

Why Does Grand Canyon National Park Restrict Archaeological Site Location Disclosure and Visitation?

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Abstract

Federal law and NPS management policies extend the authority to government programs to withhold sensitive information about cultural resources when disclosure could result in harm, theft, or destruction of such places. The National Historic Preservation Act and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act mandate the following:

The head of any Federal agency, after consultation with the Secretary, shall withhold from disclosure to the public, information relating to the location or character of historic resources whenever the head of the Agency or the Secretary determines that the disclosure of such information may create a substantial risk of harm, theft, or destruction to such resources or to the area or place where such resources are located. *Section 304, National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended through 1992.*

Information concerning the nature and location of any archaeological resource for which the excavation or removal under any other provision of Federal law may not be made available to the public under subchapter II of chapter 5 of title 5 of the United States Code or under any other provision of law unless the Federal land manager concerned determined that such disclosure would – (1) further the purposes of this Act or the Act of June 17, 1960 (16 USC 469-469c), and (2) not create a risk of harm to such resources or to the site at which such resources are located. *Section 9, Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979.*

In 1995, then Superintendent Rob Arnberger, signed the “*Cultural Site Information Standard Operating Procedure for Grand Canyon National Park.*” Through this Standard Operating Procedure (policy) the site classification system was developed and implemented, and the laws and regulations underpinning the policy were identified. The policy was established for the benefit of the resource and the public. The policy helps us direct visitors to the resources that can withstand visitation and to minimize impacts to those that cannot.

An integral part of the site disclosure policy is the site classification system. The classification system is closely tied to the ability of a site to withstand impacts resulting from visitation. Class I sites can be regularly visited because they receive the “greatest direct physical protection to minimize visitor impacts.” Class I sites are regularly stabilized through the park’s ruins preservation program and trails, guiding foot traffic around sensitive areas, are maintained. The Unkar Delta sites along the self-guided tour are examples of Class I sites. They have been excavated, stabilized, and interpreted. There is a trail to guide visitors while avoiding sensitive areas.

Class II sites are also well-known and can withstand fairly high levels of visitation. However, they receive less maintenance than Class I sites and are more susceptible to damage. Visitors should always be taught site etiquette practices before visiting any site, but it is particularly important that such information be given when visiting Class II sites. The “back eddy” site below Deer Creek is an example of a Class II site. The site is not regularly stabilized and the rock walls are vulnerable to damage. Trails to the site are not formal so care must be taken to avoid impacts to archaeological materials when walking around the site.

Class III sites are the most vulnerable and fragile sites in the park. Such sites are not maintained. They are generally not well-known, not well-studied, and contain fragile soils, artifact types, and archaeological features. Damage resulting from high levels of visitation could destroy archaeological deposits and other site elements. Most sites in the park fall into this class. These sites are not closed, but they cannot withstand visitation from large groups of people. Because of this, commercial guiding companies are restricted from taking visitors to Class III sites.

Class IV sites are officially closed to all visitation. Class IV sites are limited in number and a list of them can be found at http://www.nps.gov/grca/parkmgmt/upload/2012_grca_compendium.pdf.

In 2008, the policy was added to the regulatory requirements for all commercial guiding companies. This was necessary to protect fragile archaeological sites from impacts caused by too much visitation. The Commercial Operating Requirements (CORs), which are part of the river concessioners' contracts, state:

"Archaeological sites along the river and in tributary canyons can be damaged by people walking on fragile cultural deposits, by piling artifacts into collection piles, stealing artifacts, digging in ruins, rearranging wall fall or building up walls, and from other activities such as graffiti and vandalism. These activities are prohibited and punishable under federal laws. Guides must inform their clients about the federal laws prohibiting disturbance of archaeological remains on federal lands. The Concessioner must comply with the Grand Canyon National Park Cultural Site Information Standard Operating Procedures."

We want the public to learn to appreciate the human history of the Grand Canyon and to develop a sense of stewardship for protecting the cultural resources of the park. River guides have the unique opportunity to share first-hand knowledge and experiences with passengers. Your role is critical to helping us preserve sites for future generations.