

Discovering Elwha History

Olympic National Park

Importance

The Elwha Act was passed as a fisheries and ecosystem restoration bill but it has had the effect of substantively adding to the local and regional archeological knowledge base through regulatory compliance actions undertaken in the last 15 years. These include archeological survey, testing, construction monitoring and limited data recovery. While it remains largely an ecosystem restoration project, just about any member of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe will tell you there is an equally important cultural restoration occurring.

Archeological resources—those non-renewable, tangible, and quantifiable materials that allow us to piece together the past—form an important linkage between the larger scale cultural resource restoration that encompasses intangible aspects associated with memories, oral history, and spirituality and the realm of Western empirical science.

Status

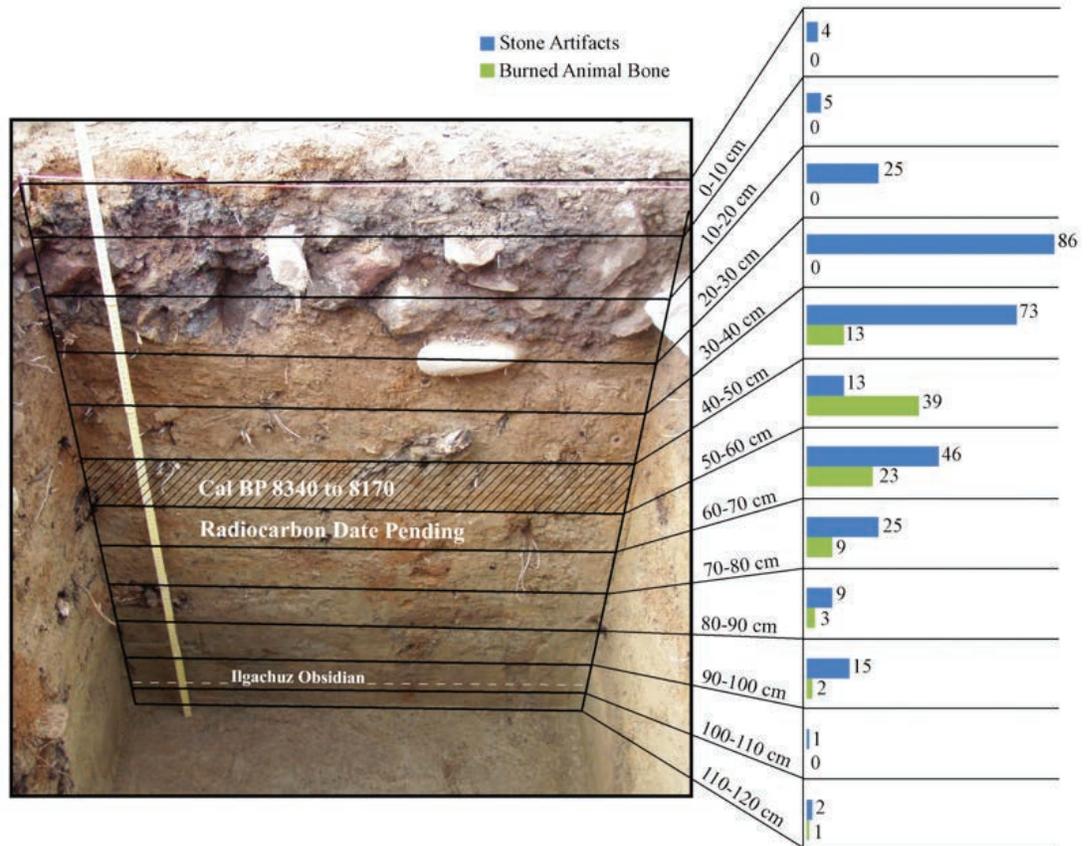
If you look at archeological site distributions across the Olympic Peninsula prior to the Elwha Project, you will find that the lowland river valleys are not well represented. During the 15 years leading up to dam removal, archeological investigations associated with the project have revealed a long and complex archeological record within the Elwha Valley.



Archeological sites in the valley have been documented during all phases of the project and reveal an intensity of use that may surprise many people. These sites are typically comprised of lithic debitage (chipping debris) and flaked stone tools, though several sites have provided limited assemblages of faunal remains including burnt animal bone, fish bone, and marine invertebrate remains. These materials have allowed us to complete radiocarbon analyses confirming human use of the Elwha Valley back nearly 8,000 years.

Discussion

The focus of archeological investigations has now shifted from survey, testing, and evaluation of sites prior to deconstruction to monitoring and treatment of sites during deconstruction activities. Soon the focus will narrow to monitoring river erosion/meander as the river re-establishes its free flowing regime. Analysis and interpretation of data are ongoing.



Archeological excavation has been completed at six pre-contact archeological sites within the valley. A large assemblage of flaked stone artifacts has been recovered that is being analyzed and will contribute to our understanding of stone tool technological organization and raw material procurement. The limited faunal remains—rare in most open, lowland archeological sites—provides a much needed avenue for chronometric dating. Radiocarbon dates range from $3,200 \pm 40$ years Before Present on marine gastropod remains found in an upriver location, and associated with flaked stone tools and a hearth feature, to a date of $7,420 \pm 40$ at a large site that was probably an upriver fishing location. This latter date is the oldest radiocarbon result from an archeological context within Olympic National Park and the second oldest date on the Olympic Peninsula. Quantitative analysis of an obsidian artifact that was recovered from a stratigraphic position beneath (presumably older than) the 7,420 date suggests early, well developed trade networks between the Olympic Peninsula and central British Columbia.

Combine this information with the recently documented location of the Lower Elwha Klallam creation site and it becomes clear that the Elwha Restoration Project has contributed to a better understanding of when, where and how people have used the watershed during the Holocene, but perhaps more importantly it gives confirmation and validation to the Lower Elwha Klallam as they reestablish cultural patterns and ties to the river that has sustained them since time immemorial.

Opposite Archeologists excavating ca. 8,000 year old sediment from a site along the Elwha River. NPS/OLYM

Above Preliminary results from archeological testing, note radiocarbon dated layer.

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