

ARTIFACTS AND FEATURES CURATION

The Museum's Coso petroglyph tours are world famous, but you may not be aware that we are active in many other areas related to archaeology. This article is the first of an occasional series highlighting some of the archaeological things we do.

Today we discuss curation of artifacts. "Curation" is the formal term for preservation and storage of artifacts, and the Museum has been curating archaeological collections since the late 1960's. We house private collections which have been donated to the Museum, as well as Navy and BLM collections. The collections are cataloged and entered into a database, organized, and stored in secure, climate-controlled conditions. These collections are available for study by scholars, and, on occasion, for exhibit in the Museum itself.

But why curate? Archaeological excavations are, by their very nature, destructive to the site excavated. This is why excavation must be carefully designed and thought through before a trowel is put into the ground. It must also be pains-taking in execution, so that as much information as possible can be retrieved. After the analysis and reporting, what is left is the artifact collection with the accompanying notes. Curation preserves them for future study.

Future study occurs because new scientific techniques are constantly being devised for analysis of artifacts, from radiocarbon in the 1950's to the very recent techniques of DNA analysis. Archaeologists examine artifacts from curated collections using new techniques to obtain data not obtainable before; for example, stone tools excavated years ago may be tested for DNA to determine which animals were butchered. Further, curated items may shed light on new research questions – just recently a collection of obsidian bifaces curated at the Museum since the 1960's was restudied to help understand prehistoric obsidian trade routes.

Archaeology is a dynamic field, and curated artifact collections are a valuable resource for archaeological research. The Maturango Museum is proud of its collections and its curation process, and is happy to be contributing to progress in the field.