

4,000 artifacts stored at Oregon refuge held by armed group (Update)

January 15 2016, by Rebecca Boone



In this Monday, Jan. 4, 2016 file photo, Members of the group occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters stand guard near Burns, Ore. Thousands of archeological artifacts and maps detailing where more can be found are stored at a national wildlife refuge currently being held by a group of armed protestors. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File)

Thousands of archaeological artifacts—and maps detailing where more can be found—are kept inside the national wildlife refuge buildings currently being held by an armed group of protestors angry over federal

land policy.

Ryan Bundy, one of the leaders of the group occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in southeastern Oregon, says they have no real interest in the antiquities. Still, their access to the artifacts and maps has some worried that looters could take advantage of the situation.

"There's a huge market for artifacts, especially artifacts that have provenance, where you can identify where they came from," said Carla Burnside, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's refuge archeologist.

More than 300 recorded prehistoric sites are scattered across the refuge, including burial grounds, ancient villages and petroglyphs. Some of the artifacts—including spears, stone tools, woven baskets and beads—date back 9,800 years.

The artifacts and remains came from ancestors of the Burns Paiute Tribe. Chairwoman Charlotte Rodrique says she feels helpless knowing that her tribe's cultural heritage is now in the hands of the armed group.

"As far as I'm concerned, our history is just another hostage," Rodrique said.

The tribe has sent a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. attorney for Oregon, Billy Williams, asking that members of the armed group be prosecuted if any artifacts or maps are damaged or missing.



In this Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2016, file photo, members of the Burns Paiute tribe watch a news conference held by their leaders in response to the armed occupation of the nearby Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Burns, Ore. A leader of the Oregon Indian tribe whose ancestral property is being occupied by an armed group opposed to federal land policy said Wednesday that the group is not welcome and needs to leave. (AP Photo/Manuel Valdes, File)

WHY AREN'T THE RELICS AT A MUSEUM?

About 7,000 artifacts and samples from the refuge are kept at a museum in Eugene, Oregon. But 4,000 more are kept at the refuge for research.

Only Burnside has a key to the room containing the artifacts and the maps. She's since seen pictures of the occupiers in her office, adjacent to the room where the artifacts are stored. The group has been looking

through government files at the site, but it is unclear if they've gone through the room with the artifacts. Bundy told The Associated Press that he's seen the artifacts and lots of maps, but he didn't know what the maps illustrated.

The artifacts and maps are legally protected by the 1979 Archeological Resources Protection Act and other federal laws.

Rodrique said she doesn't know if members of the group have disturbed the artifacts but wants the artifacts and documents catalogued as the occupation continues and once it comes to an end.

"If the occupiers disturb, damage, remove, alter or deface any archaeological resource on the refuge property, the Tribe requests that the United States bring criminal charges," Rodrique wrote in her letter to federal officials.

WHAT IS THE ARMED GROUP DOING WITH THE ARTIFACTS?

Bundy said they're not interested in the artifacts and would turn them over to the Burns Paiute Tribe, if asked.



In this Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2016 file photo, An American flag is shown at the front entrance to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters near Burns, Ore. Thousands of archeological artifacts and maps detailing where more can be found are stored at a national wildlife refuge currently being held by a group of armed protestors. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer, File)

"If the Native Americans want those, then we'd be delighted to give them to them," he said.

Rodrique said the tribe is not going to legitimize the armed group's occupation of the refuge by negotiating with them.

"That's our history, our ancestors' possessions and remains," Rodrique said. "It's hard to explain, as a native person, what that means to us. That's the very proof of our existence in this country."

Bundy said he didn't think it was likely that anyone would use the maps

to loot the site.

"We haven't really been thinking along those lines," Bundy said.

Removing artifacts from federal property without a permit is illegal.

WHAT ABOUT THE PREHISTORIC SITES?

Scientists are also worried about unintentional damage that could be done to the prehistoric sites by cattle, vehicles and heavy equipment.

The group at the ranch has driven road graders and other large construction equipment around the refuge headquarters buildings, but Bundy said Thursday they haven't used the machinery to move any earth. He wouldn't rule out that possibility, however.



Ammon Bundy speaks to reporters at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Burns, Ore., on Thursday, Jan. 14, 2016. Bundy is the leader of a small, armed group that has been occupying the remote refuge in Oregon since Jan. 2 to protest federal land policies. (AP Photo/Keith Ridler)

In 2014, Ryan Bundy and supporters of the Bundy family rode ATVs on federal land closed to motorized vehicles in Utah as part of a protest. Their route took them along an illegal trail that crossed through Native American archeological sites.

HAVE THE SITES BEEN LOOTED BEFORE?

While well-known petroglyphs or other prehistoric sites are occasionally publicized for public viewing, federal land managers often go to great lengths to keep such locations secret when they can't be safely protected from vandals and looters.

Looting has long been a problem at the refuge, with the first documented instance recorded in 1979, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service's comprehensive conservation plan.

"It's a huge problem in Oregon, especially in the southeast portion of the state," said Dennis Griffin, the state's archaeologist. "More often than not, when they are caught, it's connected to drug running or seeking quick money on eBay."

An online search of "great basin artifacts for sale" yields arrowheads, stone pestles and other items, many priced at hundreds of dollars each.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Burnside said the artifacts are part of the ancestry of the Burns Paiute Tribe and are priceless to science.

"There's so much you can gain from looking at one artifact: Where the stone came from, how far they traveled, how it was used, the skill of the person who made it," she said.

The tribe works extensively with federal officials on the archeology projects. In her letter, Rodrique said the tribe knows it's a difficult time for Burnside and other refuge employees, and thanked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for its cooperation and help.

"All I want is that our past be respected, that things don't go by the wayside, that they're not destroyed by cattle," Rodrique said in a phone interview.

"Their history is being hijacked by these people," said Donald Grayson, an anthropologist and archeology expert at the University of Washington.

HOW DOES BUNDY WANT THE ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES HANDLED?

Bundy said people interested in archeology are welcome to explore the refuge, but that cattle ranchers and loggers should have priority when it comes to land use.

"Before white man came, so to speak, there was nothing to keep cattle from tromping on those things," Bundy said.

Though some countries had domesticated cattle 10,000 years ago, the animals came to the United States with European settlers.

"We also recognize that the Native Americans had the claim to the land, but they lost that claim," Bundy said. "There are things to learn from cultures of the past, but the current culture is the most important."

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