

Cultural Treasures

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In the process of land selection and withdrawal there lies a potentially serious threat to the native heritage in Alaska. Scattered throughout the State are literally thousands of prehistorical sites which are virtually treasures of the cultural heritage of Alaskan Natives. As the lands are made more accessible and industrial and commercial development take place, these sites are going to be seriously disturbed, if not destroyed unless precautions are taken immediately.

Throughout the years many of the sites have already been pillaged, looted and destroyed by unthinking and selfish people. In some cases, unscrupulous individuals working under the guise of archaeology have destroyed more than they have preserved. In other instances, Native residents have pilfered sites to obtain ancient artifacts for resale to curio dealers and other visitors. This on-going process has destroyed forever places and artifacts which are not only of academic and scientific value, but are oftentimes the only visible remnants of the past. In a sense, they are non-renewable cultural treasures.

With good reason, many Native people do not want "outsiders" or non-Natives to dig up historical and prehistorical sites and would prefer to have Native people working on the reconstruction of their cultural past. However, there are only a very few trained Native archaeologists and cultural historians who might carry out excavations and research in the most profitable manner.

Looking back at the past and even more recent experiences, unless there is some legal control with strict enforcement, after the withdrawal of lands, many places are doomed to destruction. On the national and state level, laws have been passed to insure that historic and prehistoric sites and artifacts are protected. The laws are known as the "Antiquity Acts".

In view of the threat to the cultural heritage presented by growth and expansion — industry, tourism, population expansion — I would like to submit the following recommendations for your urgent consideration.

1. That historical and prehistorical sites and artifacts be considered basically as, "sub-surface" resources and, as such, be under the control of the regional corporation.

2. That the regional corporations immediately draft a regulation similar to, or based upon, existing "Antiquities Acts" and that they empower State and Federal law enforcement officials to enforce the regulation.

3. The basic goal of the "Antiquities Acts" has been to preserve these cultural treasures for future generations and to restrict private individuals and collectors from personal profit and gain from excavating or removing these artifacts for sale. In the same manner, each region should plan on establishing a secure regional corporation make arrangements with a reputable museum within the State of Alaska to preserve the items and to protect them.

4. That regional corporations, perhaps in conjunction with State and Federal agencies, set up a training program for Native students who want to work in archaeology, ethnohistory, museum work (preservation and display). Since there are regional variations, it may be best to have three training centers, one at each of the Regional Centers of the University of Alaska.