



Archeology Program

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Brooks River Cutbank Project

Although archeologists often try to stabilize sites to protect them from deterioration, in many cases erosion cannot be stopped. In Katmai National Park & Preserve on the Alaska Peninsula, across from Kodiak Island, erosion exposed human remains at the Cutbank site. Archeologists and culturally affiliated Alaska Native groups worked together to develop a research design to address questions of mutual interest. For the first time, archeologists excavated multi-room houses along the Brooks River. They found some surprises.

To many, the Brooks River is the heart of Katmai National Park & Preserve. It is the home of many of Katmai's famous brown bears, the gateway to the geologically significant Valley of 10,000 Smokes, and a blue ribbon rainbow trout fishing stream. The area is also a National Historic Landmark and an Archeological District consisting of 19 different prehistoric sites.

People have made their homes along the Brooks River for at least 4,500 years, and many Alaska Native people with ties to the Katmai area consider the prehistoric Brooks River residents their ancestors. Descendant communities and NPS archeologists share an interest in protecting these important archeological sites.

In Katmai National Park & Preserve, as in many other national parks, the prevention and mitigation of damage from erosion is a continuing issue in the management of archeological sites. Efforts to stabilize archeological sites may include placing protective layers of soil over the site; placing impediments to erosion across affected areas of the site; or re-vegetating the site. If stabilization measures are ineffective in halting the erosion, data recovery excavation, testing, or intensive survey captures information that would otherwise be lost. (For more information about site protection see Technical Briefs 1, 8, 12, and 18 in the Archeology Program [Technical Brief Series](#).)

The Cutbank site is one of the largest archeological sites in the Brooks River area. It includes the remains of dozens of houses that now appear as depressions in the ground surface and is steadily eroding as the river meanders. Although little is known about seasonality, the large houses at the site were probably occupied for much of the year, with residents making seasonal trips elsewhere to gather resources.

In 1999 and 2000, visitors found human remains eroding from the Cutbank site, and notified NPS archeologists. In compliance with NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (25 U.S.C. 3001-3013)) and NPS policy, NPS archeologists contacted culturally affiliated Alaska Native groups, who are represented by the Council of Katmai Descendants. Katmai NP&P staff worked with University of Oregon archeologist Don Dumond and the Council to develop a plan for site excavation and disposition of the human remains. Dr. Dumond wrote the plan, with contributions from park archeologists, and the Council offered input and approved the final research design.

The research design consisted of a plan for the disposition of the human remains and an excavation at the site that would address questions of mutual interest:

- How many houses are present in the area of the site where the burial eroded?
- Can the burial be linked to any houses, allowing us to learn more about the individual's life?
- Are the houses built in the same multi-room style as contemporaneous houses elsewhere on the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island?

In 2002, archeologists began a two-season data recovery excavation designed to answer these questions, excavating in the area where the human remains were found. Each field season was divided into two periods, to avoid the more than 50 bears that congregate along the banks of the Brooks River to fish for salmon in June.

There appeared to be two large houses along the river, one a few meters upstream of the burial area, and the other a few meters downstream from it. Archeologists hoped to follow stratigraphic layers to link the burial to one of the two houses, and to explore the construction of the houses. A thick layer of whitish volcanic ash from the 1912 Mt. Katmai/Novarupta eruption forms an unbroken layer over the site, and an ashfall dating to



Archeologists excavating the floor of the third house at the Cutbank site (NPS photo)

about A.D. 1350 lies beneath the features. Radiocarbon dates confirm that the houses in the immediate area of the burial were occupied between A.D. 1400 and A.D. 1650.



Incised pebbles from the Cutbank site with designs enhanced (NPS photo)

The site held surprises. The archeologists found a third, older, house between the two houses visible on the surface. The newly-discovered house had several ingenious deep cold-trap entry passages, confirming that dwellings at the site had multiple rooms. The same type of large house, which indicates that larger family groups were living together, developed during the same time period on Kodiak Island. Elsewhere at the site, archeologists found incised pebbles lightly etched with stylized human figures. The pebbles resemble those commonly found on Kodiak, suggesting a past connection between the people who occupied Brooks River and Kodiak. The burial appears to date to the same time as the most recent of the three houses, where clay-lined pits for storing fish and sherds of pottery were found.

The project was a success on several levels: the objectives of the research design were, in general, addressed; all parties involved in NAGPRA consultation reached an agreement; and park visitors and staff gained knowledge about archeological resources in the area. The project produced a substantial body of archeological and geoarcheological data. More than 11,000 artifacts, 125 radiocarbon samples, and 20 soil samples were collected. Multi-room houses were excavated for the first time along the Brooks River, indicating that cultural ties

existed between the Cutbank settlement and Kodiak to the east and the lower Naknek region to the west.

Erosion at the Brooks River Cutbank site cannot be stopped, but through archeological investigations and partnering with local communities we can learn about prehistoric lifeways before the evidence vanishes.

More information about project results is available in *Brooks River Cutbank: An Archeological Data Recovery Project of the National Park Service* (2005), University of Oregon Anthropological Paper No. 64 and can be purchased through the Department of Anthropology (1218 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 97403).

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