SITE RESEARCH PAPER: RANGE CREEK CANYON, UTAH

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ANTH 2969

May 3, 2016
When the existence of Range Creek Canyon was announced in 2004 it was one of the most protected and unknown prehistoric archaeological sites in the American West (Sandford 2004). The site was first located during a land survey by Deputy U.S. Surveyor Augustus Ferron, in 1884 and named Ranch Creek (Gerber 2014). A year later Ferron returned with business partners, renamed the creek Range Creek, and started the Range Valley Cattle Company (Gerber 2014). Ranchers continued to use, occupy, and protect the site until 2004 when Waldo Wilcox sold the portion he owned to the United States government (Gerber 2014). It is likely that early ranchers were drawn to the area by “chest high natural grass” as described in 1886 by Joe Wing, nephew to one of the original Range Valley partners (Gerber 2014). Early ranchers were driven to protect the areas prime grazing lands and business profits, effectively keeping much of the archaeological record intact (Gerber 2014). As stated by Metcalf in his article “In a Remote Utah Canyon, Archaeologists Plumb a Mystery” the key to ranching in the west is “to own as little as possible and control access to as much as possible” (Metcalf 2010:2). In the 1950’s a portion of the area was purchased by the Wilcox family and surround areas were leased by the same family (Gerber 2014). It was during the Wilcox family occupation that the archaeological significance of the area was fully realized (Gerber 2014). “Wilcox put up gates and road closed signs just in case pot hunters learned of the artifacts littering the ranch” fundamentally protecting the site from anyone who might wander in (Sandford 2004:2). After the sell Wilcox stated “It did not belong to us. If those people wanted to leave their things there, I thought we should leave them alone” (Sandford 2004:2).

Range Creek Canyon is an active archaeological site occupied on a 30 year lease by the University of Utah (Metcalf 2010). Because of its remote location and the protection of ranchers is one of the most pristine representations of the prehistoric culture archaeologists call
Fremont (Metcalfe 2010). Surveys were conducted in 2004 by university staff and students along with volunteers however, as much as 90% of documented prehistoric sites in the canyon had already been documented by the Wilcox family (Metcalfe 2010). Surveyors used a variety of tools to collect as much information as possible during this initial survey including GPS, IMACS forms, sketch maps, artifact sketches, and photographs (“Range” 2014). Once the survey was complete the University began a holistic approach to understanding the site and the Fremont people. Traditional archaeology along with Sokkia total stations were used to create high precision maps and experimental archaeology was also employed in an attempt to understand how the Fremont people lived and why they did what they did (“Range” 2014). Some of the experimental archaeology conducted by University of Utah field school students including building and using a granary, rock art recreation, flintknapping, hide preparation, and teepee construction (“Range” 2014). These experiments are monitored and recorded over time and are being used to understand the time, materials, and manpower needed for construction (“Range” 2014).

Some artifacts and features found in Range Creek Canyon raise questions about culture in the canyon. For example granaries found in visible areas, high in cliff enclaves could have been placed in these hard to reach locations to protect food from competing tribes as expressed by Renee Barlow, assistant professor of anthropology at Salt Lake Community College in Sandfords article “Utah’s Ancient Ones” (2004). Or perhaps the cliff locations have a more practical purpose, chosen to protect the food storage from flash flooding as suggested by Metcalfe’s “In a Remote Utah Canyon, Archaeologists Plumb a Mystery” (2010). Other artifacts and features found in Range Creek Canyon include rock art, pit houses, and human remains (Sandford 2004). Specialized studies that lend deeper understanding of the Fremont culture are also being
conducted in Range Creek Canyon. One dendroarchaeological study looked at wood used by the Freemont to build granaries and compared it to the wood used in the historical rancher cabins which also occupy the site (Towner, et al. 2009). This study found that although the species of trees in the area have changed very little over time the Fremont people in Range Creek Canyon were able to exploit a wider range of materials due to their less stringent requirements of wood size and shape while the ranchers almost exclusively used large straight Douglas-fir to construct buildings (Towner, et al. 2009). These types of specialized studies are important because they help us understand the differences and similarities between modern, historic and prehistoric culture.

The convergence of these differences and similarities along with years of cattle rancher’s protection are what make Range Creek Canyon such an important archaeological find. By attempting to understand how people lived day to day, what they ate, how they worked, and their view of the supernatural we can better understand ourselves, how we relate to each other, and our shared past. One mystery that remains in Range Creek Canyon is, why did the prehistoric people who lived there leave? As Range Creek Canyon is studied perhaps more insight to that question will be gained. When we attempt to answer these questions we gain a better understanding of how our individual and communal choices could impact future generations and how our culture might be interpreted by them.
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