

Peoples and High Elevation Wilderness in the American West: Addressing Misconceptions



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The Wilderness Act of 1964 describes wilderness as “An area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”

In GRSLE’s 23 years of fieldwork, 8374 of the 285,010 acres found in the Washakie Wilderness has yielded over 250,000 artifacts

Coding sheet used by GRSLE volunteers



I. Introduction

Greybull River Sustainable Landscape Ecology (GRSLE) Archaeology has sought to expand upon previous research collected in the Shoshone National Forest in Wyoming. Since its inception in 2001, GRSLE has recorded over 250,000 artifacts. Those artifacts, as well as data collected pertaining to local fauna and flora, offers better understanding on the area’s natural ecology. GRSLE Archaeology works directly with the National Forest Service, with its work focusing on high elevation areas.

It is important that archaeological research conducted by GRSLE and others is continued and shared openly. Moreover, these efforts should be coupled with collaborative support and reverence for federal land from visitors. Not only for the Indigenous groups whose land this belonged to before colonization, but also for the land’s longevity.

Addressing common misconceptions pertaining to federally protected lands can only be the start of a collective paradigm shift. It is widely accepted that due to inhospitable conditions, Indigenous peoples seldom frequented high elevation regions in the American west. However, the archaeological record, specifically data collected in the Shoshone National Forest, proves the opposite.



II. Field Method

- Non-invasive, fine-tuned approach
- “Catch-and-release” archaeology
- Artifacts are only collected if:
 - in danger of being illegally removed by visitors
 - warrants laboratory analysis
 - is in danger of environmental destruction
- GNSS equipment to record a plethora of artifact-related information
- Rescue excavations
- Variable transect methods, flagging

III. Yields

- The data collected suggests that people have been utilizing these high elevation areas for at least 10,000 years.
- Artifacts made from non-native rock and glass beads displays interconnectedness throughout American West.
- The pace and method of artifact recording allows volunteers to quickly familiarize themselves with the materials found in the Washakie Wilderness.

IV. Discussion

- The Shoshone have known for generations that this land was inhabited by their people. Now, GRSLE’s research cements their claim.
- “Catch-and-release” archaeology offers future archaeologists the opportunity to expand upon existing research.
 - Preserving the archaeological record is also important in ensuring public appreciation for the material.
- While the training for this project differs heavily from training received in CRM, both modes of archaeology are important and can yield great results.

