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As Floridians who are also professional archaeologists, we found *The Bradenton Times*: Sunday Favorites column titled, "In Search of the Missing Link: a Look into the Underworld of Artifact Hunting," disappointing to say the least. The underworld of artifact collecting that Tim and Jake participate in is destructive, dangerous, opportunistic, greedy, and criminal.

We do, however, relate to Tim and Jake's beyond-the-average level of interest in artifacts. All archaeologists (and many, many non-archaeologists) can connect on some level to the drive to discover and understand mysteries. From the places we have seen and the places we have been told about all of our lives, we know that the Florida outback is like no other place. Couple our state's beautiful environment with a prospect for discovery and adventure and it is easy to get hooked for the long haul on the study of Florida's past.

We understand the privilege of recovering artifacts in a very different way than Tim and Jake. We are both of the opinion that artifacts are much, much more than single objects. We believe that we can speak on behalf of all archaeologists and informed avocationalist (non-professional volunteers and supporters) when we say that artifacts are NOT JUST OBJECTS, they represent pieces of a large and complex puzzle that allow a scientific study of the past and of the Floridians who have traversed and prospered across this state for thousands of years.

Technically, an "artifact" can be anything from a sharpened stone or a manipulated whelk shell, to butchered animal bones, to pieces of pottery, or to evidence for burned or decayed structures such as wooden posts or building foundations. The shortsighted motives associated with looting and collecting stop at the thing itself—it stops at the arrowhead or it stops with a broken fragment of pottery. Looting does not look beyond the object to the knowledge and traditions that went in to the construction, use, loss, or burial of that object.

The looting of archaeological sites also leaves behind a wake of irreparable damage. It is crucial that all of us understand that once an archaeological resource is destroyed in a nonsystematic way it can never be remade. As we noted above, what an artifact truly is—and who or what it represents and why that is important—can only be understood through careful research that combines scientific methodologies and humanities-based questions. It is often said that beauty is in the details. For archaeologists, it is in these details that the true nature of an artifact can inform us about the past.

An important component of our individual service in archaeology is public outreach and volunteerism. Each of us has been fortunate enough to have opportunities to speak with people across the state about the remarkable archaeological resources in Florida. These conversations invariably involve speaking with folks about the fragile nature of these resources and how they might be appropriately maintained, explored, and serve as something of value in the lives of present-day Floridians. There are many opportunities across Florida for individuals looking to gain more specific knowledge about our state's past. And these opportunities will be, in our opinion, much more fulfilling undertakings than slinking about in the cover of darkness and sleeping in a fox hole 'til morning.

For example, the Florida Anthropological Society (FAS) is a statewide organization founded in 1947 and which currently includes 13 local chapters covering Florida from the Panhandle to the Keys. Each FAS chapter is voluntarily run and funded by individuals that have a respect for the history of our state and who share the opinion that the past should be learned from and shared. The Tampa Bay area is fit with a

couple of dynamic and energetic FAS Chapters (Time Sifters Archaeology Society (<http://www.timesifters.org/>) and Central Gulf Coast Archaeological Society (<http://www.cgcas.org/>) that are easily accessible if any reader might wish to learn more and possibly participate.

Florida is certainly big country. Evidence suggests that people have occupied this peninsula for 12,000 years. Not coincidentally, today we look to occupy the same areas that many earlier inhabitants once did. Because of this, loss of archaeological sites is expected. However, national leaders made a clear statement in 1966 with the adoption of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) that the past is important and is worthy of our preservation and protection. Similarly, Florida leaders adopted a comparable law a few years later under the Florida Historical Resources Act (Ch. 267 of the Florida Statutes).

This effort has permeated at the level of local government through required attention to historic and archaeological preservation in comprehensive plans. Sixty of Florida's 471 units of local government have gone a step further and implemented specific historic preservation ordinances. Manatee County, unfortunately, is not among that list of sixty. However a local effort is underway to encourage elected officials and policy leaders that preserving the past is an effective tool in future growth management and historic neighborhood revitalization. Adoption of the ordinance is also affirmation of the county's commitment to historic preservation.

Lastly, it would be erroneous in this financial climate not to mention the economic impact and ramifications that will result from not practicing good stewardship of our cultural heritage. Getting down to brass tacks, it is a plain and simple fact that heritage-based tourism is BIG business in Florida. In 2008, it brought 4.2 billion dollars into state revenue. In the same year, it created over 100,000 jobs. Nearly half of the visitors to Florida that were surveyed reported that they stopped at an archaeological or heritage site while here; Florida is not just theme parks and beaches.

Collectors like the individuals described in "Missing Link" are potentially cutting into that future revenue stream and it is up to all of us to be stewards of our cultural heritage and to regularly remind our elected officials that we desire the same commitment from them. More importantly however, when we lose our cultural resources, whether via looting or mismanagement, what we are really losing is part of ourselves. These losses trespass into our sense of place, they mindlessly dig into a Florida that belongs to all of us, and they steal away invaluable and intangible connections to our ancient and recent history that many modern Floridians (and visitors) take a great deal of pride in.

Sincerely,

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