

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES ON PRIVATE LANDS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

MAY 2012

LAWS:

What laws currently protect archaeological sites in Oregon on private lands?

There are three main laws in the state of Oregon that protect archaeological sites. [ORS 97.740](#) protects all Native American graves and associated artifacts. Under [ORS 358.905-358.961](#), significant archaeological sites are protected on both non-federal public (state, county, city) and private lands. The law also provides definitions for *archaeological objects*, *sites*, *significance*, *sacred objects* and *objects of cultural patrimony*. The process for conducting an archaeological excavation or removal of artifacts from a site is defined in [ORS 390.235](#). A person may not *knowingly or intentionally excavate, injure, destroy or alter an archaeological site* without a permit. The associated administrative rule, [OAR 736-051-0000 to 0090](#) defines the process for applying for a permit on both private and non-federal public lands. Links to the complete text for each of these state laws are available on-line from the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) [Archaeological Services](#) webpage.

What are archaeological objects and sites?

Archaeological sites are comprised of archaeological objects or features related to historic or prehistoric activities. In the state of Oregon, 10 archaeological objects or a feature constitutes an archaeological site. Any item manufactured by a person or a by-product of manufacturing activities that is at least 75 years old is an archaeological object. If a person made an arrowhead in the past, the arrowhead itself is an archaeological object as are the waste flakes removed from the stone worked to form the arrowhead. Any tools used to remove waste flakes would additionally constitute archaeological objects. The remnants of the fire hearth used to heat treat the stone used to make the arrowhead would constitute a feature. In this example, each object and feature allows archaeologists to piece together the prehistoric activity that occurred, when it occurred, the technology utilized and where the production materials were procured. Combined, the information may be significant in understanding Oregon's cultural past. Since human occupation in Oregon is known to extend back as far as 14,000 years ago, the range in age of archaeological objects is considerably broad. Often, people not trained in archaeology consider objects that are around 75 years old to be "garbage" (e.g., cans, bottles) when in fact they may be significant for any number of reasons related to Oregon history. Archaeology in and of itself is often viewed as the study of garbage in that archaeologists study items lost or discarded by people of the past.

What does archaeological significance mean?

Archaeological significance means that a site is eligible for inclusion on the [National Register of Historic Places \(NRHP\)](#). For an archaeological site to be significant, a professional archaeologist would need to evaluate the site in terms of its importance based on condition (integrity), type of artifacts and features associated with the site, research potential or similarity to known significant sites. Conversely, a professional archaeologist can assist with recommending an archaeological site as "non-significant". If an archaeological site is determined non-significant with State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) concurrence, it is not protected under state law. That would not prevent the landowner from protecting the site if they so choose, but it would not be necessary. Significant archaeological sites would require protection or mitigation if a landowner were planning a project with the potential to damage,

injure or destroy the site. Archaeological sites that have not been evaluated are considered significant until proven otherwise.

What is a sacred object or object of cultural patrimony?

For an archaeological object to be considered “sacred” it must be revered by an ethnic group, religious group or Indian tribe. Sacred objects are those generally used for religious or spiritual practices or for traditional native Indian religious practices. Objects of cultural patrimony are archaeological objects considered inalienable to a native Indian group. They include objects having on-going historical, traditional or cultural importance central to a native Indian group or culture. These do not include arrowheads, baskets or stone tools or portions of arrowheads, baskets or stone tools.

What does it mean to knowingly or intentionally excavate, injure, destroy or alter an archaeological site?

An archaeological site does not have to be formally recorded by professional archaeologists but can simply be known by members of a community or an individual landowner. Due to the nature of archaeological sites often being buried, knowingly can also mean at the point of discovery by anyone conducting ground disturbing activities such as excavation. The Oregon SHPO maintains information on recorded archaeological sites within the state and its waters. Site location information is confidential and generally only available to qualified individuals (e.g., professional archaeologists) or landowners/land managers. If you as a landowner wish to know if an archaeological site has been recorded on your property, SHPO will provide you with that information. The SHPO can additionally provide you with information on the likelihood that your property may possess an archaeological site based on several factors relating to historic and prehistoric land use patterns. Oregon SHPO welcomes any information provided by you, the landowner, if you suspect an archaeological site is located on your property.

PROPERTY RIGHTS:

Who owns an archaeological site on private land?

Archaeological sites on private land are owned by the landowner and the presence of such sites cannot be used to take their land away from them. The artifacts from a site are also the property of the land owner, except for Native American human remains, burials, associated funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony ([ORS 97.740](#)). Archaeologists are not allowed on private land without owner consent, regardless of the presence of an archaeological site. Projects that encroach on private land must first get the approval of the landowner to allow the project to go through their property or to conduct an archaeological survey.

If I find something can I keep it? Sell it?

Oregon state law (ORS 358.920[1][b]) permits the collection of **an** arrowhead from the surface of non-federal public or private land as long as the collection can be accomplished without the use of a tool. The law does not permit the systematic collection of artifacts but is meant to remove any penalty from a person accidentally discovering an arrowhead. Artifacts from private land can only legally be collected under a state archaeological permit with all artifacts remaining the property of the landowner to do with as they see fit. While SHPO recommends that landowners donate all artifacts to a museum for long term curation and research the landowner

can dispose of the artifacts in any way they desire (sell, trade, barter, exchange). Any artifacts from private land that are to be sold need to be accompanied by a notarized statement from the landowner as to their original location, the archaeological permit they were obtained under [OAR 736-051-0090], and assurance that the object is not human remains, a funerary object, sacred object, or object of cultural patrimony.

What happens if an archaeological site is on private land?

If an archaeological site is on private land, as with public land, avoidance is recommended. If it is not possible to avoid the site, subsurface testing by a professional archaeologist may be needed to determine if the site is significant. It is important that no ground disturbing activities occur prior to testing the site. It is further recommended that the landowner refrain from drawing attention to the site. Attention can lead to unlawful artifact collection, excavation and trespassing. Report the site to the Oregon SHPO who can assist you in locating an archaeologist to record the site so that information about how your land was used in the past can be compared to regional land use patterns.

If you have an archaeological site on your land can you continue to use the land?

Yes, in many cases you can continue to use your land without having to address potential damage to a site after coordination with Oregon SHPO has occurred. If a field is being used as open pasture for livestock, or is routinely plowed, the field can continue to be used in this same fashion. It is recommended that if possible, limiting livestock access to the site is preferred. When there is a change in how you use your land, however, there may be a need to take measures to ensure that the archaeological site is not further damaged. Coordinate with Oregon SHPO to determine the level of disturbance.

How should I treat an archaeological site on my land if it is in the way of a proposed project I want to complete?

The best protection for a site is avoidance. Keep all ground disturbing activities away from an archaeological site as much as possible. If a site can not be avoided it will need to be evaluated to see if it contains significant information about local and/or regional history. This may mean that the site will need to be tested by a professional archaeologist through archaeological excavations under a state permit (no permit fee). If the site is found to be not significant the project can move forward without delay. If the site is found to be significant, those portions of the site that can not be avoided will need to be addressed by taking steps to minimize damage to the site and/or through mitigation. One way to minimize damage to a significant site is through capping which consists of placing a thick layer of clean fill on top of the site protecting the buried component. Mitigation means that a portion of the site may need to be excavated in order to collect a sample of the significant artifacts and information that would be destroyed by the proposed ground disturbing activity. Other forms of protection and/or interpretation may also be possible so it is important to contact the Oregon SHPO to discuss any questions you may have on minimizing or mitigating damage to known archaeological sites

Who can apply for an archaeological permit and what does it entail?

Only a qualified professional archaeologist can be issued a permit in the state of Oregon. To be qualified, the archaeologist must meet the professional qualifications defined in State Law ORS 390.235(6)(b). Permits allow both collection of archaeological objects and archaeological

excavation. The archaeological permit application process itself is free to individuals meeting the qualifications and the review process can take up to 30 days before the permit is issued.

How should artifacts be properly curated from private land?

If artifacts are found on private land SHPO recommends that they be left in place and the area around the site be avoided from development, if possible. This is because the true value of an artifact is not in the artifact itself but in its context; the soil and placement of the artifact when originally deposited. For artifacts that have been collected under a state archaeological permit, we recommend that all artifacts be curated at a local museum or tribal office so they will be preserved for future research and education of the public.

How do I find out if I have an archaeological site on my property?

Oregon state law protects the sharing of location information for archaeological sites in Oregon [ORS 192.501(11)]. However, a person cannot protect or manage a site on their property if they do not know such a site exists. If a landowner wants to know if an archaeological site is known to exist on their property they can contact the Oregon SHPO. SHPO will need to see evidence of ownership of the property and be given a few basic pieces of information in order to check their statewide database of known sites. This information includes: 1) a complete legal description of the property (township, range & section); 2) a USGS map that clearly depicts the location of the property in relation to the section it lies within; and 3) an address or contact information so that we can respond to your request. Free USGS maps are available on-line at <http://www.topoquest.com/>.

Who do I contact if I want to have an archaeological survey of my land?

The Oregon SHPO maintains a list of qualified archaeological contractors on the [Archaeological Services](#) web page. The list is maintained to assist people who need to hire a professional to conduct an archaeological survey or testing project. Each of the listed firms has a qualified archaeologist able to complete all phases of archaeological research. It is recommended that you contact three (3) or more archaeologists or archaeological firms in order to get a good perspective on the cost and services offered.

What happens if I inadvertently discover archaeological objects or a site on my property?

Once a site has been discovered on your property you, the landowner, become responsible for protecting the site from further damage. It is recommended that you contact the Oregon SHPO so that they can assist you in finding ways to best protect the site while not impacting any proposed projects.

If I found something on my land but don't know if it is an artifact, who should I contact?

Identification of artifacts that you may have found can often be obtained by contacting a professional archaeologist at a local university or federal land managing agency. The US Forest Service and BLM offices all maintain a staff of archaeologists who may be able to assist you. You can also contact the Oregon SHPO archaeological services.



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