

Todd R. Metzger

Vanishing Treasures

A Legacy in Ruins

Buildings made of the stuff of earth itself . . . as old as time and human labor, the containers of the experience of community, ours in trust. . . . Now there is an undeniable crisis of care. And we need your help.

Roger Kennedy
Former Director, National Park Service

After 20 years of inadequate funding, backlogged treatment needs, and a lack of information on condition, thousands of prehistoric and historic ruins at 38-plus National Park Service (NPS) units in the arid West are threatened with severe deterioration and collapse. These architectural resources—some of them World Heritage sites—are important to our national heritage, and they also hold special and significant meanings for a number of traditional Native American and other communities. In addition, the NPS employs very few highly skilled preservation craftspersons, and many of them are retiring after 30-plus years in the Service. A lack of funding has prevented their specialized knowledge from being passed on to a new generation of craftspersons.

The Program

In 1993, the National Park Service identified and began to correct critical preservation weaknesses through a grassroots program strongly supported by the NPS directorate and managers that has become known as the Vanishing Treasures Initiative.

Currently, more than 40 national parks, monuments, historical parks, historic sites, memorials, and recreation areas in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Texas, and Wyoming have identifiable Vanishing Treasures resources. Vanishing Treasures resources are structures

or groupings of related structures that are in a “ruined” state; have exposed intact fabric (e.g., earthen, stone, wood); are not being used for their original function(s); have experienced occupation(s) and utilization(s) that have been interrupted or discontinued for extended periods of time; are located in the arid West; and are the resources or part of the resources for which the park was created (or, if National Historic Landmarks, are either listed on or are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places). Examples include architectural remains that have intact historic fabric exposed at or above grade (e.g., wall alignments, upright slabs, foundations, bins, cists, constructed hearths); subgrade architecture exposed through excavation or erosion (e.g., pithouses, dugouts, cists); Native American architectural structures (e.g., pueblos, cliff dwellings, hogans, wickiups, ramadas, corals, earthen architecture); and Euroamerican architectural structures (e.g., churches, convents, forts, ranch/farm structures, homesteads, mine buildings, acequias or related features, kilns). Not included among Vanishing Treasures resources are sites with no exposed architecture or structural remains (e.g., collapsed, buried, mounded, or otherwise not evident); archeological or other sites with no architectural remains (e.g., lithic scatters, dumps, campsites); Civilian Conservation Corps and Civil Works Administration buildings and features; historic structures that are regularly maintained and/or adaptively used and that fit within Historic Structures/List of Classified Structures definitions; structures in use as NPS facilities (e.g., administrative buildings, trails, bridges, ditches, canals); mine shafts and caves without architec-

Antelope House Ruin, Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona. A large multi-story ancestral puebloan village dating from AD 800 to AD 1275 located in Canyon del Muerto. The site exhibits numerous kivas, multi-story structures, intact plasters and decorative paint on walls, stratified archeological remains, and numerous rock art images. Photo by Al Remley.



tural/structural features); pictographs, petroglyphs, and other rock art (except if found in or on architectural structures); and NPS or other reconstructed buildings or ruins (e.g., Aztec Ruins' Great Kiva, Aztec, New Mexico, and Bent's Old Fort, La Junta, Colorado). (Please note that, for purposes of convenience, this article uses the term "ruins" in full recognition of the fact that some Native American and other communities do not use this term because they do not consider the places to be "ruined," out of use, or unoccupied.)

The common thread shared by all Vanishing Treasures units consists of the ongoing degradation of their architectural resources, the continuing and ever-increasing backlog of work required to bring the condition of the resources up to a stable and maintainable level, and the lack of or decline in the availability of qualified expertise to address current and future needs. At present, most parks are doing only emergency work to protect deteriorated infrastructures and stabilize dangerous conditions. Obviously, the longer that vitally needed preservation work is put off, the more expensive the final costs are going to be.

Vanishing Treasures Initiative administrators will create a career development and training program in which skilled craftspersons and other professionals will have career status, benefits, and career development options analogous to other segments of the federal workforce, in order to ensure work continuity. In addition, a computerized data management system as well as clear

guidelines for future planning and preservation will be developed. Adequate funding levels to achieve specific goals are estimated to be some \$67 million—\$59 million for emergency preservation needs and \$8 million for the preservation workforce. Parks estimate that approximately 65 to 70 technical craftspersons and 50 to 60 archeologists or other specialists will need to be recruited over the next decade (over time, the boundaries between these two groups will blur, and a new kind of employee—the preservation specialist—will be born). This very rough estimation comes to approximately \$1 to \$1.5 million, and 3 to 4 new staff for each of the known and potential Vanishing Treasures park units (with actual funding and personnel needs dependent upon the size, number, and complexity of the resources within each unit).

In 1993, a *Vanishing Treasures: A Legacy in Ruins* video was created by concerned NPS managers—and the work began.

Todd R. Metzger is Program Agent of the National Park Service's Vanishing Treasures Program.

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