



Cultural Resources on America's Public Lands



BLM, a Small Agency with a Big Mission

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior, manages 261 million acres of public land, more than any other Federal agency. These lands represent about one-eighth of the United States and are found primarily in the American West (in 12 western states, including Alaska).

Public lands managed by the BLM include grasslands, forests, high mountains, arctic tundra and deserts. They contain an abundance of resources such as timber, forage, wild horse and burro populations, fish and wildlife habitat, wilderness areas, paleontological sites, and cultural resources.

What Cultural Resources does BLM Manage?

Cultural resources include archaeological sites, historic sites, and places of traditional importance to Native Americans and other ethnic groups. BLM is responsible for the Federal government's largest, most varied and most scientifically important body of cultural resources. These resources represent the tangible remains of 13,000 or more years of human adaptation to the land, spanning the entire spectrum of human experiences since people first set foot on the North American continent.

About 16 million acres, or 6 percent of BLM's current acreage, have been intensively inventoried for cultural resources since the mid-1970s, and more than 271,000 archaeological and historic sites have been recorded. Based on this sample, an estimated 4 million archaeological and historic sites exist on the public lands today. BLM manages this important cultural legacy for its scientific, educational and recreational values.

BLM's cultural resources include: scatters of prehistoric artifacts; ancient Paleo-Indian mammoth kill sites; stratified cave deposits; tantalizing, oversized ground figures etched in desert pavements (intaglios); awe-inspiring prehistoric complexes of Ancestral Puebloan villages and cliff dwellings; intriguing remnants of Spanish- and Russian-period exploration; the trails and lonely outposts of historic-era exploration and settlement; lighthouses that guided ships at sea; evidence of mining and ranching; and even remnants of 19th- and early 20th-century military activities.



Why are Cultural Resources Important?

The cultural resources managed by the BLM are a constant source of fascination for visitors. People look to these resources for recreational opportunities (sightseeing and photography), satisfaction of their curiosity about the recent and remote past, preservation and continuation of their cultures, and inspiration about the human spirit.





BLM's cultural resources reflect nearly every cultural tradition and ethnicity present in American society, including first Americans (ancient cultures and contemporary Indian tribes) and immigrant Americans (explorers, miners, ranchers, homesteaders, soldiers, and others). For researchers, educators, and interpreters, these resources tell us when people first arrived on the continent, how they dispersed, how cultures flourished, what led to their demise, how they perceived the spiritual world, how they interacted with other cultural groups, how they exploited—and perhaps overexploited—their environments, how they treated their dead, how and why they came into conflict, and much more. The lessons we can learn from past cultures have direct relevance to the choices facing our society today.

How Can I Help Protect Cultural Resources?

A small but growing cadre of volunteer "Site Stewards" is working behind the scenes to help BLM archaeologists document and protect cultural resources on the public lands. Site Stewards keep an eye on archaeological sites threatened by vandalism or natural deterioration. They monitor conditions of the sites and report these to professional archaeologists, using observations, field notes, drawings, and/or photography to record changes over time. Site Stewards also assist in surveying, mapping, and collecting oral histories. Many Site Stewards provide educational outreach programs that increase awareness of the importance and lasting value of cultural resources, and encourage understanding and respect for cultural diversity.

Site Steward programs are active in at least eight western and some eastern states. From programs established by state legislation to those existing as grassroots efforts, they all have at least one element in common: a determination to stop vandalism and theft and to create a record of what exists on the land. One does not need any particular expertise to volunteer, as training is provided. Aside from organized Site Steward programs, members of the public can help BLM manage and protect cultural resources by simply reporting the location of any artifacts they find to the nearest BLM office. That way, BLM archaeologists can ensure that the artifacts are properly recorded, studied and preserved for everyone's benefit. Visitors should not disturb or remove any artifacts found, as important information may be lost, no matter how much care is taken. There are also serious penalties for unauthorized collection.

How Can I Learn More?

For information about cultural resources on the public lands, or about volunteer opportunities, including local Site Steward programs, please contact your nearest BLM office or visit our website at www.blm.gov/heritage/adventures/. 

