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An Ancestral Puebloan Community in Morefield Canyon, Mesa Verde National Park

The Mesa Verde National Park Community Center Survey (MVNP CCS) is a multi-year study with the goal of understanding the formation of large, aggregated pueblo villages from A.D. 600-1300 in the central Mesa Verde region in southwestern Colorado (Glowacki and Varien 2003; Glowacki and Ortman, in prep). One goal of the project is to understand the reasons why populations moved from dispersed homesteads and hamlets into larger aggregated communities. During our eight-week field season, we found evidence of public architecture and infrastructure that had the potential to greatly enhance the agricultural productivity and population carrying capacity in one area of the Park, Morefield Canyon. These initial population aggregations sowed the seeds for the later massive cliff dwellings that give Mesa Verde its fame.



Detail from a panorama of the central valley of Morefield Canyon. Water management feature can be seen as a strip of green grass, marked by the red arrow. A large reservoir is indicated by a magenta arrow in the [larger image](#).

The MVNP CCS 2009 field season focused on gathering site size and occupation history data at four site clusters—Morefield Canyon Community, East Fork of Long Canyon Community, Head of Long Canyon Community, and Sun Temple Ridge Community—in order to identify “community centers.” Typically having some of the longest occupational histories of sites in the region, these key nodes of social, economic, and political interaction consisted of large settlements (usually the largest in the vicinity) of 50 or more total structures and often include public architecture, such as kivas (Adler and Varien 1994; Lipe and Varien 1999: 345). While the importance of communal investment and village-wide gatherings is suggested by the presence of great kivas, the high number of newly identified and previously recorded water control features highlights the cooperative communal action necessary to irrigate crops and sustain large populations. Of the site clusters, Morefield Canyon represents the best candidate for identification as a community center. Morefield Canyon is a broad and lush canyon near the eastern boundary of Mesa Verde NP.

Survey Methods

Extensive archeological survey was conducted in Morefield Canyon by University of Colorado field schools in the late 1960s and early 70s and also during the Bircher-Pony Post Fire Assessment Survey (Kleidon et al 2003). MVNP CCS focused on the northwest slope, and coincided with the location of most of the larger sites and all of the public architecture. Foot survey was conducted to identify new sites and to re-locate previously identified sites. Survey entailed re-mapping known sites to gather data about architectural features, which are used in estimates of site size, and completing in-field ceramic analysis for chronological assessment.



Archeologists mapping a site in the central valley of Morefield

Roomblocks were identified based on visible wall alignments, rubble scatters with distinct boundaries, and higher rubble

Stone Alignments

During the survey, MVNP CCS researchers identified a previously unrecorded water control feature in the valley of Morefield Canyon. The feature consists of a series of discontinuous stone alignments (90 x 10 m area), all of which are aligned south-southwest; they connect an intermittent drainage on the east side of the canyon and the canyon's main drainage. This feature may have been an attempt to prevent alluvial fan diffusion at the mouth of an intermittent drainage and direct water through artificial channels towards fields in the main canyon. Morefield Canyon has the highest maize productivity potential in the northern Southwest (Benson 2010); perhaps innovations such as this feature contributed to the more productive soils there and allowed larger crops.

Conclusion

Containing public architecture, water control features, and a settlement density that suggests the necessity of land sharing and communal investment practices, Morefield Canyon is a Pueblo "community center." The concept of a "community center," developed for central and western portions of Mesa Verde (e.g., Canyon of the Ancients National Monument and southwestern Utah; Adler and Varien 1994; Glowacki and Varien 2003; Lipe and Varien 1999: 345; Varien et al. 1996) is subject to intraregional variation, but continued fieldwork at MVNP should help to enhance our understanding of the development and role of large aggregated pueblo settlements within the broader landscape.

Acknowledgements

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Find out more about the people of [Mesa Verde](#).

By Charles Reed, Ryan Lash, and R. Kyle Bocinsky

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