

Jerry Spangler, Archeologist Transcript

Nancy Green

Jerry, tell me about your research for this canyon in terms of archaeological sites. Why did you originally visit the Green River?

Jerry Spangler

Well, I've, you know, I've always been in love with the Tavaputs Plateau from, you know, the earliest days of my graduate school, but Green River was always fascinating to me from the very first time I floated it in about 1989. The river was virtually unknown archaeologically, we know a lot about Nine Mile Canyon, and we're starting to learn a lot about Range Creek Canyon, but hardly anything was known about Desolation Canyon, how people lived along the rivers. So we started the project about two years ago to try to get a base line of, you know, what kind of sites are there along the river, how are those sites distributed across the landscape, and what kind of human impacts are occurring on those sites because of the, you know, six thousand river visitors a year that come down the Green River.

Green

What is the impact of all those people on the sites?

Spangler

It's been a very interesting study, because by and large river runners have an exceptional ethic when it comes to camping. They pick up micro-trash, they dust out their camp spots so no one knows they're there, but somewhere along the line we've lost the ethics message for how to behave on and around archaeological sites. Graffiti is a serious problem throughout the canyon, we had some graffiti as recent as 2008. It's one of those things where we think it's probably kids, the crude nature of some of the drawings kind of you to believe that it could be someone of that - certainly doesn't have an emotional maturity to know you don't do that. But graffiti is the serious problem, we also have some active cases of vandalism going on where major sites have been entirely looted, and in places that you wouldn't expect to find that kind of activity. So it's by individuals who are very serious about trying to find pre-Columbian artifacts, and are completely destroying sites. Now those are not common, but they're rare, they're happening, and they're happening throughout - I mean it's ongoing. One site in one of the drainages farther up canyon, we found a 2005 penny left in the looters pit. So we know that it was happening within a few years of us being there.

Green

How should we approach or enjoy archeological sites?

Spangler

I mean, with archeological sites, they're very fragile. The rock art, you know, it's

been here for a thousand years, you think it's going to be here for a thousand years more. If everybody goes up and touches it, it won't be, the oils in your skin will accelerate the erosion, the abrasion of touching it is, you know, this is sandstone, it erodes quickly, and this particular, you know, site here, you see how soft the sandstone is. So you know touching it, scraping it, tracing it, those are just not acceptable things to do. It accelerates - it'll destroy it over a period of time. With, you know, with structural sites, you know the cliff sites and the granaries and stuff, there's no need to climb up into them, and most of them in this part of the country are located on very narrow ledges where the instinct is to hold onto the wall when you're trying to climb into it. Well, that just pulls the wall over, it won't support you, it'll keep going on over, and we see several sites in here where the front wall looks like it's been pulled out. Don't know if it was done by visitors or whether it was natural erosion, but it's not acceptable to stand on those walls, or hold onto them, or use them for support to sit on them. I mean, this is thousand year old adobe that's holding them together, and it will degrade quickly with even the slightest amount of pressure on them. And so we encourage people to just observe it from a distance, you don't need to be right on top of it. If there's cultural posits on the inside, by going into the structure, you disturb those, you change the context of, you know for any future study. If there's not anything in there, what's the purpose of going into the site in the first place? It's more enjoyable to enjoy it from a distance. So we try to tell people to just look but don't touch. Don't pick up artifacts and put them in your pocket, and, you know, as a souvenir of your trip. It's just respect, you know, the tried and true, you know catch phrase, you know you take only photographs, and you leave only footprints. Well, it applies to archeological sites as well.

Green

Are there a lot of sites up and down the river?

Spangler

There are a lot of sites, there are a lot of spectacular sites. The public has discovered many of them, but not all of them. Some of the sites we found were in extremely pristine condition with doorway lids still intact on them and it's very exciting because this area has not been studied, and because of its inaccessibility by road there are still a lot of cultural materials here that are intact, and right for study.

Green

So tell me a little bit about the people who lived here. Who were the first people in this canyon?

Spangler

People have been here, people have been here forever. I mean since man, since humans were in North America shortly thereafter they were in this part of the country. You know, were the Paleo Indian hunters along the Green River corridor? Probably but we don't have that evidence yet. I've been told about

some research that's being conducted on the East Side of Desolation Canyon, back up on the plateau here, that have some Clovis material. So they were probably here. The Huntington Mammoth site is not very far from here, it's just straight up over this canyon rim here on above Huntington. And that site had a very large late place to see mammoth, and a short faced bear was also found with it, that had some Paleolithic points, that may or may not be associated with it. So they were certainly in the area, were they in the canyon, in Desolation Canyon, we don't know that yet, but we know for certain that archaic hunters and gatherers were here. We have a few sites that have the distinctive archaic dart points that we identify with those early hunters and gatherers. And so those sites are primarily sand dune sites. But, you know, where is it appropriate to camp? Those sand dune sites are just loaded with cultural materials. The beaches are great to camp on, but if you move up onto the sand dunes, then you're directly impacting a site that could be thousands and thousands of years old. So the hunters and gatherers were here, there's no question they were here, how many? We don't have a good statistical sample of the canyon to know that, but we do know that most of the sites that we're finding are Fremont sites, sites we suspect are associated with the Fremont occupations of Range Creek and Nine Mile and elsewhere on the Tavaputs plateau.

Green

Give me a basic understanding of who the Fremont were.

Spangler

The Fremont's the name we gave them as Euro-Americans and we don't know what they called themselves. But in Utah, farming appears in Northeastern Utah by about AD 200, up in the Uintah Basin, and the advent of farming radically altered how humans utilized the landscape. Instead of going out and procuring food, you were staying, you were more sedentary in producing foods. So instead of procurement, it's production, and that transition to a more sedentary life way, is typically a sign to the Fremont culture in Utah. When it started, we debate about that all the time, you know, was it AD 200, AD 400, AD 600, it doesn't matter really because it's just a artificial construct that we've created to describe people who farmed. And what made the Utah Fremont so unique in the West, is that they were also very adept at hunting and gathering and foraging. So they had this duality, if you will, of subsistence, of farming and foraging, and so they were very flexible, and able to move back and forth between subsistent strategies. What's interesting about the river is that most of what we're seeing is evidence of farming, of Fremont farming, we don't see a lot of a Fremont foraging sites. And I say that with a caveat that we haven't done enough research yet to really know, they may be here, but for once we're recognizing thus far into the research are big granaries to store the corn that was produced, a few pit houses, and big Fremont rock art sites.

Green

So why settle around the Green river? Was the river important to them?

Spangler

I don't know, as far as I can tell, no one's ever studied the issue of the Fremont culture and how it relates to the Colorado River. There's a lot of research that's been done in, down the Escalante-Glen Canyon area, about the river being an ethnic boundary between groups living south of the river, and the Fremont living north of the river. And whether the Green River functioned as a similar boundary, we don't know, the Green River's a lot easier to cross than the Colorado, but it can still be very difficult and very treacherous. So it probably formed a boundary at some times of the year, and at other times of the year, probably not. What we know about the Fremont adaptation on the east side of the river, it looks and feels a lot like that on the west side of the river. But the river was probably - rivers are important to every culture. We write poems about them, we write songs about them, even in our culture today, there's something magical about rivers, and so it undoubtedly had significance to people who lived along rivers. What that was, we really don't know.

Green

In terms of the rock art they've left a lot of rock writings along here. Do we have any idea what it means?

Spangler

Well rock art is a mystery and I'll give you my standard spiel here, it's impossible for us living, you know, a thousand years hence from when they lived, we have a different world view from what they had. We don't know what their world view was, so it's impossible for us to look at rock art and know what it means. Those who say they can interpret the rock art, more power to them, but that's their opinion, you know, it's interesting and it's fascinating, and it is art because it inspires and it makes you wonder, and that's what art does, but it may not have functioned as art to the people who made it, and for us, it should be something that we enjoy and respect as part of a culture that came before our own, but try to interpret it and decipher what it all means, that's meaningless, it's - just enjoy it. (laughter)

Green

We talked about some of the pressures earlier, but what are the pressures or threats that are facing these sites?

Spangler

Well, I mean this site here is a good example. This one's well known, it's marked on river guides, a lot of people stop here and visit this, we'd venture to say during the peak season there's hardly a day goes by that someone isn't stopped here, and coming up to visit it. What we're seeing is that there are maybe twelve to fifteen sites throughout Desolation Canyon that are being heavily, heavily visited. When you get a concentration of people in a limited number of areas, you get compacted trails, and you get accelerated erosion from the pedestrian traffic, and

without the baseline, without knowing if that trail is actually cutting through cultural deposits, we could be damaging a site every time we come to visit it and not know it. So there needs to be - if we're going to direct people to a handful of well-known sites, we need to do a really good job of documenting those sites and whether there are cultural materials that are going to be damaged through the - sending that many people. And then the other risk that you run, is that there's an awful lot of people that come here for the wilderness experience, they want to camp and they want to go hike and not see another person all day, and those kind of people are going to run into the remote sites that are perfectly preserved, and we have to get the ethics message to those people about how to behave when they're on an archeological site, because they're going to find them. I mean, it's inevitable in this country, they're going to find them, and so let's give them the tools to know how to behave when they do find it.

Green

Is there something the Fremont can teach us today? Why study them?

Spangler

Well, I think it's very fascinating to think of the Fremont as some very innovative farmers, who are able to grow corn in a desert landscape here, where pretty much all they can today is alfalfa and pasture land, but they were producing corn, and a lot of it. How were they using the environment? Did the Fremont population grow so big so quickly that it exceeded the carrying capacity of this very fragile and limited landscape, and what happens when you have too many people in a desert? Not enough water to grow enough food to feed all the people that are there. I think those are very similar issues that we face today in the desert southwest. How do we allocate our water? What's the highest and best use of that water? Is it food production? Is it golf courses? There are so many different uses for water, but by studying the ancients who lived here we also learn about a people who maximized their use of the landscape, and within the limits of the of the climate that they had at the time, and when climate changed they were no longer able to survive here, and they moved on. So I think those were all lessons that we can take to heart, as residents of the American Southwest. The environment allows us to be here within the constraints of the climate, of the water, of the land, so we're not in control, the climate the environment is in control.

Green

That is actually a good point though. They did have successful cultures for a long time.

Spangler

In this area, the Fremont culture was probably successful for fifty to a hundred years, and three hundred years at a maximum. Those are the dates that we've got so far, the radio carbon dates. Some of the Nine Mile dates are coming in

AD 900 to a 1000 on the early end. Range Creek's all coming in around AD 1050, and our dates in here are mostly around AD 1050 with a couple of interesting exceptions.

Green

So what happened to the Fremont, is that a mystery?

Spangler

With the, you know, with the cultures living, you know in out, what we call the Anasazi or the Ancestral Puebloans, you know, we can follow their migration southward, you know, through the pottery styles, and we know with pretty good certainty that the modern residents of Zuni pueblo of Acoma, you know, Hopi Mesa, that those are the modern descendants of the Anasazi. Well with the Fremont we really don't know where they went, and maybe they didn't go anywhere. Maybe the Ute of today are the descendents of the Fremont. Maybe the Fremont became absorbed by other groups, and so their DNA is now intermixed with other groups that live here in the southwest. We don't really know because we haven't been able to track them through the artifacts that they left behind, you know, follow them to where they might have migrated. There are different theories, you know, there are theories that they also moved south, that the Anasazis were their cousins and that they all moved south. There's an interesting hypothesis that they actually moved northeast out onto the plains. Not a lot of people subscribe to that one anymore, but there's an interesting line of evidence that, you know, possibly some of them did. We don't really know, and as humans we tend to look at groups of people, or cultures, if you will, as monolithic that they all are acting together in a same manner, when in reality we all act in our own self-interest, and if it's in your self-interest to move away, that's what you'll do. If it's in your self-interest to stay behind and assimilate with a new group of people, that's what you'll do, and so it could be a whole combination of factors involved in what happened to the Fremont. What we know is in this part of the country our latest radiocarbon date is around AD 1300, 1290 to 1300, and that's from Nine Mile Canyon. And it's a single date, all the other dates are much earlier, 1250 or earlier, and so it doesn't appear yet that they persisted in this canyon environment much past 1300. A couple of interesting things that we need to do a lot more research on, is we've got two different radio carbon dates from two different sites in the same general area that both come in around AD 1500, and both of those dates are from corn, and that's two hundred-two hundred and fifty years after we think that the Fremont left this area. And so it raises interesting questions, maybe they're just bad radiocarbon dates, maybe the early Utes in this part of the country were also growing corn. Maybe there's a pocket of Fremont that just didn't leave, and living along the river you've always got water, I mean the Green River's not going to dry up in a drought. You can have the worst drought in the world and it's going to have some water in it. So maybe it was a little oasis, there's a lot of different possibilities, but we try not to be too close-minded about, you know, when it started and when it ended, because there's new information coming along all the time which challenges our long held

assumptions.

Green

Is there anything that you want to add?

Spangler

Well, you know, this is a documentary about the Green River and, you know, this is the most remarkable place that I've ever seen in my life because it's still pretty much in the same condition that it always has been. The river flows are altered because of Flaming Gorge, but the way we see the canyon now is pretty much the same way that the people who lived here a thousand years ago saw the canyon, and when we can see things through their eyes maybe we can understand them better.

Green

Thanks.