

The Vanishing Treasures Program of the Tres Piedras Group

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Ruins Preservation Challenges in Western National Parks

The prehistoric and historic architectural remains of our shared heritage (Figure 1) face more threats today than any other time since the enactment of the Antiquities Act of 1906. In America's national parks, increased visitation, looting, vandalism, extensive soil erosion, years of insufficient funding, and many other threats pose serious risks to long-term preservation of these irreplaceable structures. Examples of the enormous variety of preservation challenges we face today in our national parks and other public lands include:

- Stabilization and routine maintenance for frontcountry structures;
- Statutory requirements of inventory, documentation, and evaluation of all historic properties on all land managed by the National Park Service (NPS);
- Condition assessments and treatment evaluations for thousands of backcountry sites;
- Monitoring and increased law enforcement patrols for resource protection;
- Data management and reporting; and
- Education and interpretation to ensure that the public and agencies are aware of the significance and relevance of cultural resources.

These challenges are great, and will be impossible to meet unless unique, flexible, and innovative strategies are developed soon.



Figure 1. The Upper Ruin at Tonto National Monument, Arizona, typifies the kind of prehistoric architectural remains found in many western national parks.

Three NPS units in New Mexico and Arizona are developing one such innovative strategy through cooperation and collaboration, and by participation in the Vanishing Treasures program. These three parks, known as the Tres Piedras Group, include Petrified Forest National Park in east-central Arizona, and El Malpais and El Morro national monuments in west-central New Mexico. Vanishing Treasures is a preservation program tightly focused on preserving archeological resources containing exposed architecture. Now in its sixth year of funding, Vanishing Treasures is one of the most successful cultural resource initiatives in the history of NPS. This paper introduces the Vanishing Treasures program, describes the cooperative effort of the Tres Piedras Group, and discusses the variety of preservation projects being conducted. We conclude by examining the key aspects of this program that make it a success.

The NPS Vanishing Treasures Program

What is Vanishing Treasures? Vanishing Treasures is a ruins preservation program that began in 1993 when cultural resource specialists and managers in the parks realized a crisis was looming regarding the preservation of countless prehistoric and historic structures (Metzger and Kendrick, in press). Decades of inadequate funding for the preservation of these irreplaceable archeological resources, some of which are World Heritage sites, had taken their toll and were now threatening their very integrity. Adding to this crisis was an aging preservation workforce nearing retirement. Few mechanisms existed to develop and train the younger workforce that would soon be needed by NPS.

The Vanishing Treasures program is currently active in 44 units of the National Park System in eight states of the arid West (Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming). The program operates in national parks, monuments, historic sites, memorials, and recreation areas. The program has hired conservators, archeologists, masonry workers, exhibit specialists, and a structural engineer in its

efforts to build a long-term preservation workforce.

What are the goals of the Vanishing Treasures program? The goals of Vanishing Treasures are clear and simple. The first goal is to stop the current loss of unique and irreplaceable prehistoric and historic structures by securing funding and personnel to conduct emergency and high-priority preservation projects. The second goal is to renew the preservation workforce in the parks. Finally, the third goal is to develop into a proactive, rather than reactive, ruins preservation program.

What are Vanishing Treasures resources? One reason for the success of the program is that it has a specific focus on what we call “Vanishing Treasures resources,” which are prehistoric (pre-European contact) or historic structures that meet the following criteria:

- Are in a partially collapsed or “ruined” state;
- Contain architectural fabric (such as wood, stone, earthen materials, and such) that is exposed;
- Are not being used for their original purpose;
- Are characterized by interrupted or discontinued occupation and use for an extended period;
- Are located in the arid West;
- Are the resources or part of the resources for which the park was created, or are national historic landmarks, or are listed on or are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Examples of Vanishing Treasures resources include ancient pueblos, cliff dwellings, historic forts, homesteads, and missions. Examples of resources that do not qualify as Vanishing Treasures include:

- Archeological sites with no exposed architecture;
- Civilian Conservation Corps and Civil Works Administration (CWA) buildings and features;
- NPS facilities;

- Historic structures that are regularly maintained;
 - Petroglyphs or pictographs; and
 - Reconstructed buildings (such as the reconstructed great kiva at Aztec Ruins National Monument).
- \$300,000 to meet the management needs of the program.

Vanishing Treasures Program of the Tres Piedras Group

A collaborative ruins preservation program between three NPS units. Spanning more than 200,000 acres across the southern Colorado Plateau, the Tres Piedras Group of parks—so named after the distinctive basalt of El Malpais National Monument, the prominent sandstone Inscription Rock of El Morro National Monument, and the well-known petrified wood of Petrified Forest National Park—contains thousands of archeological sites. Vanishing Treasures resources abound in the three parks. At El Malpais, prominent Vanishing Treasures resources include a Chaco-style great house and great kiva, and extensive prehistoric trail systems containing formal basalt ramps and bridges spanning lava crevasses. Other fascinating sites include prehistoric subterranean architecture with ancient pottery sherds frozen in the depths of ice caves. El Malpais Vanishing Treasures resources also include the ruins of Dust Bowl-era homesteads.

At El Morro, Vanishing Treasures resources range from small 13th-century households to the enormous 700-year-old Atsinna Pueblo, which has 800–900 rooms (by comparison, Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon contains about 650 rooms). Across the box canyon from Atsinna is North Ruin, another massive multi-room site contemporaneous with its cross-canyon neighbor.

Petrified Forest National Park may contain the oldest Vanishing Treasures resources in the entire 44-unit program. House structures dating to the earliest centuries of the first millennium AD are found there. These sites also contain some of the oldest pottery in the northern Southwest. Not to be forgotten at Petrified Forest, of course, is the Chaco Era (AD 1050–1150) McCreery Pueblo with its great kiva and the late prehistoric Puerco Ruin. Puerco Ruin is one of the few major ruins of the Pueblo IV period (AD 1300 to about 1450) managed by NPS. It contains about 125 rooms and is the most visible and

How does Vanishing Treasures work?

The Vanishing Treasures program is often considered a “grassroots” initiative. This is because Vanishing Treasures is a self-directed and self-managed program, one with a clear focus on accomplishments and accountability. The program is also directed and managed at the park level by a leadership committee comprising four to five park superintendents and a full-time program coordinator. The program is also guided by advisory, career development, database, funding, and guidelines workgroups (primarily containing cultural resource specialists within the Vanishing Treasures program).

Importantly, though, the Vanishing Treasures program is accountable for its funding. At the end of the fiscal year, each park contributes a fiscal accounting of their activities, projects, and accomplishments. The Vanishing Treasures program coordinator then compiles these into a fiscal report that is presented to Congress every year. Individuals hired through the Vanishing Treasures program are expected to work primarily (at least 80% of their annual work) on Vanishing Treasures resources, projects, and issues.

Vanishing Treasures accomplishments to date. In the brief time since funding began, the Vanishing Treasures program has made significant contributions to the preservation of cultural resources. These accomplishments include:

- \$8.7 million since 1998 (fiscal years 1998 through 2003) to meet the goals of the program;
- \$5 million for 78 emergency and high-priority project in 30 parks;
- \$3.4 million to hire 56 preservation specialists in 22 parks (these specialists include archeologists, masonry workers, conservators, a structural engineer, and exhibit specialists); and

visited Vanishing Treasures resource at Petrified Forest.

Though the management and preservation challenges are great, the Vanishing Treasures program provides several mechanisms by which to meet them. These include a renewed preservation workforce, project funding, and a network of cultural resource and historic preservation specialists to provide advice and assistance when needed.

Examples of current projects. Because of the variety of site types across the three parks, the Vanishing Treasures program has initiated a number of different preservation projects since fiscal year 2000. Below, we provide summaries of our multi-year projects.

Atsinna Pueblo preservation project, El Morro National Monument. Site type: Pueblo (800 to 900 rooms). Period of occupation: AD 1200s to middle 1300s (final occupation). Accomplishments to date:

- Drainage system beneath the structure (built in 1950s and 1960s) renovated;

- Preservation history being finalized;
- Condition assessments completed for over 70 wall surfaces;
- Elevation drawings of wall surfaces initiated; and
- Previous preservation treatments harmful to the original fabric removed and replaced in-kind with unamended mortar in three walls (Figure 2).

Garrett Homestead preservation project, El Malpais National Monument. Site type: Single-room, sandstone masonry structure, and main residence for a homestead. Period of occupation: AD 1937 to ? (possibly the 1960s). Accomplishments to date:

- Elevation drawings and condition assessments for entire structure completed;
- Repointing of each wall completed in 2002; and
- Interpretation begun, through use of rack cards.

Puerco Pueblo preservation project,



Figure 2. Vanishing Treasures masonry worker treating a void in a 700-year-old wall at Atsinna Pueblo, El Morro National Monument, New Mexico.

Petrified Forest National Monument. Site type: Pueblo (approximately 100 rooms). Period of occupation: middle AD 1200s to late 1300s (final occupation). Accomplishments to date:

- As-built maps completed;
- Previous research and preservation history initiated; and
- Condition assessments for each of wall surface of 25 exposed rooms initiated.

Erosion control at three archeological sites in El Malpais National Monument. Site types: Pueblos, both large (approximately 60 rooms, a tower kiva, a prehistoric road, and a great kiva) and small (containing 10 or fewer rooms). Period of occupation: all three sites date between AD 1050 and 1150 (the Chaco Era). Accomplishments to date:

- All three sites thoroughly documented;
- Pre-project condition documented; and
- Excelsior sediment logs made of photo-degradable netting and chipped aspen installed at arroyo head-cuts and within active arroyo channels in two sites.

Core functions of the Tres Piedras Group Vanishing Treasures program. The core functions of the program tie statutory mandates and NPS policy with the overall Vanishing Treasures initiative. Primary among these core functions is preservation of the architectural remains (or ruins) of prehistoric and historic structures throughout the three parks (but not those structures that are NPS facilities or are currently still in use, as discussed above). Documentation of known Vanishing Treasures resources and inventory to locate the remaining structures is also a core function of the program. For example, over 90% of El Malpais has not received a systematic, professional inventory for cultural resources. Therefore, inventory and documentation are vital activities of the program. Program development is also a core function. This function focuses on securing project funding and ensuring sustainability in the program. Another core function is education and research through a heritage preservation perspective. Education and research flourish

hand-in-hand. We will continue to ask questions about the resources and preservation techniques, contribute to a better understanding of the past, and relay that new information and its relevancy to the public and our fellow staff of NPS. Finally, all of these core functions will require constant management of data.

Keys to a successful multi-park program. Though we are just beginning to develop the tri-park program, we have observed several important points that make the collaboration successful. Primary among these is agreement on priorities. Each year the superintendents of the parks and the Vanishing Treasures personnel in those parks meet in order to assess the progress of the program and discuss immediate and long-term needs of Vanishing Treasures resources. This ensures projects and other activities focus on the highest priorities each year. Valuing professional diversity is another important part of the program's success. Each park benefits from the professional diversity the tri-park arrangement offers. Alone, each park might have one or two specialists who work solely in their particular park. Together, the three parks draw on each other's expertise and experience. The larger Vanishing Treasures initiative also allows access to other preservation specialists, such as structural engineers and conservators.

Although our tri-park program has just begun to pursue partnerships, we realize that long-term success will not be possible without them. We are currently developing working relationships with the following groups:

- University of New Mexico, which will hold its 2003 archeological field school at El Malpais (focusing primarily on inventory, documentation, and condition assessments).
- Arizona State University, which will begin extensive research into the prehistory of the El Morro valley in 2003. This will provide a tremendous opportunity for new interpretations of Atsinna and the ancient context in which it developed.
- Petrified Forest Museum Association, which annually fund an archeology internship at Petrified Forest.
- Pueblo of Acoma, which has expressed an

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interest in working together on a number of preservation projects at El Malpais and at Acoma. Discussions have also focused on training and educational opportunities (for both Acoma and NPS), and an in-kind service agreement.

Finally, the most important keys to success are maintaining fiscal accountability and continuing to accomplish high-priority preservation projects. Ultimately, future generations will judge us successful or not by whether we have upheld the mission of the National Park Service by preserving and protecting resources of our shared heritage. By design,

the Vanishing Treasures program focuses on one particular type of those resources—pre-historic and historic structures containing exposed architecture. This focus has allowed it to become a model program not just for accountability but also for significant accomplishments.

Reference

Metzger, Todd R., and James W. Kendrick. In press. Vanishing Treasures: a unique approach in the management of cultural resources in the National Park Service. *SAA Archaeological Record* 3:3.

