

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CURATION CRISIS IN ARIZONA
A REPORT PREPARED BY THE GOVERNOR'S ARCHAEOLOGY ADVISORY COMMISSION
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The Governor's Archaeology Advisory Commission (GAAC) is a statutory body that advises the Governor and the State Historic Preservation Officer regarding archaeological issues. The goals of this document are to communicate the importance of archaeological curation, to describe the crisis now threatening archaeological collections in Arizona, and to present policy recommendations.

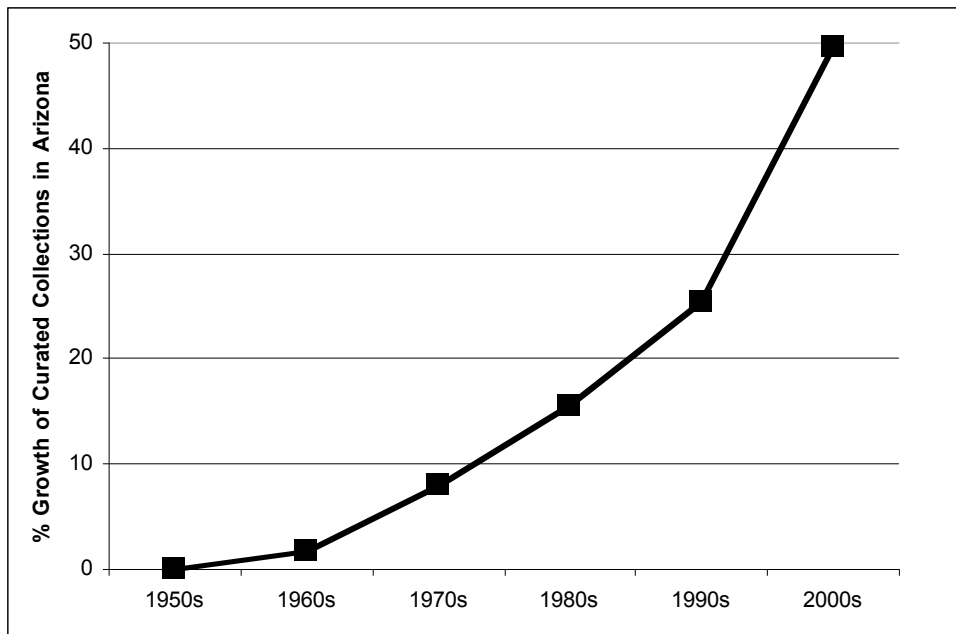
The Importance of Curating Artifacts and Associated Records

Federal and state laws, and some county and municipal ordinances, require archaeological survey, surface collections, and/or excavations prior to ground-disturbing activities involving the use of public lands, public funds, and/or permits granted by government agencies. The goal of these statutes is the preservation of our historical and archaeological heritage, through a process referred to as cultural resource management (CRM). Under relevant laws and regulations, the objects that archaeologists recover as a result of CRM projects, and their associated records, are equal to the scientific significance of the archaeological site that will be impacted or even destroyed by construction or some other activity. The sample of material recovered may be all that is left once the rest of the site is destroyed.

Taxpayers have invested artifacts with value by funding proper recovery techniques, documentation, and curation. Although reports document the conclusions of archaeological research, museum collections represent the empirical data—the proof of archaeological discoveries. In this sense, museum collections are like books in a library; researchers constantly return to them as knowledge expands. Changing research foci and ever-improving analytical methods in archaeology necessitate returning to existing collections. New techniques allow more precise determination of the ages of sites and greater understanding of how artifacts were made and used. As new techniques are applied, more and higher quality information is associated with curated objects. Objects and records have values beyond archaeology, however. These include spiritual connections with descendant communities and educational opportunities for the general public.

The Problem

Based on information compiled from published sources, interviews with museum professionals, questionnaires submitted to archaeological repositories, and oral and written testimony delivered at four public hearings held in 2005, GAAC has documented a lack of adequate space and funding for curation in the state. A key indicator of the severity of this problem is the recent year-long moratorium on accessions by the Arizona State Museum (ASM), the official repository for archaeological materials recovered from state lands and the only institution currently accepting collections from all areas of the state. Arizona is the second-fastest growing state in the United States and its major repositories are due to be full again within the next five to ten years. A startling measure of the upward trend in archaeological work in the state is a 290% increase over the last four years in information requests forwarded to ASM by CRM companies. More requests for information translates into increased fieldwork and more collections to curate.



Possible Solutions: Policy Recommendations

Space available to repositories for curation must be increased. This can be accomplished in large measure through more efficient use of space currently suitable for this task, rehabilitation of space not suitable for curation, rental of additional space, and new construction. Limited and ethical deaccessioning of materials inconsistent with the mission of a given institution is also recommended.

Funding for curation must be increased, through the use of interest-bearing accounts (endowments) and fee structures that realistically meet the costs of curation in perpetuity (including annual fees). In addition, federal agencies and the other entities that own the collections curated in Arizona's repositories must be convinced to take financial responsibility for materials accessioned in the era before curation standards and curation fees were developed.

Collections growth must be effectively and aggressively managed through long-term strategic planning by repository staffs and the archaeologists who create collections. Each repository must determine the types of collections it will accept and under what conditions. The archaeological community must develop standards for in-field analysis and encourage non-destructive alternatives to excavation. Such alternatives include avoidance of archaeological sites, better use of remote-sensing technologies, and encouraging or even requiring more use of existing collections rather than new fieldwork. Under some circumstances, collections should be culled before accession, based on professional standards to be developed locally. Excavation plans that incorporate more limited but representative sampling (i.e., preserving more material from fewer contexts and/or from smaller portions of sites) must be encouraged.