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FEATURED

Archaeologists, students dig in at Quartz Lake

Theresa Bakker Jul 9, 2018



The archaeology collections manager at the UA Museum of the North, Scott Shirar, takes notes at a site near Quartz Lake. Photo by Meghan Murphy

FAIRBANKS — During the short summer in Alaska, scientists are busy conducting field work. With the increased daylight and warmer temperatures, they can work longer hours and get more done. Right now, researchers are traveling all over the state, hoping to make new discoveries.

That includes students, too. For the past couple of years, high schoolers enrolled in the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Alaska Summer Research Academy have camped out at Quartz Lake, north of Delta Junction, and helped with archaeological research. They work with scientists from the University of Alaska Museum of the North to map and collect bone and stone artifacts from seven different sites along the shoreline.

Scott Shirar, the museum's archaeology collections manager, said the students are contributing to an ongoing long-term research project. "Not only are they getting experience excavating at a site, but they also get to see how that specific information they collect in the field directly contributes to a broader picture and a better overall understanding of the past."

It's a good spot for this kind of work. Access is relatively easy from the Richardson Highway, but the team gets to camp out at the site and have an adventure, too. Bryan Johnson, a West Valley High School student, has attended the camp for the past two years. He said it's a great way to learn about history and archaeology.

“You can just scrape the ground with a trowel and see a flake or something interesting,” he said. “We found bone flakes and pieces of fire cracked rocks. Those are special because it shows there would have had to be a fire to cause it to crack. That means somebody was there.”

So far, the ASRA archaeology camp team has found animal remains and other artifacts that represent several different time periods. As the lake levels recede, sites that were previously underwater can be easily accessed.

“One interesting thing about that particular site is that it is multi-component, which means people lived at this spot multiple times in the past,” Shirar said. “The oldest component radiocarbon dates to between 5,000 and 6,000 years ago, while the most recent component dates within the last 1,000 years.”

Archaeology is a discipline that people have many misconceptions about. Shirar said the ASRA module gives students a truly accurate picture of what archaeology is, both from a hands-on perspective and also in terms of the types of questions that archaeologists have and how they go about trying to answer them.

Archaeology is one way of helping us understand the amazing diversity and adaptability of Alaska’s people. The Quartz Lake research focuses on reconstruction of the landscape over the last 20,000 years and understanding the record of human occupation within that time frame.

The goal is to understand human response to changes within the environment of Interior Alaska. The team is also interested in animal species, such as elk, bison, mammoth, horse, moose and caribou, which have roamed the area over the last 14,000 years at differing times in the past.

Visitors can discover Alaska archaeology at the museum, including finds from the Quartz Lake research project. In the Collections Gallery, artifacts from the sites are displayed in the “Expeditions Alaska” exhibit. A chart shows how the animals that ancient humans hunted changed in the area as the environment changed.

The museum’s archaeology curator, Josh Reuther, said animal species in the region shifted as the terrain and vegetation were reorganized once the Ice Age ended. “The boreal forest took over the once vast, grassy tundra landscape. Herds of bison and elk, or wapiti, roamed the area for thousands of years and were staple food, clothing and tool resources for the peoples of this region.”

As the abundances of these resources changed along with the distribution of plant species, people began to rely on different types of larger animals, like moose and caribou. They also increasingly fished at different periods throughout the year near Quartz Lake.

“Our understanding of how people responded and were resilient amidst this environmental change can bring a profound appreciation to the past,” Reuther said.

A smaller exhibit in the museum’s café focuses on the vibrant cultures of Interior Alaska around the time the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867. This exhibit also summarizes some of the Quartz Lake research and can be seen online at www.uaf.edu/museum/collections/archaeo/online-exhibits/alaskatreaty/.

Archaeological artifacts also help us learn more about the cultures of today. In the Gallery of Alaska, carved ivory artifacts found at archaeological sites from the coastal regions of western Alaska are displayed next to a case of more contemporary carvings. Visitors can examine how they are similar and

different to each other in size, shape and decorative elements. This reveals how cultures both change and stay the same over time.

Visitors can also explore archaeology as art in the Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery. Items used by ancient people as tools could also be considered pieces of art with their elaborately carved designs. The intricate relationship of tool function and artistic expression is intertwined within these objects.

Learning about people from ancient times also teaches us about our own history. It's important to know where you came from and how traditions and customs developed over time. Even if you are not a direct descendant of the people who lived in Alaska thousands of years ago, you can learn about, and appreciate, the history of the place where we live thanks to research like the project at Quartz Lake.

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