

Overview of South Park Archaeology

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South Park has a deep and extensive archaeological record, comprised of the material remains of the activities of human populations that have lived in the Park over millennia. The existence and relatively undisturbed character of this record was a significant component in the South Parks' successful bid to become a National Heritage Area. Indigenous peoples' activities account for the longest time span in this archaeological record, but the record of early historic ranching and mining activities in the Park are also central to its character.

Native American Indians visited South Park seasonally for at least 10,000 years prior to the arrival of the first White explorers, trappers, traders, and settlers. These Indigenous people, who practiced a nomadic, hunting and gathering subsistence economy, moved their base camps seasonally according to the availability of wild food resources, and visited South Park regularly in their annual rounds. Although archaeologists have yet to recover direct evidence of the seasons when Native people were in South Park, they assume that Indigenous people were not here during those times when the weather was challenging and food resources limited.

While the Ute were in South Park at the time of early contact with White populations, we know from a series of archaeological studies that their history here is limited to the last 1,000 years. Thus the traces of Ute culture that can be found in the Park, such as peeled trees and stone enclosures, as well as the chronicles of early settlers and explorers, record only the most recent part of Indigenous history in South Park. The prior 9,000 years of that history is recorded only in the archaeological remains that can be discovered throughout the Park.

Given their transient lifestyle, hunters and gatherers had limited material possessions and few (if any) of the tools that they made from perishable materials could survive the rigors of exposure in South Park's environment. Thus the archeological remains of early Indigenous activities in South Park are limited. Lost or discarded stone tools and the remains of their manufacturing process are the primary archaeological traces of this history, along with a variety of stone constructions including cairns, enclosures, and alignments.

To date, archaeologists have studied only a small fraction of South Park's landscape (less than 5%), but they have been able to identify and document over 1,700 sites that record 10,000 years of Native American Indian history. Stone tools (principally projectile points) found in the Park and made in styles characteristic of specific time periods bear witness to this deep historic time span. In addition, South Park Archaeology Project archaeologists have recovered charcoal from two separate excavations and dated these samples to 3,000 and 6,000 years ago.

Every time we can associate traces of past human activity with a place and a time, we come closer to being able to map out what type of Indigenous activities occurred within the Park at particular places and times. These data then start to build a picture of dynamic human interactions in the past. We are beginning to understand that certain areas of the park were favored for different types of settlements, that certain ritual activities were undertaken to map this landscape, and that likely more than one cultural group occupied the Park at any given time.

Our ability to expand upon this emerging story depends on the preservation of a fragile data base. Artifacts removed from sites and sites destroyed remove vital information from an already restricted database. Volunteers who have helped archaeologists gather the information that we currently possess understand this principle well, and as a result they have formed the South Park Site Stewardship Program, whose purpose is to promote the preservation and protection of prehistoric, historic, archaeological, and paleontological resources within the South Park National Heritage Area. Should you come across such evidence in your travels through the Park, please contact our Site Stewards through their website.