

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **November 15 - 22, 2011**

Destination: **Great Basin**

Leader: **Richard Robinson**

Number of Participants: **8**

Eight SJBAS members visited the Great Basin participating in some or all of the planned activities. It was a long drive to the primary destinations, but the Blythe Intaglios and the petroglyphs of Little Petroglyph Canyon allowed additional experiences. We were able to view between 13 to 15 sites (based on the definition of a site), and later car camped at an Arizona State Park along the Colorado River. We visited Corn Springs CG, Owl Canyon CG outside of Las Vegas, the Maturango Museum, and the Rainbow Basin National Area. With a member's telescope, we viewed the moons of the planet Juniper. Several participants also visited Death Valley and the Calico Early Man site. We visited two contrasting ecological zones: the Colorado River Basin (with water) and the Great Basin (lacking water, but with periods of greater moisture. The water pooled and did not flow out.) Different books use different dates and ancestral titles describing the sites visited, and I am in no position to know which is correct.

We met with Tom, BLM archaeologist from Yuma in Blythe, CA to learn more about the Yuman speaking Colorado River People, and the intaglios, first seen in 1931(?) by an airplane pilot. The dependable presence of water and constant flooding played an important role in the culture, in addition to burying the cultural remains. Deep trenches have uncovered many flood events and many remnants of the cultures. In addition to viewing the planned six intaglios, we saw two additional figures, one measuring 171 feet from head to toe. These large figures scratched in the "desert pavement" to expose lighter colored material may represent religious communications to those above or to people entering the valleys from high passes to impress on them the size of the society. A popular theme is that the figures lie along a route from Pilot Knob (spirit house) to Spirit Mountain and may be the calling to Mastamho (the mythic creator) for help. We viewed three large humans, a fisherman, one feline, and several geometric figures. Over 200 intaglios exist along the Colorado River, dating from at the earliest historic times (more likely 450 YA) to 3000 YA. Many of the intaglios are surrounded by BLM chain link fences to protect them from mechanical damage.

As we left the region of high relative humidity for the dryer desert air, we viewed many petroglyph sites and geological areas showing tilted land masses, including the release of tremendous amounts of energy. Many generalizations can be made about the areas. Archaeologist David Whitley's work about the area provides interesting even if not entirely accurate ideas. Although there are differing opinions about the meaning of the petroglyphs, there is a good chance that they all contribute to an over-all understanding. Water was very important to the area. Many of the petroglyph sites are located near springs. Dr. Whitley, from the people present today, learned oral traditions and developed an interesting relationship between the Shaman, their mythical symbols and the process that humans undergo to make depictions of them.

Almost all of the petroglyph sites represent many areas of activity over thousands of years or more. The petroglyphs are of Great Basin Curvilinear and Rectilinear styles, with many bighorn sheep, grids, lines, circles and human forms. Although many of the people present in the area today are related to those of long ago, people of this area have migrated north, northeast and east. Of interest to us, they were Numic speaking ancestors of the Ute people. Corn Springs was along a major E/W Native American trail connecting the Desert Cahuilla and Yumans of the Colorado River. Some of the glyphs are from a thousand to several thousand years old, the site of the native California fan palms.

Rainbow Basin National Area: The area had multi-colored rock formations and is noted for fossils of mastodons, early pronghorns, camels and three-toed horses. Inscription Canyon, in Kawaiisu territory contained glyphs that demonstrated a wide range of revarnishing and represent a potential time span from several hundred to several thousand years. The canyon is a low-profile arroyo that drains into a dry salt bed, lined with basalt, with more than 1000 glyphs. A very significant site in the Mojave Desert.

Little Petroglyph Canyon contained thousands of glyphs in this canyon and many, many more is the surrounding area. These petroglyphs, located in the Coso Range in the eastern California border of the Great Basin, were produced by the Numic speaking Shoshone, Northern and southern Paiute and Kawaiisu peoples. Most likely these were made by shaman and were related to the availability of water. Most of the bighorn sheep petroglyphs represent males, as were the majority of shaman. Many of the human-like forms have elaborate main frame (shirt) symbols, but no two are the same. Most of the glyphs date from recent to 1500 YA, and even back to 19,000 YA. We had a very special tour at the China Lake Naval Weapons Center near Ridgecrest. (Special arrangements must be made through the Maturango Museum but we owe a special thanks to the China Lake Naval Base.)

Ayres Rock was a concise site with pictographs of red, orange, white and black. The many obsidian flakes indicate it was a tool making center. Hiking by myself returning to my car, I saw a lone figure walking briskly on a ridge with his long hair blowing in the wind. I felt I was witnessing the past, but then realized that it was Jim with a jacket blowing in the wind.

Steam Well Petroglyphs was a site named after a nearby steam well drilled into a geothermally active zone to power mining activities during the 1930's and required a two-mile RT hike. The area was occupied by the Kawaiisu people. Springs are located nearby. Glyphs are probably between one and two thousand years old. One petroglyph is a combination of two common but prominent spirits of Numic people, the rattlesnake and a bighorn, individually very important, and in combination a very significant representation of supernatural spirits.

Bishop Petroglyph Loop was located within the Owens Valley Paiute territory which was the home of a Numic speaking group. The glyphs there were made in very soft volcanic tuff. All sites are considered to be sacred. Access is through the BLM office in Bishop. The petroglyphs may be between 1,000 and 9,000 YO, by the ancestors of the Paiute-Shoshone who inhabit the area. We also saw the Fish Slough Petroglyphs. The Chidago Petroglyphs were made up of bisected circles, grids, zigzags, spirals and concentric circles. David Whitley suggests that the spirals and concentric circles represent whirlwinds and supernatural power. The Red Canyon Petroglyphs contained several panels with human hands and footprints and several bear paws with references to human tracks and "Water Baby" who lived in springs and rivers. The Chalfant Petroglyphs contained many bisected circles that may represent girls puberty ceremony's or atlatls. Sloan Canyon was an extensive site that required a four mile RT hike and that has approximately 1,700 petroglyphs on both sides of the canyon. These petroglyphs were probably from the Ancient Puebloans, Patayan, and Southern Paiute.

- Prepared by Rich Robinson