

Questions and Answers About Heritage Resources on America's Public Lands

What are heritage resources?

Archaeological, historical, and paleontological resources on our nation's public lands tell the story of our recent and distant past. These "heritage" resources contribute greatly to our understanding of the origins of life and civilization in North America. They dazzle, delight, fascinate, and sometimes bewilder, any person who comes upon them.

Cultural resources – archaeological and historic sites, and places of traditional importance to Native Americans and other ethnic groups, represent the remains of 13,000 years of human adaptation to the land, spanning the entire spectrum of human experience since people first set foot on the North American continent.

Fossils are the remains or traces of activity from any organism preserved in the earth's crust, going back hundreds of millions of years. Generally, fossilization occurs as organic material is replaced by minerals. Paleontology is the study of those remains.

What is the BLM doing to protect these resources and let the public experience them?

In 2006, BLM will celebrate 100 years of historic preservation that began with passage of the Antiquities Act of 1906 and continued with enactment of other laws, including the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. BLM will use this opportunity to increase public awareness and appreciation of heritage resources, and to involve the public in a national stewardship campaign to share in the protection and management of America's priceless heritage.

What is the Antiquities Act?

The Antiquities Act of 1906 is the legislative basis for the protection and preservation of cultural properties and fossils on federal lands. The act provides for permits under which BLM can authorize scholarly use of cultural properties; imposition of misdemeanor-level penalties for unauthorized use; and Presidential designation of outstanding properties as National Monuments for long-term preservation.

Is there a website or other information available about the Antiquities Act?

BLM created an "Adventures in the Past" website to mark the 100th anniversary of the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the 40th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The URL for the "Adventures" website is <http://www.blm.gov/heritage/adventures>.

The website brings together many of the educational, archaeological, recreational, and public outreach activities and programs that BLM offers to fulfill the intent of historic preservation statutes and demonstrate BLM's stewardship of heritage resources on America's public lands.

What are some of the key provisions of each act and why are they important?

The Antiquities Act was designed to protect “any historic or prehistoric ruin or monument, or any object of antiquity” on land owned by the federal government. It

- created criminal sanctions for the destruction of antiquities (including fossils, historic and archaeological resources),
- allowed for the creation of historic and scientific national monuments, and
- provided for the issuance of permits for the federal government to authorize the investigation and excavation of archaeological sites.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 established a national policy of historic preservation, including protection of structures, buildings, districts, and sites significant in American history, archaeology, and architecture. The Act

- directed an expansion of the National Register of Historic Places, a listing of significant prehistoric and historic sites, to include properties and districts of local, state, and national significance,
- directed federal agencies to consider the effects of their actions and authorizations on properties listed on or eligible for the National Register,
- directed federal agencies to establish programs for the identification, evaluation, and protection of archaeological and historic sites, including nominations to the National Register.

The acts are important because historic, archaeological and fossil resources are fragile and irreplaceable traces of the past. Left intact for proper study, they can contribute valuable information about past cultures and life forms. Once they’re gone, they are lost forever, reducing our opportunities for interpreting them, facilitating scientific research, and conserving places for future study.

The lessons we can learn from the past have direct relevance on the choices our society is faced with today. When we lose what remains of our heritage resources, we lose our connections to the land – our sense of place – and ultimately our perception of the past as an anchor to the present and a guide to the future.

What kinds of historic, archaeological and fossil resources can I collect on public lands and which are protected – can I go out and get some arrowheads?

Collection of historic and archaeological resources is prohibited on public lands unless authorized by permits issued to qualified archaeologists. This includes arrowheads, bottles, coins, bullets, tools and equipment that are at least 50 years old, whether found alone or within an historic or archaeological site, regardless of whether they are buried or on the surface of the ground.

Collection of vertebrate fossils is prohibited on public lands unless authorized by permits issued to qualified paleontologists. Invertebrate and plant fossils, however, may be collected in reasonable amounts for noncommercial purposes without a permit.

I'd like to see some heritage resources on public lands; where are they located?

A publication entitled “America’s Priceless Heritage,” at <http://www.blm.gov/heritage>, lists cultural and paleontological resources that can be visited in each BLM western state. BLM’s ‘Adventures’ website (<http://www.blm.gov/heritage/adventures>) lists, under the link “Take a Vacation to the Past,” other heritage sites that can be toured.

Public lands are dotted with thousands of archaeological and historic sites that include everything from Paleo-Indian mammoth kills to oversized ground figures etched in desert pavements (intaglios), to prehistoric complexes of Ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings, to rock art, to exploration and settlement sites of the historic era, to historic trails, to evidence of mining, ranching, railroading, and 19th (and 20th) century military outposts.

Fossils of thousands of kinds of plants, animals, and other organisms can also be found on public lands, including tiny trilobites more than 600 million years old, dinosaurs from between 210 and 65 million years ago, and Ice Age cheetahs and lions.

How can I help protect America’s heritage resources?

Our website (<http://www.blm.gov/heritage/adventures>) under the link “Want to Help?” lists ways the public can become directly involved in protecting our nation’s heritage resources. Individuals can join Site Steward Programs, sponsored by public land managers and State Historic Preservation Offices, to monitor and protect archaeological and paleontological sites.

There are many opportunities for the public to volunteer their services for the benefit of heritage resources such as through www.volunteer.gov and volunteer recruitment website; the Forest Service’s “Passport in Time” program; or by participating in National Public Lands Day activities in every BLM state. “Backyard Conservation” discusses ways that people can help protect heritage resources on their own property.

The BLM manages the largest, most diverse and scientifically most important body of heritage resources of any government agency. Visitors to the public lands can take personal responsibility for protecting and preserving heritage sites for future generations by following these basic principles:

- Leave artifacts and fossils where you find them.
- Avoid climbing on the walls of prehistoric or historic structures.
- Treat rock art, historic structures, and archaeological features with respect.
- For campfires, collect only dead and downed wood that is clearly not from historic or prehistoric sites. Collect wood/build fires at least 200 yards away from heritage sites.
- If you camp or recreate near heritage sites – or anywhere on public lands – dispose of waste in trash receptacles if provided; otherwise, pack it out.
- Educate others never to dig at sites or collect artifacts or vertebrate fossils.
- Report the location of archaeological sites and vertebrate fossils to the nearest BLM office, so that land managers can alert professionals to their existence.
- Report looting and vandalism to a BLM ranger or other local authority.