



## Why the Present Matters: The Importance of Community Outreach and Public Engagement in Archaeology

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## Why the Present Matters

### The Importance of Community Outreach and Public Engagement in Archaeology

*Tracie Mayfield and Scott E. Simmons*

But it is more important — because more humanizing — for us to understand the actors of the past in their full complexity and humanity, just as we would like to be appraised by future historians. Straw men and cardboard women are unworthy subjects and incapable of teaching us anything of value.

— James Axtell (1992)<sup>1</sup>

Archaeologists seek to understand the past through material, biological and documentary remains. These remains include buildings, objects from everyday life — food waste, plates, bottles, etc. — burials, newspapers, diaries, art and statuary. The list goes on and on. But even though humans leave behind many clues to how they live/d their everyday lives, those clues frequently are not enough to understand much more than what people ate, what their houses looked like, how they were buried and the kinds of technology they interacted with on a daily basis.

Archaeologists must find ways to verify, add to and challenge information gleaned from archaeological excavations to create a better understanding of the daily lives of past peoples. It is one thing to know what kinds of

plates people who lived as slaves during the Colonial period in the Americas used, but it is another to understand the experiences of people who lived as slaves during the Colonial period. The latter is a much more meaningful use of archaeology — to expose not only the materials of the past, but how individuals and groups navigated life and made decisions during a particular era depending on their economic, gendered, social, political and racial status.

One way to add value to archaeological interpretations is by seeking input from the local communities where archaeologists work to better understand recovered archaeological remains and to better understand how history is used by and is important to these communities. The past is not a static entity, just sitting there, stuck in time, unchanging. History is an active player in the present. Individuals and groups use history to establish power, argue for change or continuity, rationalize wars and genocide and present a particular way of life as “natural” or the “way things have always been.” Equally important, history tends to be silent with regard to those who do not have the modes and means of recording “their” histories (for example, people who cannot read and write). Archaeologists

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Figure 1. Ceramic artifacts recovered from the San Pedro site, Ambergris Caye, Belize during the 2017 field season, dating from the early 1800s through the 1880s. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.



Figure 2. Faunal remains recovered from the San Pedro site, Ambergris Caye, Belize during field season 2017. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

must strive to look at the past holistically and recognize the limitations of relying only on materials created in the past.

Modern humans should think of the past as “virtual reality”— a world based on real places, actual things and the written word but not a complete reality because we simply do not have enough information to construct such a world. Archaeological interpretations are based on amalgamations of information that are, unfortunately, rife with blind spots and unknowns. Just think about what you leave behind. Is what you throw away really representative of your whole life? Would a future archaeologist understand your particular experience in the 21st century from only your trash and your burial?

Although many archaeological excavations are carried out far from cities and

towns, just as many digs are conducted in populated areas, which are still currently in active use, often in much the same ways as they were in the past. During the summer of 2017, we excavated a site in San Pedro Town, on Ambergris Caye in Belize with students from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Our excavations were located in the front yard of a hostel, across the street from the main port and town square. San Pedro Town is an active, vibrant place with homes, restaurants, hotels, shops and food vendors who set up stalls that waft delicious smells around 5:00 each evening.

The site had originally been excavated in the 1980s, and we returned in 2017 to re-search the site further. The San Pedro Maya site has been continuously occupied for around 800 years, originally by the Maya and



*Figure 3. View of the San Pedro site, Ambergris Caye from the top floor of the Hostel La Vista, 2017. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.*



Figure 4. View of the San Pedro site, Ambergris Caye from the top floor of the Hostel La Vista, 2017 with views of the port, town square, and local businesses.

later by Spanish and British colonists seeking their fortunes in the New World, post-1492. Artifacts recovered in 2017 run the gambit from Maya objects (e.g., fishing weights, obsidian blades and ceramics); British materials such as medicine bottles, tobacco pipes and factory-produced tableware; and modern materials (e.g., safety glass, plastic water bottles and tile flooring).

Our work was carried out in full view of anyone passing by, and we wanted to invite the public to ask questions and engage in our research, so, among other things, we reached out to local newspapers and television. During the field season, we were interviewed on the *Good Morning, San Pedro* television

show and were featured in the two local newspapers: *Ambergris Today* and the *San Pedro Sun*.<sup>2</sup>

The results of these interactions with local media were immediate. The same day we did the morning show, three to four people stopped by to see what we were doing. Each of those people had seen artifacts similar to those we had excavated on their property and knew someone they were going to send over to take a look, as well. We got leads on previously unidentified sites and were informed of community members who might be able to answer some of our questions. Because the San Pedro Maya site had been settled for at least 800 years, not only were we able to



Figure 5. Modern artifacts recovered from San Pedro Town, Ambergris Caye, Belize during field season 2017. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.



Figure 6. The authors with [Reef Radio TV Productions] host, Eiden Salazar and Camera Tech, Kainie Manuel, after being interviewed on the Good Morning San Pedro Show. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

glean information about the deep past, we were able to make better interpretations about the site's later Colonial and modern history, as well. For example, just after breaking ground, we unexpectedly came across a modern concrete slab. The current owners of the property did not know about the slab and there were no records of a structure in that area. After asking around for a few weeks, we found out there had been a shaman's shack at that location. A local herbalist (not uncommon in Central America) had set up shop in the main square for a period of time about 40 years prior, just as many merchants had done for hundreds of years before and continue to do today.

The new leads and answers to some of the mysteries we had uncovered excited not

only the local public, but our students as well. It was a boon for our field experience to connect with local people, whose history we were studying and, in many ways, whose history we now share because our work as archaeologists becomes part of the local historical legacy.

Good science looks for and uses multiple lines of evidence. Relying only on excavated materials and historical documents can lead to false assumptions and a focus on one segment of the population, the most visible one. For example, when excavating plantations, a large percentage of the artifacts, structures and documents represent the experience and behaviors of the white, elite planter class. Most slaves did not read or write and their



Figure 7. Unexpected concrete slab excavated during 2017 excavations. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

homes were made of less robust materials than the main plantation house and, thus, are frequently lost to time and decay.

However, this does not mean those histories are lost. Stories and oral histories are passed down from generation to generation, so finding people whose families have a long local tenure can bring to light evidence unavailable from other types of data. Many times, local informants do not even realize how much they know. Stories of the meals their grandmothers made compared to what is eaten now shed light on animals that might no longer be available wild locally or pinpoint when other culture groups immigrated to the area (e.g., an influx of Chinese labor

in the 1800s introduced rice noodles into the local cuisine). A seemingly insignificant comment, such as “when I was a kid, the beach went out about 100 yards more and the school was located out there,” gives archaeologists an idea of how a landscape and the movement of people have changed over time. Local informants are a direct line to real, lived histories and, thus, should be consulted and considered an extremely valuable resource.

Engaging with the public brings cultural changes and continuities to light. As mentioned earlier, the same types of activities have been taking place at the San Pedro Maya site for hundreds of years. The port is



Figure 8. 2017 First day of excavations at the San Pedro site, Ambergris Caye, Belize in the front yard of Hostel La Vista. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.



a place where people gather, sell things and spend pleasant evenings enjoying the sea breezes. Knowing this changes how archaeologists experience a site, contemporarily, and enriches our interpretations of the lives of past peoples.

In archaeology, a horizon is a distinctive trait or set of traits (cultural, material, environmental) that connote an era different from what came before and after. For example, control of fire by humans. After fire could be controlled, human settlements began to look very different because they were now, generally, organized around hearths.

Communicating with the public can help identify past and even future horizons. For example, at Lamanai (an inland Maya site in Belize), a number of Christian burials were discovered within two Spanish colonial period churches (approximately 1540s–1640s) during excavations in the mid-1980s. These were assumed to be of Spanish origin. However, an informant was located who had family ties to Guatemalan squatters who lived at Lamanai after fleeing widespread discord in 1917. The owners of the property chased off the squatters that same year, but the informant along with his family and others moved back to Lamanai to farm what he believed to be his family's land in 1973.<sup>3</sup> He told the researchers that his grandfather and others from the early 20th-century village, which existed for only about a decade, had used the Spanish church for burials because "the villagers knew the featureless mound to be consecrated ground that had been used as a cemetery in [the 20th century]."<sup>4</sup> This was known solely through oral transmission and traditions until the 1980s excavations. Knowing that a specific group was present at the site (and when they

were present at the site), even if only for a short period, deepens archaeologists' understanding of the site's contexts over time and allows for a more precise timeline.

Local informants can also assist in identifying very recent or future horizons. For example, local people might know about changes to infrastructure, like a main port being moved to a new location, which would change the movement of people and goods and ultimately affect the archaeological record. While having a locally made beer after the day's field work in San Pedro Town, we noted that each bottle was served with a small beverage napkin wrapped around the mouth and neck. We later learned that, until a few years ago, the bottle caps used would transfer rust to the mouth of the bottles. So napkins were served with the beer to wipe off the rust. The napkins are no longer needed now that a different style of crown cap is used, but they are still included simply because it is the way things have been done for many years.



*Figure 9. A typical Sunday BBQ plate from a vendor in San Pedro Town. The same things, other than a change from wild pigs to domestic pigs and from deer to cow, have been prepared and eaten in the same location for over 800 years. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.*



Figure 10. Salvadoran food from a restaurant in San Pedro Town. During wars and times of stress, people from El Salvador frequently immigrate to Belize and have for over 150 years. Salvadoran food has become prevalent in many parts of the country, just as Mexican and Chinese food in the United States. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

For archaeologists, knowing bottle cap technology changed at a specific time can help us date artifact assemblages and add depth and breadth to interpretations. Even though beers are still being served with a napkin, the bottle caps themselves make their way into the archaeological record and the change is visible to archaeologists. Without the oral record, however, we might never know why the change was made in the first place. The artifactual horizon (e.g., when and why bottle cap technology changed) and the

**Without the oral record we might never know why the change was made in the first place.**

cultural horizon (e.g., serving beers with a napkin) may be different, adding nuance and complexity to archaeological interpretations.

Another reason for archaeologists to reach out to the public is to inspire locals to protect and utilize cultural materials (heritage management) when archaeologists' work has been completed, for example, by discouraging looting. Looting is a persistent, ongoing issue in most archaeologically rich regions, and it is more complicated than just "bad people" digging up artifacts and selling them on the black market. Many times, such activity is the only way



Figure 11. Local informant overseeing excavations during the 2017 field season. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

to make enough money to feed one's family in an economically depressed area. By working with and educating the local public, archaeologists can help develop sustainable ways for local individuals and groups to make a living by keeping sites intact and focusing on tourism instead of one-time sales of artifacts that will then be gone forever.

Engaging with the public, especially schoolchildren, also encourages up-and-coming local talent. Several Belize nationals have earned advanced degrees and now hold key positions in the Belize Institute of Archaeology, and we hope more will do the

same in the future. It is also beneficial to link up with local people already working on cultural and historical resources. In Belize, archaeologists are frequently assisted by Jan Brown. Brown is the Founder and Chairman of the Board of the Marco Gonzalez Maya Site, a Belizean nonprofit organization based near San Pedro Town.<sup>5</sup> She not only promotes and maintains the Marco Gonzalez site, but also assists archaeologists working all over Belize. She helps facilitate working relationships between locals and international researchers, rallies local businesses to participate in site preservation and public outreach,



Figure 12. Author, Scott E. Simmons, with Jan Brown [Founder and Chairman of the Board for the Marco Gonzalez Archaeological Site, Ambergris Caye, Belize] at the Runway bar and restaurant, San Pedro Town, Ambergris Caye, Belize. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.



Figure 13. Student taking notes in an excavation unit during the 2017 field season. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

gives advice on where to locate supplies and hire assistants and field technicians and even shows up in her golf cart to carry us and our equipment around when needed. Brown and people like her are an invaluable resource for reaching the public and adding value to archaeologists' work.

Significantly, engaging with the local public makes fieldwork more meaningful for the researchers. Archaeologists and their students have the opportunity to actually live in the places they study. Archaeology is visceral (and dirty!) work, and having outlets to share findings and meet the people whose ancestry we are researching is invaluable and ultimately deepens the research experience for all those involved in excavations and archaeological research.

Ultimately, public outreach should be geared toward different groups using a va-

riety of methods and mediums. Generally, local publics can be informed about current and ongoing archaeology through local media. Making contact with media before or soon after arriving on site generates interest and attracts local informants. In addition, developing relationships with key people already involved in local cultural history and historical preservation will always be a boon to archaeologists' work.

Tourism is an important aspect of developing, funding and maintaining archaeological sites. Working with local tourism boards and business owners, therefore, should be a component of archaeological investigations. Tourism boards, community leaders and Chambers of Commerce can also be engaged by encouraging them to voice the kinds of questions they would like answered and how they would like to use information and arti-



Figure 14. Scott E. Simmons [left] with Jan Brown [Founder and Chairman of the Board for the Marco Gonzalez Archaeological Site, Ambergris Caye, Belize] with artifact samples being interviewed on Good Morning San Pedro [Reef Radio TV Productions] by host, Eiden Salazar (right). Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

facts after research is completed, for example, asking how to organize museum exhibits or asking for research into a rumor about a specific location that might add intrigue and attract visitors to the area who would, in turn, spend money at restaurants, shops and hotels (e.g., “I can’t find any information about it, but people around here say this used to be a secret brothel that Al Capone would visit”). It is unlikely archaeologists could tie Al Capone to a location he might have visited in secret, but knowing the site may have been a brothel would alert archaeologists to be on the lookout for artifacts that would confirm or deny the oral history.

Looters are an unfortunate aspect of the archaeological universe. As mentioned

earlier, people who need to make a living are sometimes forced to resort to selling artifacts. Part of an archaeologist’s job is to help local people understand that a living can be made by opening museums, charging site entrance fees and building an infrastructure that caters to national and international tourists alike (e.g., hotels, restaurants, transportation, etc.). Instead of ostracizing individuals who sell artifacts, archaeologists could work with them and try to gain their trust enough that they would help archaeologists identify unknown sites and the materials found there, even if those materials ultimately disappear into the black market. Some data are better than no data.

Last, specific outreach should be geared toward school-age children and young adults. Archaeologists are usually outsiders in the communities where they excavate, so mentoring and facilitating the next generation of scholars and patrons of culture history from the local population adds depth and breadth to current and future research.

The academic and personal outcomes of community engagement and public outreach are always worth the time and effort. Archaeologists must get out, lean in and

**The academic and personal outcomes of community engagement and public outreach are always worth the time and effort.**

listen to what people have to say. There are many ways to begin the process of engaging with the public, such as going out to restaurants, shopping near the site, mak-



*Figure 15. The authors with field season 2017 archaeology students from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.*



Figure 16. Archaeology students processing artifacts in 2017. Courtesy of Tracie Mayfield.

ing friends at local bars and reaching out to school teachers and administrators. Archaeologists must always be ready to stop and talk to anyone who visits the site and must prepare their students to do the same. Our job is two-fold: study the site's past and understand what that past means to the people who still experience that same landscape in present times.

## Notes

Photos by Tracie Mayfield.

1. James Axtell, *Beyond 1492* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), ix.

2. <https://www.ambergristoday.com/news/2017/06/13/maya-findings-downtown-san-pedro-archaeological-students-conduct-digs>; <https://>

[www.sanpedrosun.com/arts-culture/2017/06/15/archaeology-students-conduct-four-week-excavation-san-pedro-maya-site/](http://www.sanpedrosun.com/arts-culture/2017/06/15/archaeology-students-conduct-four-week-excavation-san-pedro-maya-site/).

3. David Pendergst, "The Historical Content of Oral Tradition: A Case from Belize," *The Journal of American Folklore* 101, no. 401(1988): 321–324.

4. Pendergst, "Historical Content of Oral Tradition," 322.

5. <http://www.marcogonzalezmayasite.com/>.

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**Tracie Mayfield** has been working in Belize since 2009. She is a broadly trained (four-field), anthropological archaeologist, with specialization in zooarchaeology, currently focused on British colonialism in the Western Caribbean. In particular, she is interested in plantation and extractive industry sites. While much of her research output is focused on post-Columbian anthropological archaeology in the New World, her research and teaching milieu is much broader and relies heav-

ily on knowledge of pre-Columbian history and material culture. Her academic studies, research foci and teaching theory and methods rely on a holistic and longue durée view in order to more fully understand the history of the Americas. Dr. Mayfield is a lecturer at the University of Southern California.

**Scott E. Simmons** is an archaeologist who studies craft specialization and production processes, archaeometallurgy and ancient political and domestic economies, with a particular focus on the coastal Maya. He received a Bachelor of Arts in anthropology from the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, a Master of Arts in Historical Archaeology from the University of Massachusetts-Boston and a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Colorado, Boulder. He conducts fieldwork primarily in Belize and has worked in El Salvador, Wales and various parts of the United States. He is principal investigator of the Ambergris Caye Archaeological Project II in Belize, where he is investigating coastal Maya trade as well as island and mainland interaction spheres. Scott is a professor of archaeology and has taught anthropology and archaeology courses since 2001 at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He is a senior honorary research associate at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London.