

# Citizen science in New Mexico

August 13 2015, by Sharman Apt Russell

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Stewards monitoring site on the Santa Fe National Forest. Credit: Santa Fe National Forest

Time traveling is one of my favorite things to do as a citizen scientist. As part of the New Mexico Site Steward Program, I walk slowly through an archeological site, the ground littered with the remains of pottery from people who lived here a thousand years ago. I am free to touch and finger these clay shards as long as I carefully put them back where I found them. I pick up (and put down) a square of white with thin black lines, part of a bowl with an interior painted scene—perhaps a crane spearing fish or a woman giving birth. I pick up (and put down) a curved piece the size of my palm of brown corrugated cooking ware—all those

simmering stews of meat, roots, and herbs. I pick up (and put down) a geometric pattern of red and white, part of the human aesthetic: look at the world in this way.

As I walk through the remains of this village, past lines of rock that were once the walls of homes, I am also taking notes and photographs and looking for signs of damage by humans, animals, or natural forces. By keeping track of what is happening on this archeological [site](#), I am helping protect its scientific value for future study and research.

My duties are fully explained in the Site Steward Handbook. Find It. Record It. Report It. In particular, the looting of such sites for their cultural artefacts is a major problem—and a criminal offense. The program is carefully constructed to avoid confrontation with any so-called pot-hunters: if I see anyone on my site, I should watch from a distance, collect whatever information is possible such as license number and "subject description," and then leave. I am also reminded that I should dress for weather, carry plenty of water, tell my site manger when I am going, travel in teams if possible, gas up my vehicle before leaving, stay near the vehicle if it breaks down, and be careful while driving through arroyos. Sending people out to remote areas in the Southwest is no joke, and we all take the job seriously.

I am part of a larger network which includes the New Mexico Site Watch program supervised by the state of New Mexico and the Santa Fe National Forest Site Steward Program, one of New Mexico's largest with sixty to eighty stewards who monitor over two hundred sites in the Santa Fe National Forest. These volunteers contribute around 5,000 hours a year, logging in over 40,000 miles total on their vehicles. Mike Bremer, the chief archaeologist in the national forest, says, "From a preservation perspective, the stewards are the Forest's eyes and ears for site inspection."

Moreover, as site stewards grow more knowledgeable about their particular sites, they are in a position to help visiting archaeologists and researchers. Mike Bremer adds, "The stewards tend to observe the subtle shifts in site condition and have given us a sense of site dynamics and short term changes. One of the things they contribute frequently is an alternative perspective that can lead to new ways of interpreting site function." Site stewards are also the ones who may know hidden features such as nearby shrines or petroglyphs.

In the Santa Fe National Forest Steward Program, many volunteers go on and pursue even more training in archaeology, participating in excavations and large scale site documentation projects. Some site stewards have acquired specific skills such as archaeo-magnetic dating and use that in assisting professionals with their work.

Mike notes, "The biggest achievement is that we are able to know what condition our sites are in—at a time when budget constraints don't provide for the resources we need to perform that monitoring." The volunteers with the site steward program on this [national forest](#) also organized a separate nonprofit organization not affiliated with the Santa Fe National Forest called the Site Steward Foundation that argues for site preservation and promotes public awareness of the value and importance of archaeological resources. Moreover, Mike adds, "It's fun to work with the stewards. I cannot begin to tell you the contribution these people have made to my life as the Forest Archaeologist and to me personally, as a friend of many of them."

My own work as a site steward includes monitoring a small cliff dwelling in the southern part of the state. The site is high and hidden on top a crumbly slope that requires some climbing. A raven seems to have adopted the task of monitoring me, and the silence is broken periodically by his gurgly thnk-thnk-thnk. At the top of the climb, an adobe wall blocks half of an overhanging ledge to create a cave-like room, which I

can enter through a narrow opening that still has its wooden lintel.  
Peering into that room, hand on the worn and polished wood, I  
feel—again—the frisson of time-travel, now scented with mice urine and  
accompanied by a triumphant ka-ka-ka!

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