

Rowher Flats OHV Archaeological Investigation

During May 2009, the Angeles National Forest (ANF) conducted an archaeological investigation at a site containing the remains of a prehistoric Native Californian village located in the south-facing foothills of the Castaic Mountains, Los Angeles County, California. The investigation was designed to characterize archaeological "heated rock" food cooking features, which had been exposed by rainstorm erosion in a roadbed. These cooking structures, commonly referred to as "earth ovens," were considered to be at-risk of damage or total destruction from motorized vehicles and road maintenance activities after the scheduled reopening of the Rowher Flat Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Area in November 2009. The Department of Fish and Game, Office of Spill Prevention and Response contributed funds towards investigating the cultural resources in support of maintaining recreational opportunities in the area.

The investigation site, situated within the Rowher Flat OHV Area, contains numerous archaeological components, including cupule pit rock art boulders, lithic flakes and cores, graters, projectile points, manos, metates, several rock alignments and clusters, shell tube beads, and, most significantly, human skeletal remains. The site has been determined to be eligible for inclusion to the National Register of Historic Places.

In September 2007, virtually all the native vegetation growing at the OHV Area was burnt by an intense wildfire. ANF temporarily closed the OHV Area to protect resources and provide for public safety. The OHV Area was scheduled to reopen in November 2009. During January 2008, winter rainstorms exposed a series of prehistoric heated rock structures in the roadbed. ANF determined that the scheduled reopening of the OHV Area would likely adversely affect the cooking features. To alleviate the concerns, ANF undertook a review of ethnographic/archaeological literature relevant to the study area, conducted a field study involving systematic surface examinations and excavations at seven heated rock cluster loci, and prepared stratigraphic profiles and photo-documentation.

Field laboratory processing and cataloging was conducted on the specimens and some charcoal samples were subjected to dating analysis. Radiocarbon data indicate that the site was inhabited by Archaic populations approximately 5000 years ago, which makes it the oldest site yet documented in the upper Santa Clara River watershed area. Two of the earth ovens examined are by far the oldest rock-lined cooking structures yet found in the Transverse Mountain Ranges. The site appears to have functioned as a seasonal village that was inhabited by Native Californians, perhaps on a more-or-less annual basis, for thousands of years.

Sources of water in nearby Texas and Rowher Creeks were undoubtedly a primary factor in the occupation of the site. Faunal remains recovered indicate cottontail, jackrabbit, mule deer, and other mammals. Plants processed in the heated rock features may have included acorn, manzanita berry, and yucca heart. Quartz utilitarian lithic chopping, cutting, and scraping implements were expediently manufactured and used on-site. Schist metates and manos were also manufactured on site. Well-formed granitic manos and fine-grain flaked tools are probably curated artifacts that were manufactured elsewhere. Trade with coastal groups to the west is indicated by abalone shell and fused shale from Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. The presence of limited amounts of obsidian suggests that site inhabitants also had trade relations with Mojave Desert groups who had access to the Coso obsidian quarries in southern Owens Valley.

Because the archaeological investigation was completed, the Rowher Flats OHV area is once again open for recreational opportunity.