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Archaeologists Dig for History of Valles Caldera

By Adam Rankin
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A new set of eyes is peering into the human history of the Valles Caldera National Preserve, preparing to relate the long cultural story of the extinct volcano's past by taking note of what people left behind.

"Much of archaeology is looking for things that don't belong there," explained Steve Chomko, the new archaeologist with the Valles Caldera Trust.

His official title is cultural resources coordinator, but that bland moniker belies the nitty, gritty aspect of his new job that generates genuine excitement in his voice when he uncovers a stream-worn boulder of obsidian and tells you how it can explain a prehistoric economy.

"Archaeology, he said, "is a great, big jigsaw puzzle, and you're only limited by basically your imagination."

Having been at the preserve less than a month, Chomko already has grand ideas for how to frame the cultural history of the preserve— stretching back at least 10,000 years from the earliest nomadic hunter-gatherers to the first European homesteaders— though he doesn't yet know the plot.

He intends to unveil the caldera's long-term research and survey plans in a report he will present at an April meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Montreal.
But not everything about the caldera's human past is unknown.

"From the work to date, we already know people have been coming to the caldera for at least 10,000 years to retrieve that obsidian," Chomko said.

He said Jemez Mountain obsidian— formed as thick flows in the caldera's volcanic domes when iron-rich magma cooled to form the glassy mineral, perfect for making arrowheads and other tools— has been found as far afield as Calgary, St. Louis, Louisiana, Kentucky and the Pacific Northwest.

In piecing together the caldera's human story from the Stone Age to the 20th century, Chomko said he plans to use the most innovative techniques and technology at the preserve, where he will have a little more flexibility to be creative.

It's more than just the virtually untouched and unreported cultural resources that get Chomko's archaeological juices flowing— little has been studied because the property was private until 2000 when Congress put up $100 million to purchase the land and make it public. Chomko's excitement also stems from having the opportunity to be a part of telling the story and framing it from the beginning.

For one, Chomko said he is excited to be a part of the trust, which manages the 89,000-acre federal preserve, because its board is willing to be innovative and adaptive in the way it manages the recently acquired public land.

"There isn't an established this-is-the-way-we've-always-done-it mentality," he said on Friday as he looked out over the Valles Grande, the largest of the grassy bowls, nestled in the pit of the extinct volcano.

There are a few priorities and areas of focus he and the archaeologists who come to work on the preserve need to address first as longer-term projects and partnerships are established, he said.

One priority is cataloging areas where development and improvements are slated to begin, such as along various roads and hiking trails in the preserve that need to be fixed up for public access and safety.

Along one road, Chomko and archaeologists with the Midwest Archaeological Center, a division of the National Park
Service, have uncovered what they believe was one of several procurement sites for early Native Americans collecting obsidian. Jason Jurgena, who displayed a four-pound bag of obsidian flakes he and his digging partner collected from a one-meter square excavation site, has been helping Chomko catalog some of the sites in areas that might be impacted by road improvements.

The obsidian flakes are the leftovers from when hunter-gatherers, dating back as long as 4,000 years ago in this case, chipped obsidian boulders down into sharp-edged hide scrapers, arrowheads, spearheads and knives, some of which eventually made their way into the loose trade network that brought Pacific seashells to the East Coast and Texas chert to Montana.

"It's an ideal material type for making prehistoric tools," Chomko said. "It was a very much sought-after resource," he said, and was "a big factor in the trade network."

The point of these excavations, Chomko said, is to develop a plan to protect the sites during road construction while learning as much as possible in the process.

"Archaeology is all about information. It's not about artifacts, it's not about things," he said. "We're excavating information."

That's where a delicate balance comes into play, Chomko said, that aims to respect ancient cultures, whose descendants include 21 New Mexico pueblos and eight regional tribes, while protecting the cultural resource for years to come and doing enough excavations to tell the full human story.

That's why he is in frequent contact with local pueblos and their elders, consulting them on their historical and cultural use of the caldera to make sure his work or that of others don't impinge on important sites.

Chomko said he is also working with pueblo leaders to establish an oral history of the caldera that will include identifying place names each tribe used for different geologic features.

At the same time, the caldera is a public resource now, and the archaeological features are part of what make it unique. Chomko said he wants to share that with visitors. Eventually, he said, the preserve will have some self-guided archaeological tours and perhaps some guided tours for the more sensitive sites.

"We want to do it in such a way that is sensitive to the long-term needs," he said, because vandalism and theft are major concerns. "If (the preserve) was just opened up, (the archaeological resources) would just be used up.

"The more people visit and the more is known about the resources, the more that it is going to become a concern," he said.
To help him and the trust catalog the vast archaeological resources of the caldera, Chomko plans to enlist volunteers, university research programs and local archaeological societies.

Already, the Santa Fe Archaeological Society has expressed interest in helping inventory sites, and Chomko said he plans to establish a program that will train volunteers to do some of the work.

Eventually, Chomko said he plans to have all 89,000 acres surveyed and cataloged. To date, some 200 sites have been identified, a long way from the 90,000 sites Chomko estimates are out there.

Every chipped rock, abandoned home site and sheepherder-initialed Aspen tell a part of the caldera's human story, a tale Chomko said he'd like to see published in a book eventually.

"But that won't be done in my tenure here," Chomko said.
"That is a very long-term goal."

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