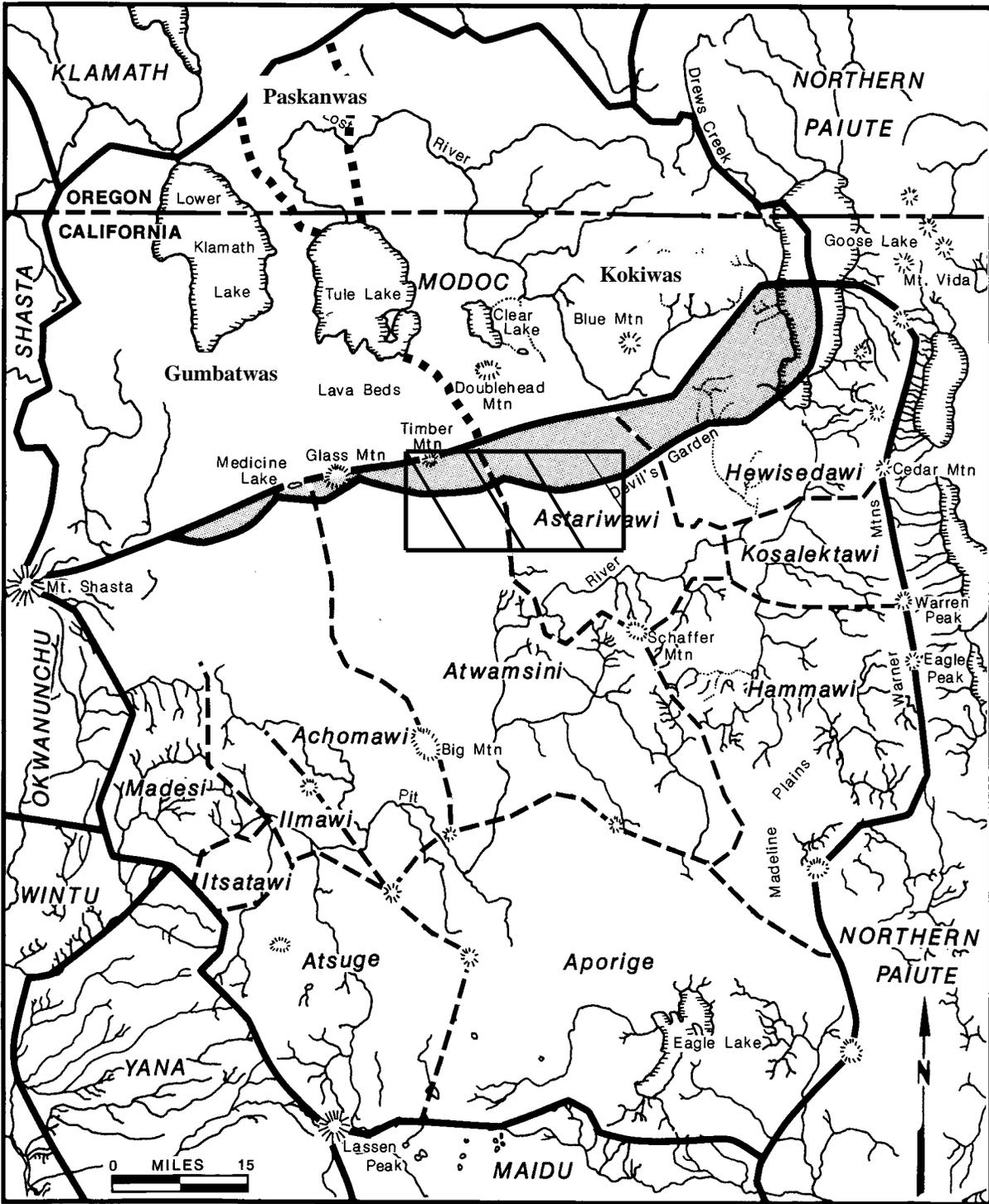
*This presentation takes a brief look at two additional prehistoric site types similar to the "small sparse lithic scatters" (or "small foraging and logistic locations") examined previously under a thematic NRHP determination of eligibility. The first type meets all the criteria of the small sparse site, but exhibits a moderate to dense surface lithic manifestation. The second meets all the criteria except that it is twice the size limit. Similar excavation methods were used as in the thematic study. This paper presents the results of those excavations.*

A few years ago I completed a thematic study of a class of prehistoric archaeological sites called "small sparse lithic scatters" or more formally "small foraging and logistic locations" (Gates 2004, 2007). Generally, these sites were up to 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> in size, had surface manifestations of about five flakes per m<sup>2</sup>, generally lacked diagnostic artifacts—but could have one or two projectile points or fragments or utilized flakes visible—were shallow in depth, and had no ground stone present. These are our ubiquitous "stinkin' lithic scatters" so common on the Modoc National Forest. As a result of the close archaeological inspection of a sample of 10 of these sites I concluded that a certain percentage of them (50 percent plus) were "single-use" or "time capsule" sites that contained pristine sets of archaeological data relative to a specific activity taking place at a specific location at a fixed point in time. This set of data contained within this class of site seemed to have major archaeological interpretive values in the arena of "landscape archaeology" and land use patterns across the landscape through time. The temporal aspect could be ascertained for each site through obsidian sourcing and hydration analyses. In the study final report entitled *A Thematic Evaluation of Small Prehistoric Foraging and Logistic Locations on a Portion of the Modoc Plateau of Northeastern California* (Gates 2007), I concluded that this "class" of sites, as a whole, contained significant archaeological information and was eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) under criterion D. The State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), in a September 2007 letter, did not object to this finding. Thus, we ended up with 243 contributing class members within the study area. Nineteen additional class members have recently been located within the study area and added to the listing.

The study area (Figure 1) is located on the Devil's Garden area of the Modoc Plateau, in a location that is a border zone between the Modoc tribe and the Pit River tribe. Further, this study area contains portions of territories of two bands of the Modoc (*Gumbatwas* on the west and *Kokiwas* on the east) and two bands of the Pit River (*Atwamsini* on the west and *Astariwawi* on the east).

The two site types in this current presentation also lay within this study area and include 1) small prehistoric sites up to about 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> in size, but with more than a "sparse" surface presence of lithics, the presence of diagnostic or other artifacts, and relatively shallow cultural deposits; and 2) prehistoric sparse lithic scatters between 1,000 and 2,500 m<sup>2</sup> in size, about five flakes per m<sup>2</sup>, no or few diagnostics present, and shallow depth—basically the same as the small sparse lithic scatter, just larger. As this presentation will illustrate, both of these types of sites provide challenges for recovering and interpreting the data collected when compared to the sample of sites tested in the small sparse lithic scatter thematic study.

The first site examined, CA-MOD-5740, was described as small sparse lithic scatter—about 100 obsidian flakes visible in an area under 800 m<sup>2</sup>, but with numerous Late/Terminal period projectile points and bifaces on the site surface (Figures 2-4). This site lies adjacent to a much larger site covering over 160 acres. It is within the Devil's Garden area about 20 mi. northwest of Alturas, California. It is within a

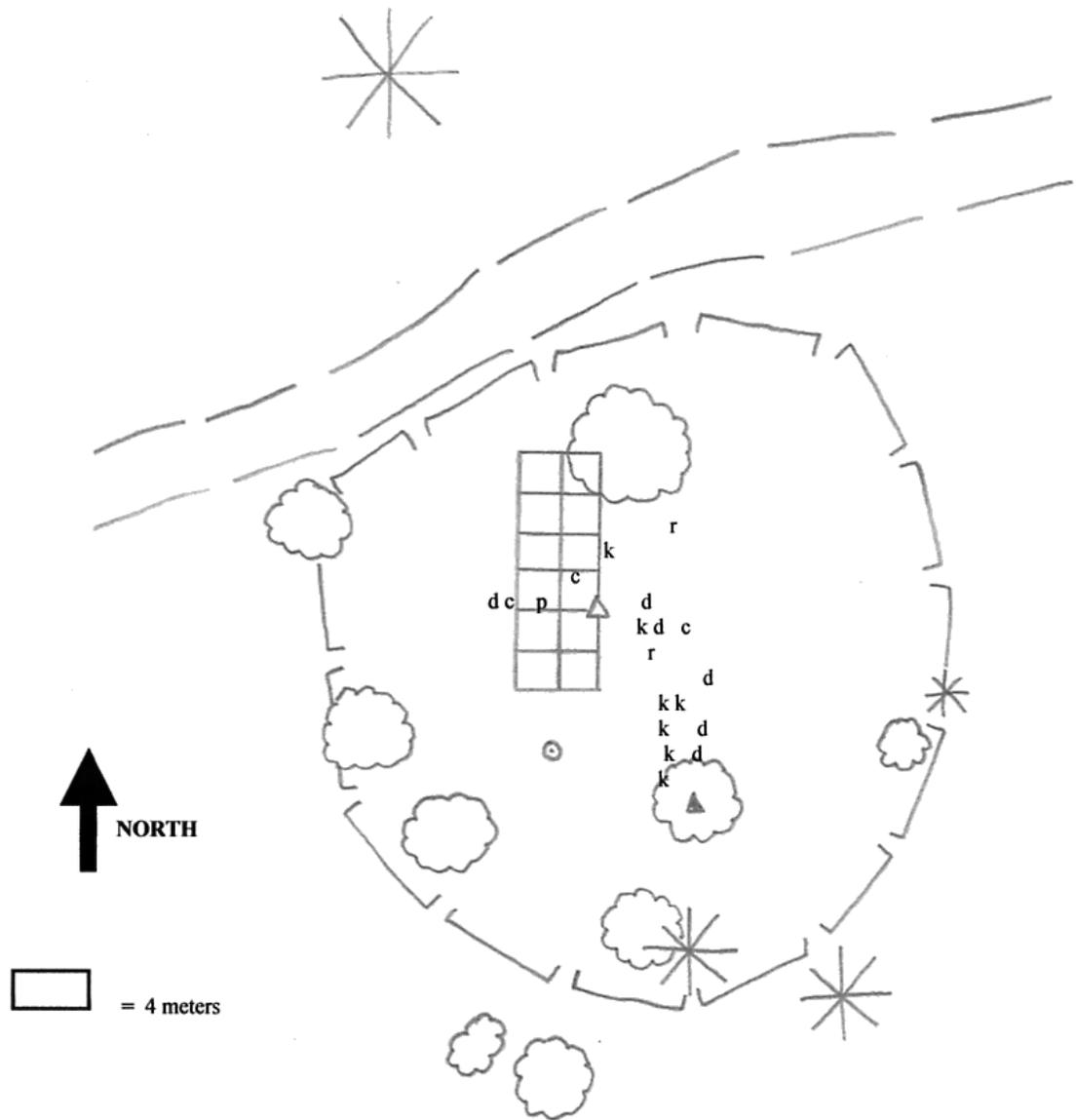


*NOTE: the gray tinted area is an "overlap" zone between the Pit River and Modoc tribes, possibly reflecting a southward expansion of Modoc bands.*

**Small Prehistoric Foraging and Logistical Locations on a portion of the Modoc Plateau**

 = Study Area

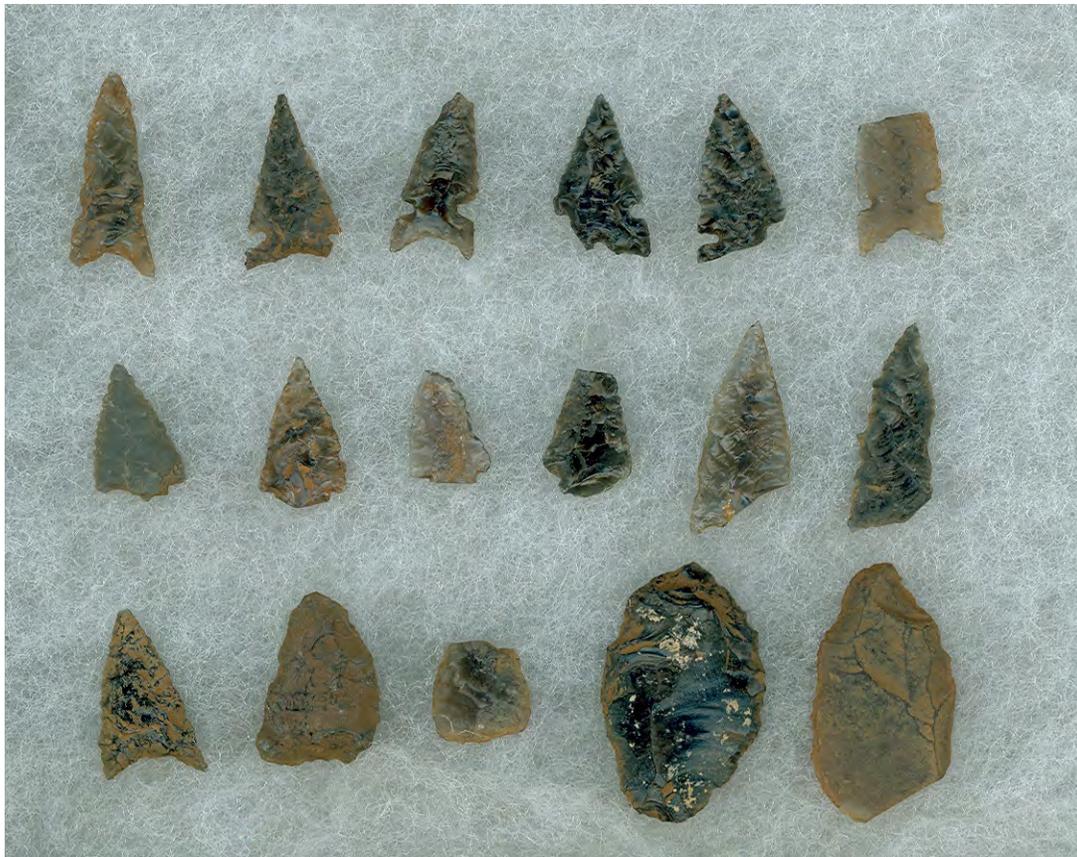
Figure 1: Ethnographic boundaries and the study area.



**CA-MOD-5740  
(FS-05-09-55-1323)**

- Legend:**
- ▲ - Datum Tag
  - ⊙ - Mapping Datum
  - △ - Grid Center Point
  - p - Proj Pt fragment
  - r - Rose Spring series?
  - ⎓ - Site Limits
  - - Excavation Unit
  - - Dirt Road
  - d - Desert Side Notched
  - ☁ - Juniper
  - ✳ - Pine
  - k - Knife/Biface
  - c - Cottonwood

Figure 2: MOD-5740 site map.



*Figure 3. MOD-5740 – projectile points and performs.*

ponderosa/Jeffrey pine forest interspersed with former wetlands and dry lakes and patches of juniper woodlands and sage steppe. The second site, MOD-2017, was described as small temporary camp with two small, compact, and moderately dense flake loci, and a possible Great Basin Stemmed (GBS) projectile point. It is situated about 1 mi. north-northwest of MOD-5740, in the same Devil's Garden environmental setting. It was recorded covering some 1,650 m<sup>2</sup>. This site was actually selected for testing due to the potential age of the site based on the recovered GBS point.

Both sites were subjected to excavation by crews of "Passport in Time" volunteers. Basically, the same number of units were excavated that would have been excavated if these were "small sparse lithic scatters" under the thematic study.

MOD-5740 had a total of 12 2-x-2-m units excavated to a depth of only 10 cm, for a total of 4.8 m<sup>3</sup>. As the data collected indicates, this certainly was not a "sparse" lithic scatter. Additionally, it resulted in making a liar out of me—as I have consistently told folks that in the local soils, due to acidity issues, bone, unless burnt or charred, will not preserve for any length of time. This site yielded more bone fragments than flakes! These consisted primarily of small and large mammal remains—several of the larger pieces being "deer"—and numerous unidentifiable fragments. In all, about 1,186 bone fragments were recovered, with 748 (63 percent) unburned. Over 90 percent of these were recovered from six adjacent units (Figure 5). Total debitage recovered included 897 flakes—91 percent obsidian, 8.7 percent basalt, and two flakes of "Stone Coal Red," a local metamorphosed volcanic stone (Figure 6). Visually the obsidian appears to be from Buck Mountain and Sugar Hill in the north; Warner Mountains to the east; East Medicine Lake, Cougar Butte, and possibly GF/LIW/RS in the Medicine Lake Highlands to the west; Blue Mountain to the north; and possibly Tuscan from further to the southwest. Specimens from



Figure 4. MOD-5740 – bifaces and fragments.

this site will be sent for both obsidian sourcing and hydration analyses. At present, the apparent obsidian mix indicates that this most likely was a Pit River/*Astariwawi* band occupation, rather than *Kokiwas* Modoc. I suspect the hydration readings will cluster between 0.8 and about 1.5 microns, indicating occupation around the late 1500s. We did send 15 specimens, bagged in the field, for blood residue analyses—checked against seven antisera and, disappointingly, having no positive reactions. We are still hoping to have someone look at the faunal remains to glean some additional information from that data set.

Potential “activity loci” like those shown here are much harder to identify with widely scattered 1-x-1-m units (or smaller) spread across the site. Traditional testing methods on this site probably would have entailed two or three 1-x-1-m units, with little data recovered.

The second site, MOD-2017, had 16 2-x-2-m excavation units undertaken to a depth of 10 cm, for about 6.4 m<sup>3</sup>. Due to the size of the site, over 1,600 m<sup>2</sup>, it was difficult to recover an adequate sample of materials from the site. Four of the units yielded no archaeological materials, and another nine yielded 10 or fewer items each. The bulk of the archaeological data came from only three units. Only 133 pieces of debitage (86 percent obsidian, with a few flakes of basalt, chert, and chalcedony), four projectile points (three from one test unit), one biface fragment, and nine utilized flakes or expedient tools were recovered

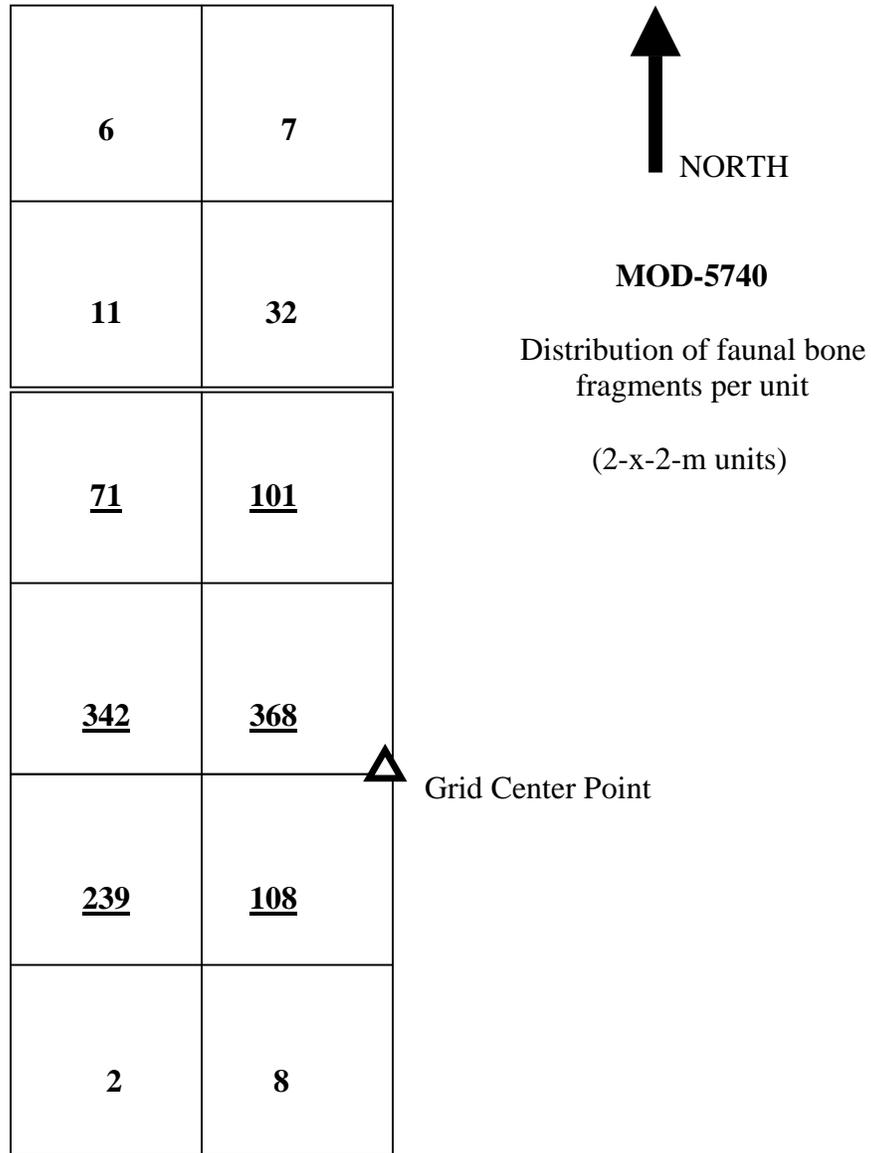
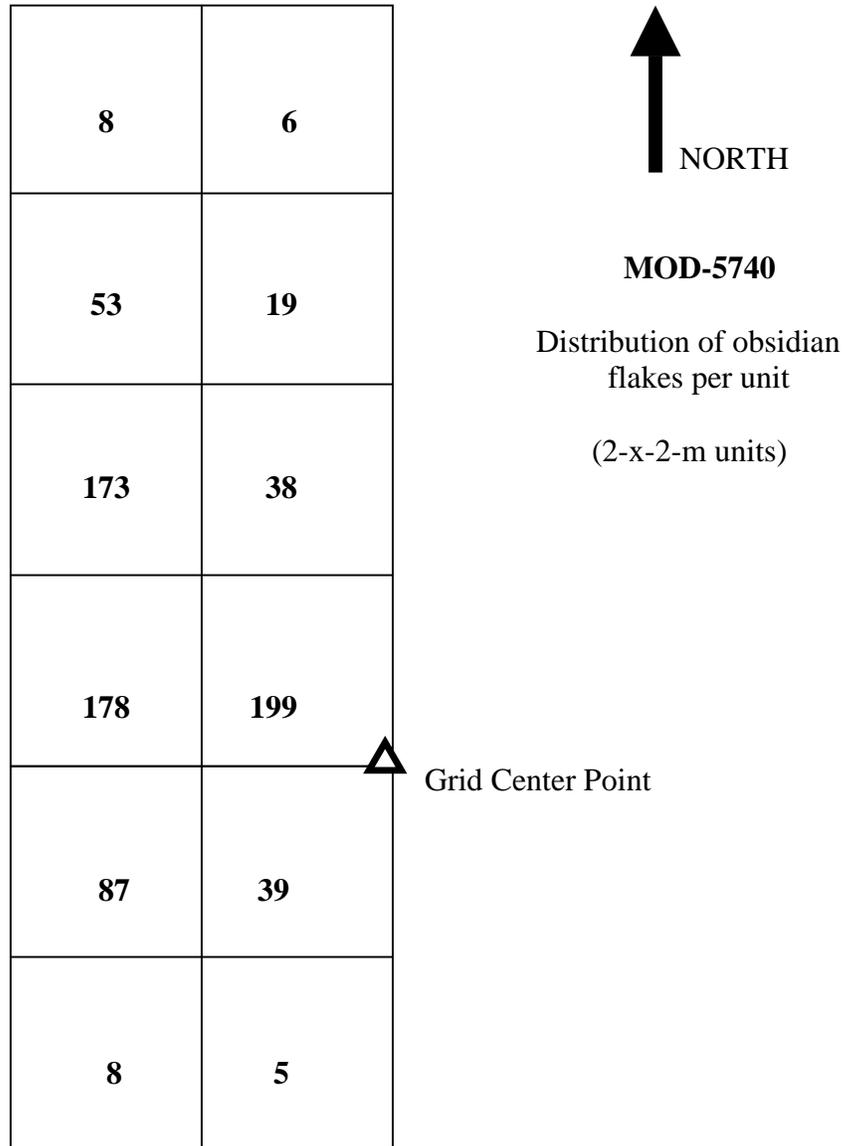


Figure 5. MOD-5740 showing the distribution of faunal bone fragments recovered from the excavation units.

from the site. One potential “activity locus” was located (Figure 7). Twenty-nine very small to small charred bone fragments were recovered from three of the units in the site.

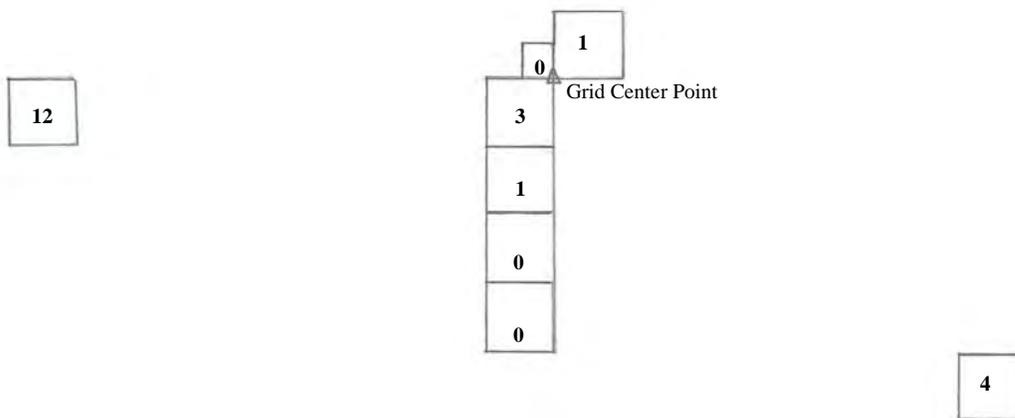
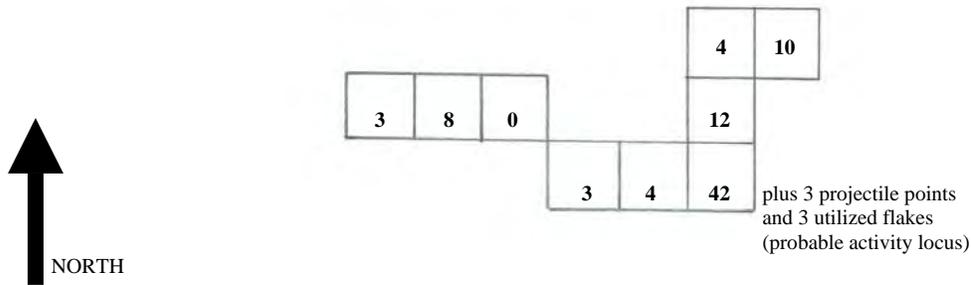
In examining both of the site types—the small but intense concentration, and the larger, sparse scatter—some similarities are evident with the sample of sites from the “small prehistoric foraging and logistic locations.” First, the smaller site has very similar data sets—just “more” of everything—generally more points and tools, and a little more debitage than average, plus the faunal remains (this, however, is probably actually rare in this type of site). The first site, MOD-5740, appears to be an intensively used “single-event” or “time capsule” site, and, as in the small sparse study, has the potential to yield archaeological data that are tied to a specific point in time at a specific place and tied to a specific activity. I suspect this site represents a very short-term hunters’ camp where game (e.g., deer and small and medium mammals) were butchered and some cooked and consumed on-site, projectile points were



*Figure 6: MOD-5740 showing the distribution of obsidian waste flakes recovered from the excavation units.*

discarded or resharpened, and expedient tools were made or utilized and discarded on-site. The visual sourcing of the obsidian tends to indicate the folks using this spot were most likely Pit River/*Astariwawi* in origin. These obsidian data tell us something about the preferred sources and possibly some indications of trade, and the debitage indicates that this small group of hunters carried with them obsidian cores and/or nodules for expedient tools. These Terminal or very late Late period site data can be used for comparative purposes against similar sites in other band or tribal territories in similar time periods or with similar sites dating to the Middle or Early Archaic to identify trends and/or changes in preferred toolstone sources and/or trade through time.

The data set from the second site, the larger, sparse MOD-2017, is also similar to the small sparse sites, but overall the sample is smaller because it was more difficult to find the “heart of the site” or the area, or “locus,” of concentrated archaeological materials. One test unit (N06/E03) may have touched the



## MOD-2017 (FS-05-09-55-0902): Placement of Excavation Units

 = 2 x 2 m

# = number of flakes recovered

Figure 7. MOD-2017

edge of such a locus, and the area could be subject to additional shallow excavation to confirm or refute this. The obsidian sources from this site are a little harder to interpret—a significant amount of Blue Mountain obsidian (19 percent) was recovered from the units and site surface. This obsidian is usually an indicator of *Kokiwäs* Modoc band territory. However, most of the other debitage and projectile points were other obsidians—one small point was Blue Mountain, however. The point originally identified as a potential “Great Basin Stemmed” will most likely have a significantly lower hydration reading. The three small projectile points (Figure 8), all recovered from the same unit, indicate a Terminal or Late period



Figure 8: Projectile points and biface from MOD-2017. Left to right: biface, three arrowheads, large stemmed point.

use of this site. I suspect, however, once we have obsidian hydration data from a broad range of surface and subsurface specimens, that the range in microns will be significant, probably indicating multiple uses of this larger site area through time. The primary challenge with extracting significant archaeological data from a large site like this is dealing with its size—you simply can't cover enough of the area, even with the broad and shallow units—to recover a decent sample of data. You are left with only a “hint” of the data potential that is actually present.

In my opinion, it is the small site type, up to about 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> in area, that is going to yield significant archaeological data that will enable us to address some major research topics dealing with subsistence patterns across the landscape and through time. Many of these small, insignificant-appearing sites—the “small prehistoric foraging and logistic locations”—are key in the broader field of landscape archaeology. These “time capsule” sites are a very valuable component needed to facilitate our interpretation and understanding of the patterns of prehistoric aboriginal use in northeastern California, and I suspect elsewhere across the state. But you must expend the effort to excavate enough units to acquire sufficient data to make significant contributions to these research efforts.

#### REFERENCES CITED

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