Amerindian societies are the oldest in the Americas. They are a people who are characterized by a deep sense of community and a strong connection to the land. The Amerindian way of life is closely intertwined with the natural environment, with a strong emphasis on agriculture and hunting. The Amerindians were the first people to develop complex societies in the Americas, with a wide range of cultural practices and beliefs.

In the American Southwest, this legacy is a cultural mosaic. When the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, they met many native peoples who had been here for thousands of years. Subsequently, some Amerindian groups remained in their original homelands, while others changed locations. Some groups lived in villages and towns, while others roamed in the wilderness. Many languages were spoken, and traditional customs differed from those of the Spanish and more recent European arrivals—and, often, from tribe to tribe. Spanish and Amerindian traditions are part of the heritage that makes the American Southwest unique.

European expansion and development, including activities such as the clearing of fields, grazing, and the construction of new buildings, farms, and roads, has destroyed evidence of earlier uses of the land. Even excavating archaeological sites (no matter who destroys them) is destructive.

By the time that citizens and the government decided to preserve artifacts and sites around the turn of the 20th century, many Amerindian and non-Amerindian sites had already been destroyed, burned, or otherwise lost. To help preserve remaining sites, several laws were passed to protect antiquities on federal, tribal, state, and municipal lands. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 protects human remains and associated funerary materials, as well as sacred objects and cultural patrimony on federal, Amerindian, and Native Hawaiian lands. We now recognize that the sites and objects representing Amerindian cultural heritage deserve our respect and protection—because they are our fragile legacy.


during the late 19th century, they were forcibly removed from their homelands and sent to boarding schools. This policy, known as "Cultural Appropriation," was intended to erase Amerindian ways of life and culture.

Many Amerindian tribes have initiated their own archaeological studies. Sometimes they work with other professionals to verify oral traditions, to manage sensitive ancestral sites, or to undertake claims to former homelands.

For many Amerindians, the past is a living memory. Their stories, songs, dances, and other cultural practices are passed down through generations. Examination of early accounts and more recent historical records, including photographs and art objects, and study of archaeological remains. Many people are helping, including Amerindian and other ethnic groups, researchers of contemporary culture groups, historians, members of local communities, and archaeologists. In combination with oral history and historical documentation, archaeological survey and the excavation of Amerindian pueblo, early colonial churches and villages, and historic industrial sites tell us how people lived.

A tiny fragment of distinctive pottery can indicate the presence of a specific group of people and, through the use of sophisticated dating techniques, can reveal the approximate dates when people lived in the location in which it was found. A shred of cloth could indicate that the people may have grown cotton. A small fragment of wood can be used to infer past vegetation and climate, as well as to determine species of trees used for building homes, for firewood, or for making tools.


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Preservation-wise Collecting

The desire for knowledge about human history runs deep. So does the urge to collect objects representing people who have gone before us. Looting continues to be a problem on all lands, and illegal artifacts do find their way into the market. Nevertheless, more people now understand the importance of preserving archaeological sites and their artifacts for the future and are instead choosing to pursue preservation-wise alternatives.

Collecting contemporary American Indian art provides its own very special excitement and rewards: modern-day Indian paintings, sculpture, and crafts are highly artistic and decorative. Basketry, rugs, blankets, pots, and jewelry are useful as well as attractive. Many modern pieces reveal strong connections with the past through themes, styles, and design elements and techniques. As a collector, you can specialize in particular artists, tribes, or regions—or in topical favorites such as ceramic storytellers or turquoise jewelry. You can sometimes meet artists at tribal arts-and-crafts shows, events like

To Report Illegal Activities, Call:
National Parks, Nationwide:
1-800-24PAVRR (227-5266)
A National Park Service 24-hour line for reporting resource crimes (ARP/ NACPA: poaching, digging fossils, and other violations).
• Arizona 1-800-VAINDALS (826-3257)
• Colorado 1-303-866-3395
• New Mexico 1-505-827-5320
• Utah 1-800-722-3998

Federal agencies work cooperatively with state and local law-enforcement agencies and use undercover operations and highly sophisticated surveillance equipment to apprehend offenders.

Copies of federal and state laws can be obtained from the state historic preservation offices listed below. Information about Indian preservation and protection laws can be obtained from tribal preservation offices.

• Arizona State Historic Preservation Office
  1500 West Washington
  Phoenix, AZ 85007

• Colorado State Historic Preservation Office
  1500 Broadway
  Denver, CO 80203

• New Mexico Office of Cultural Affairs
  Historic Preservation Division
  228 East Palace
  Santa Fe, NM 87503

• Utah State Historic Preservation Office
  300 Rio Grande
  Salt Lake City, UT 84101

Getting Involved

Here are some ways you can get involved in helping to preserve our fragile legacy:

By visiting local museums. You can see the past come to life in exhibits—from large urban museums to roadside points of interest.

By teaching your children. You can encourage teachers in your community to educate children about historic preservation—an excellent springboard for introducing concepts like scientific inquiry, the issues and ethics of conservation, cultural diversity, and problem solving. Recognizing the historical significance of ordinary objects helps young people make a personal connection to the past, and promotes respect for other people. Teacher’s guide that integrate archaeology are available from some federal agencies and state historic preservation offices.

By supporting preservation organizations. You can support the many organizations working on state and local levels. Groups like The Archaeological Conservancy acquire and permanently preserve endangered sites all over the country. Other volunteer groups often work with state and local governments to encourage developers to preserve archaeological sites within planned developments—a practice that not only preserves the sites for the future, but also gives developers certain advantages, such as tax deductions, favorable publicity, and even added value to their land.

By volunteering. For exciting hands-on experience in excavation, artifact processing, and analysis, you can contact local archaeological societies, contracting firms, or government agencies. Such groups work under permit, collaborate with cultural groups associated with archaeo-

Recommended Reading


Schual, Gregory, with photography by Lewis Kemper; 1996: Ancient Ancestors of the Southwest. Graphic Arts Center Publishing Inc., Portland, OR.

Schauf, Polly; 1980: Indian Rock Art of the Southwest: A School of American Research, Santa Fe, NM.

Trimble, Stephen; 1993: The People—Indians of the American Southwest. Sun Press, Santa Fe, NM.

Walker, Steven; 1994: Indians of the American Southwest: Carneback/Canyonlands, Scottsdale, AZ.

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Cover photo: Archaeology examining an artefact recovered during rescue stabilization at Canyon del Chelly National Monumen. Courtesy of National Park Service.