We tend to think of archaeological sites as a part of the past. They hold the remains of activities that occurred long ago, and tell us about how people once lived. Yet, ancient sites are also part of the present. They exist today, and the modern forces that shape them dramatically alter the information they can provide.

There are many types of archaeological sites. On Kodiak, the most common are areas with buried evidence of human activities, like the remains of sod house villages or deposits of ancient garbage. Over time, natural forces change these sites. Organic materials like grass, wood, and bone gradually rot, leaving behind just stone tools and an incomplete view of past technologies. Kodiak’s rivers meander, eating away their banks and the remains of streamside camps. Winter waves pound the coast, eroding coastal village sites and scattering their contents on the beach. And then there are digging animals. Otters, foxes, and birds dig dens in sites, and brown bears create craters in search of tender spring plants. The result is like tearing a hold in the center of a photograph.

While natural disturbances are often unavoidable, the damage caused by people—artifact digging, construction, camping on top of a site, and the use of off-road vehicles—can be avoided. Like animal digging, these activities, which are often illegal, stir a site’s contents. Much of what sites have to tell us is in the locations of artifacts and their relationship to things like hearths or storage pits. Dig in a site or remove its artifacts and these relationships are lost.

Whatever the cause, understanding the forces that impact sites is critical to their study. Archaeologists need to know how a site has been altered to interpret its contents. Moreover, patterns of site disturbance across a region can alert researchers to major changes in the archaeological record or the need to study materials before they vanish.

For these reasons, we work with our site stewards to record site damage. A simple system helps volunteers record the presence of erosion, animal damage, vandalism, and modern use at the sites they visit and to estimate the extent of the damage. The result is a picture of how the sites studied today have changed since they were created hundreds or even thousands of years ago.
YOU CAN HELP!

Never dig in or collect artifacts from an archaeological site.

Never collect or disturb human remains and report them to the museum and Alaska State Troopers.

If you find a site, enjoy it, but leave it. Take photographs not objects.

Teach your family and friends to respect archaeological sites. Most people do not know that it is illegal, destructive, and disrespectful to alter sites.

Report illegal collecting, site vandalism, and artifact trafficking to the National Park Service (1-800-478-2724). Rewards of up to $500 are available for information.

STEWARDSHIP

Partnerships for preserving Kodiak’s past

Videors To Teach Historic Preservation

Why is archaeology important? Who owns archaeological sites? What should you do if you find an artifact? These are some of the common questions we explore in a new series of short videos. Scheduled for release in August, the three five-minute films are funded by the US Fish & Wildlife Service to advance public education about historic preservation.

“We’ve written a lot about preserving archaeological sites,” said Alutiiq Museum archaeologist Patrick Saltonstall. “But the information can be confusing. Videos give us a chance to explain in greater detail, add images, and involve community members in telling the story.” The three videos are:

- Kodiak Archaeology, A Library Underground: an introduction to Kodiak’s rich archaeological record and its value to Alutiiq people.

- Digging into the Past: A discussion about archaeological sites and their study.

- Artifacts, Our Ancestors’ Tools: A look at the journeys artifacts make when they leave the ground.

Copies of the films will be distributed for free to libraries, tribal organizations, land managers, and the public. They will also available for viewing in the museum’s gallery and on its website.

Quyanaasinaq | Many Thanks

2014 Archaeological Site Stewards

Suzanne Abraham • Paul Chervenak
Andy Christofferson • Steele Davis
Brigid and Harry Dodge • Daniel Fox
Jake Harding • Alex Hughes
Patrick (Juney) Mullen • Mike Munsey and family
Adelia Myrick • Betsey Myrick
Dan Ogg • Susan Payne • Tom Pogson
Mitch Simeonoff • Matt Van Daele
Keller Wattum • Dave Yesner
Mike Zweng

Patrick Saltonstall discusses damage to an archaeological site created by off-road vehicles. Photo by Alf Pryor.