NPS Protocols for Archaeological Discoveries

Archaeological sites are fragile, non-renewable resources. Well-intentioned visitors to archaeological sites sometimes cause lasting damage because they don't know how to behave in these fragile places. It is important to be aware of the Federal and State laws governing archaeological resources.

Discovering an archaeological site or artifact on Santa Rosa Island is likely because human communities lived on the island for more than 10,000 years. Prehistoric and historic items from a diverse array of people who have spent time on the islands provide insight into what life was like in past times.

Especially dense on the Channel Islands are sites archaeologists call middens: areas of prehistoric detritus, shells, charcoal and other debris. The materials in midden deposits are layered in such a way that they contain a great deal of information about the history of the site. In a scientific sense, middens are one of the most important parts of the site. Care should be taken not to disturb these deposits or cause them to be mixed in any way. Other common site types include house pits and villages, campsites, quarries, ceremonial sites and rock art, stone walls, abandoned structures, corrals and ranching tools, fence lines, and military equipment.

In any area where people have lived for thousands of years, multiple cemeteries and burial locations will occur. Santa Rosa Island is no exception. Over the years, erosion has exposed some of these burials. The Chumash community living on the mainland today includes descendants from the original islanders. The living Chumash do not want their ancestors’ remains and belongings disturbed. If you encounter human remains please show respect to the deceased and their families. Do not disturb the remains, and do not linger in the area unnecessarily.

It is a violation of Federal law to remove or disturb archaeological sites or materials on public lands without a permit. Criminal penalties include fines up to $20,000, imprisonment, or both. Civil penalties, including restitution and the forfeiture of equipment and vehicles may also be levied. Under California State Law it is also a felony, punishable by imprisonment in the state prison, to remove, obtain, or possess human remains or associated grave goods/artifacts, except as otherwise provided by law.

The protocols listed below must be followed:

1. When an archaeological site or artifact is found, do not disturb it.

Arrowheads and other small stone artifacts maybe picked up and examined if they are lying completely exposed on the ground surface, and it is not necessary to cause any
ground disturbance in doing so. Be careful not to damage it, and return it to its original location.

If the conditions are muddy, avoid walking over archaeological sites.

2. Make a note of your location.

Record your location on a map, or take a GPS reading (be sure to indicate which map projection your GPS unit is using). After completion of the project, all maps containing site locations (or similar lists of GPS coordinates) should be destroyed or surrendered to the NPS archaeologist.

3. Photographic Guidelines

It is okay to photograph sites and artifacts. Often these can be useful to the NPS archaeologist in relocating the site/artifact. However, do not take photographs of human remains.

4. Notification

If the site or artifact is endangered due to exposure to regular human traffic, erosion, or other natural or human forces, the NPS archaeologist (805 658-5754) should be informed as soon as possible.

If human remains are discovered, the NPS archaeologist must be notified as soon as possible. Avoid discussing human remains over the radio or internet.

If evidence of looting or vandalism is encountered (or you witness someone in the act), make a note of the location and leave the area (it is a crime scene and your presence may contaminate critical evidence). Make an immediate notification. If on TNC land notify the appropriate TNC personnel. If on NPS land, contact the island Law Enforcement Ranger. If the Ranger is not available, contact the Chief Ranger (805 658-5717) or the NPS Archaeologist.

All other discoveries should be reported to the NPS Archaeologist on a regular basis.