Using the Past to Shape the Future: Contributions of Archaeology to the National Wildlife Refuge System

The science of archaeology can contribute in many ways to excellent science-based wildlife management. Cultural resource management and its attendant disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, and history are uniquely equipped to provide information on how ecosystems have changed through time, and aid managers in defining and restoring wildlife habitat. Prehistoric archaeological sites often contain important data on the plants and animals that occupied the places we now call National Wildlife Refuges for thousands of years. Data from archaeological sites can outline the range of "natural" environments that existed prior to modern disturbance and can supply important evidence of past climatic and ecological change, including changes in vegetation and fire frequency.

Traditional ecological knowledge plays a role in developing strong science-based wildlife and habitat management as well. The members of many native and rural communities have unique knowledge and understanding of their local land, water, and animals resources.

The Goetz Site: Changing our Understanding of Ancient Bison

The Goetz Site is a Late Holocene archaeological site in the Upper Missouri. The site is on the Missouri National Heritage Area, and the Missouri River Breaks National Monument. The site contains a large number of bone and hide artifacts, primarily from bison, as well as a large number of stone tools.

Riverine Archaeology at Ridgefield NWR: A holistic archaeological approach to understanding the natural and cultural history of the Columbia River Delta

This project focuses on the archaeological investigation of the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge, located on the Columbia River Delta. The project is designed to provide a holistic understanding of the natural and cultural history of the region, including the impact of human activity on the environment.

The Dismal Key Site: Archaeological Data as a Component of Climate Change Research, Florida

The Dismal Key Site is an archaeological site located on the Florida Keys, off the coast of Florida. The site contains a number of cultural resources, including shell mounds, and is important for understanding the impact of climate change on human societies.

Cathlapotle Archaeological Project, Washington: Using Archaeology to Interpret Cultural and Natural Heritage

Located on Ridgefield NWR in Washington, Cathlapotle is significant as one of the largest and best-preserved Chinookan plank houses in the United States. The project focuses on the archaeological investigation of the site, including the excavation of the plankhouse, and the interpretation of the cultural and natural history of the area.

Alaska Maritime NWR: Archaeology, Historic Data, and Ecosystem Dynamics

The Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge is located on the coast of Alaska, and is home to a number of archaeological sites. The project focuses on the archaeological investigation of the site, including the analysis of cultural and natural data, and the interpretation of the impact of human activity on the environment.

Below: Laboratory of Southeastern Archaeology crew

The Laboratory of Southeastern Archaeology is a research institution that specializes in the study of prehistoric cultures of the Southeastern United States. The crew is shown here conducting archaeological research at a site in Florida.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional ecological knowledge is an important aspect of cultural resource management. It is based on the understanding of the natural environment and the traditional practices of indigenous peoples. The knowledge is often passed down through generations, and is an important foundation for the management of natural resources.


Located in the Spring Mountain National Reservation, this project focuses on the traditional ecological knowledge of the Southern Pines, a group of indigenous peoples who have lived in the area for thousands of years. The project is designed to promote government-to-government consultation and resource management.

Historic Rice Plantations: Adaptive Behaviors of a Cultural Resource for the Benefit of Wildlife at Savannah and ACE Basin NWRs

The project focuses on the adaptive behaviors of rice plantations, which have been an important part of the landscape in the Savannah and ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuges for centuries. The project is designed to promote the conservation of these cultural resources, and to the benefit of wildlife.