

# READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME *reden*, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

## WILDLIFE ARCHAEOLOGY

*Archaeologists in New Mexico are analyzing tree rings, pottery, and blasts of light to argue that federal fire suppression policies are partially to blame for the raging wildfires in the West. As Stephen Nash reported:*

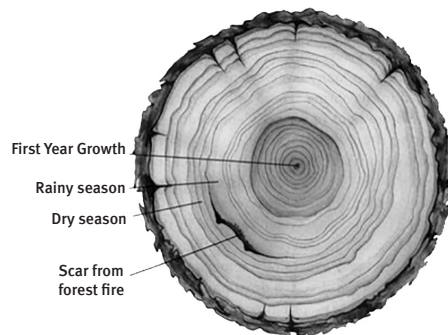
Using dendochronology, or tree-ring dating, the team examined fire-scarred trees in and around Wabakwa [Jemez Pueblo] and found three distinct patterns. From around A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1650, small, patchy fires were common in the area. These fires, which often affected only one or two ponderosa pines, would have been set by the inhabitants as part of their subsistence and cultural practices, probably to manage plant resources and maximize agricultural productivity.

Once Native Americans left the region, those patchy fires stopped, and nature took over again. From the late 1600s through about 1880, according to the fire scars in the trees, there were widespread, low-level wildfires that affected larger numbers of ponderosa pines. This pattern is consistent with other ponderosa pine forests across North America, where wildfires occur naturally every 15 to 20 years or so....

Finally, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up until today, coinciding with the period of federal fire suppression, as well as livestock grazing and logging activities (largely by Euro-Americans), the team found evidence of significant changes to the forest structure. With low-intensity fires no longer passing through the area, the forest became denser and overgrown, with lots of trees having germinated since the last recorded wildfire in 1893. The amount of combustible materials, such as leaves, needles, and branches – what scientists and forest managers call the “fuel load” – also increased significantly due to the lack of fires during this period....

Thanks to the work of archaeologists at Wabakwa, we now have convincing evidence that ponderosa pine forests that were once effectively managed by humans and natural wildfire cycles have become flammable tinderboxes.

It’s going to be exceedingly difficult to rectify this situation. That said, collaborative research between various federal agencies, universities, and Native American tribes suggests that a return to Indigenous fire management practices can indeed prove effective in mitigating our current situation.



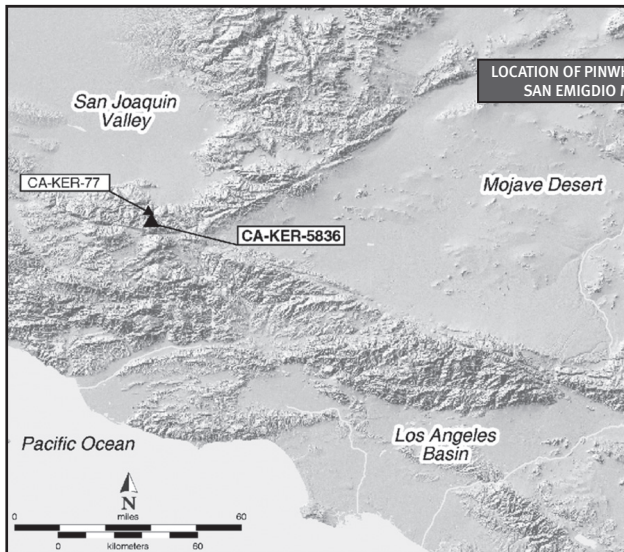
(<https://ell.stackexchange.com/questions/49850/how-do-you-say-that-tree-rings-are-will-be-closer-if-there-isnt-much-rain>)

**MIND-ALTERING**

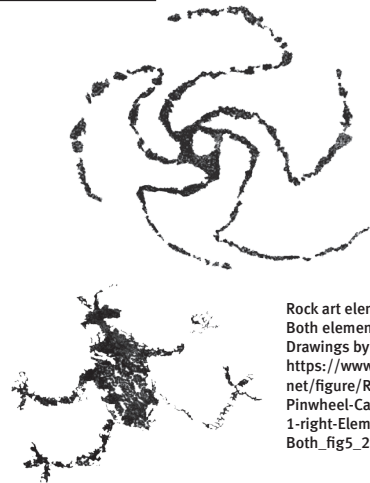
Researchers from the University of Oregon have been studying Pinwheel Cave, a Native American rock art site in California associated with the Chumash people. They discovered evidence of mind-altering psychedelics (among them *datura*, commonly known as jimsonweed or moonflower) dating from around 400 years ago.

Pinwheel Cave was named for a red pinwheel painted on the cave ceiling. During the summer solstice, sunlight travels across the pinwheel which was thought to suggest that the cave served for seasonal ritual celebrations. Excavations have now shown evidence of food processing, cooking fires, and other domestic activities, indicating that the cave was less a site for rarefied shamanic practice and more a community hub where *datura* ingestion occurred alongside everyday communal activities.

Source: "Mind-Altering Psychedelics Discovered in Native American Cave." 14 Dec. 2020, <https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2020/12/14/mind-altering-psychedelics-discovered-in-native-american-cave/>



Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-Pinwheel-Cave-CA-KER-5836-in-the-San-Emigdio-Mountains-California\\_fig1\\_267865775](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-Pinwheel-Cave-CA-KER-5836-in-the-San-Emigdio-Mountains-California_fig1_267865775)



Rock art elements, Pinwheel Cave. Both elements in shades of red. Drawings by Dan Reeves, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Rock-art-elements-Pinwheel-Cave-Left-Element-1-right-Element-2-105-x-17-cm-Both\\_fig5\\_284504174](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Rock-art-elements-Pinwheel-Cave-Left-Element-1-right-Element-2-105-x-17-cm-Both_fig5_284504174)

**HOMeward BOUND**

From 1977 to 1983, Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) led a massive series of archaeological digs at Black Mesa in Northern Arizona where Peabody Energy leased land from the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe to strip mine for coal.

Because Peabody was working on reservation land, it was required by the National Historic Preservation Act to search for, remove, and preserve Native American remains and relics.

As the mine grew, the project became one of the largest in the history of North American archaeological fieldwork, according to SIUC, employing hundreds of people, identifying nearly 2,500 archaeological sites across about 100 square miles of the mesa, and unearthing

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several million Navajo, Hopi and ancient Puebloan and prehistoric artifacts, some as much as 8,000 years old, as well as the 200-plus skeletons.

The items were placed in the temporary care of SIUC. But their return to Native American hands has been slowed by politics and logistics....

Properly reburial of the skeletons would require an extensive matching game, using field notes from the original excavations to pair each body with the ceremonial burial items that accompanied it.

Those burial objects remained in Carbondale, while the human remains had been transferred to a researcher at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Representatives from both Navajo and Hopi traveled to Las Vegas to arrange for the skeletons' return to Arizona. They also visited Carbondale twice to retrieve the burial items, driving them back to Arizona in a U-Haul.

"SIUC took really good care of the BMAP (Black Mesa Archaeological Project) collection," Begay said. [Begay was hired as the Navajo Nation historic preservation officer in 2007.] "They really did provide us with all the info we wanted and worked hard to make sure the Navajo and Hopi were happy with the process."...

A reburial ceremony was held in May. Together, Hopi and Navajo representatives picked a new gravesite as close as possible to the ancestors' original resting places within the mine's working area.

The reburial began early in the morning, with about 15 volunteers working all day. There was no media present, no videos or photographs. Each tribe handled the dead according to its own customs, and Hopi and Navajo spiritual leaders performed blessings on the remains and the workers.

"It was satisfying," Begay said. "As unfortunate as it was that the remains were removed, it was probably a good decision to remove and protect them. They would've been completely destroyed otherwise."

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Source: Neely-Streit, Gabriel. "Returning home: Sacred artifacts held by SIUC Carbondale reburied with Hopi, Navajo ancestors." *The Southern Illinoian*, 2 Jan. 2020, [https://thesouthern.com/news/local/siu/returning-home-sacred-artifacts-held-by-siu-carbondale-reburied-with-hopi-navajo-ancestors/article\\_198831a5-1552-5f21-be9f-1e88cba03eaa.html](https://thesouthern.com/news/local/siu/returning-home-sacred-artifacts-held-by-siu-carbondale-reburied-with-hopi-navajo-ancestors/article_198831a5-1552-5f21-be9f-1e88cba03eaa.html)

## OLDEST AMERICANS

*Artifacts recently unearthed at a site in western Idaho called Cooper's Ferry indicate that humans were living there 16,000 years ago, pushing back the timeline of human habitation in North America which had previously been set at 13,500 years.*

...[I]n recent years, archaeologists have found numerous sites and artifacts older than [the] migration timeline, suggesting that early humans didn't travel through the ice but followed the coast, likely using boats. A site called Monte Verde at the southern tip of Chile is at least 15,000 years old, a sinkhole in Florida recently yielded a knife and butchered mammoth bone more than 14,500 years old, and the Gault site in Texas has yielded thousands of artifacts that could be 16,000 to 20,000 years old.



<https://www.ineffableisland.com/2019/08/first-people-arrived-in-north-america.html>; Map by Teresa Hall, Oregon State University.

... The simplest explanation is that the earliest migrants to North America traveled up river to reach Idaho. “The Cooper’s Ferry site is located along the Salmon River, which is a tributary of the larger Columbia River basin. Early peoples moving south along the Pacific coast would have encountered the Columbia River as the first place below the glaciers where they could easily walk and paddle in to North America,” Davis says in the press release. [Loren Davis is an Oregon State University anthropologist and lead author of the new study.] “Essentially, the Columbia River corridor was the first off-ramp of a Pacific coast migration route. The timing and position of the Cooper’s Ferry site is consistent with and most easily explained as the result of an early Pacific coastal migration.... One of the big questions remaining is just who the earliest North Americans were. Davis has speculated that the oldest artifacts found at Cooper’s Ferry are similar in form to artifacts found in northwestern Asia, in particular Japan. He’s currently comparing his dig’s finds with Japanese artifacts and also has lots of other material queued up for carbon dating from a second dig site in the area.

Source: Daley, Jason. “Idaho Site Shows Humans Were in North America 16,000 Years Ago.” *SmithsonianMag.com*, 30 Aug. 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/idaho-site-shows-humans-were-north-america-16000-years-ago-180973024/>

**EDITORIAL MATTER**

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