

Archaeologists in Louisiana save artifacts 12,000 years old from natural disasters and looters

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Gray Tarry, bottom left, an archeological field technician for the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, digs on an archeological excavation site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and

Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert

Long buried under the woods of west central Louisiana, stone tools, spearpoints and other evidence of people living in the area as long as 12,000 years ago have become more exposed and vulnerable, due to hurricanes, flooding and looters.

This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the Vernon Parish site in the Kisatchie National Forest. They have been sifting through dirt to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation of the area.

"The site appears to have been continuously occupied throughout prehistory, as evidenced by a wide range of stone tools and pottery dating to each Native American cultural era up to European contact," the U.S. Forest Service said in a news release.

The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the Forest Service. After hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees, disturbing and exposing some of the artifacts, Kisatchie National Forest officials used hurricane relief money to begin salvage excavations to learn more about the site, and to preserve it.

"Between the looting and the hurricane damage we were really in danger of losing this site over time," Forest Service archaeologist Matthew Helmer said during a media tour of the site in June.

Helmer, walked amid areas already excavated, pointing to changes in soil

color and texture that, like the crude artifacts being excavated, can give clues as researchers work to determine facts about the people who occupied the area at different times over the millennia.



An archeologist stands near a cylindrical discoloration in the soil, center, which indicates the prior existence of a prehistorical structure, at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Conan Mills, a field technician for the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, sifts for artifacts at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Jamie Butts, a high school student from Youth Conservation Corps, assist in sifting at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Josiah Hamilton, left, and Jamie Butts, high school students from Youth Conservation Corps, assist in sifting at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Conan Mills, a field technician for the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, shows a lithic flake, a piece of flint broken from a larger piece during the manufacture of tools, that he just found sifting at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



A worker digs in an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



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Professor Mark Rees, of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and director of the Louisiana Public Archeology Lab, holds a side notched, archaic projectile point at an archeological dig site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Gloria Church, an undergraduate student at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, studying anthropology and archeology, sifts for artifacts at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Professor Mark Rees, of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and director of the Louisiana Public Archeology Lab, holds a San Patrice, variety Hope, that dates from around 12,000 to 11,500 years ago, in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



Gray Tarry, bottom left, an archeological field technician for the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, digs, while Josiah Hamilton, left, and Jamie Butts, right, high school students from Youth Conservation Corps, watch at an archeological site in Kisatchie National Forest, La., Wednesday, June 7, 2023. This summer, archaeologists have been gingerly digging up the ground at the site in Vernon Parish to unearth and preserve the evidence of prehistoric occupation. The site was found by surveyors in 2003, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Hurricanes Laura and Delta uprooted trees and exposed some of the artifacts. Further damage has been done by looters making unauthorized digs. Forest officials say the site shows evidence of generations of people living in the area going back 12,000 years. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert



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"We're really writing the history of these peoples that lived prior to 1492, all the way back 10,000-plus years," said Helmer.

It's a welcome opportunity for Mark Rees, a professor of archaeology at

the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and director of the Louisiana Public Archaeology Lab.

Still, Rees laments that the work is hampered by people who have made unauthorized digs and made off with material from the site.

"It's like walking into the archive and finding a book that's so rare it's one of a kind and it predates writing itself, it's like tearing a page out of that book and walking off with it," said Rees.

The salvaged artifacts will be sorted, catalogued and examined as researchers at the archaeology lab seek to make determinations about past cultures at the site.

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