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Archaeologists find Fraser Valley dig site older than expected

Contact: Dana Lepofsky, (via media/pr; she is presently on sabbatical) [Phone removed];
dana_lepofsky@sfu.ca

August 31, 2004

With maps in hand and 50 years of previous archaeological work setting their direction, archaeologists thought they knew what they were digging for in a large field near Agassiz in June and July.

Instead of uncovering remnants of a late prehistoric village, they found evidence that the site is much older, and had been used for a completely different purpose.

"It's not what we expected to find, but that's archaeology at its best," says SFU archaeology professor Dana Lepofsky, who is leading the Fraser Valley Archaeology project. A team of researchers from SFU, UBC, the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Saskatchewan have been working together with the Sto:lo Nation to learn more about the area's history. This summer the fieldwork was conducted by field school participants, graduate students and community members from several Sto:lo bands.

Following in the footsteps of archaeologists who began mapping the area earlier in the century, the team established digs throughout the site but soon found themselves changing strategies. By chance they targetted a small area and successfully dug up 11 crude chopping tools, likely used for woodworking and a range of other tasks, says Lepofsky. They later uncovered 50 such artifacts, as well as hundreds of others including remains associated with burnt deer bone fragments and from a variety of plants. "The most exciting was the discovery of a small structure -- something that is quite rare for the early part of Northwest coast prehistory," says Lepofsky. She has sent two samples for radiocarbon dating but, based on the artifacts, she says the site is anywhere from 3,000 - 7,000 years old. "Students on the excavation all took bets on the date and are anxiously awaiting to see who won," she says.

Researchers also extracted some of the material around the structure's hearth but wanted to preserve the rest for future study. "What we're finding here is huge," says Lepofsky. "It's an extraordinary site, and we're certain it will have more stories to tell." During the summer SFU graduate student Amanda King and Sto:lo cultural teacher Yvette John led tours of the site, generating wide community interest. More than 700 people visited, from tourists to groups of school students and aboriginal elders. "The community outreach program is one of the most important aspects of the research," Lepofsky notes.

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the three-year project will include further work at other sites in the Fraser Valley next summer.