Found an artifact on your hiking trail? Love it, and leave it

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Anthropologist Molly Cannon loves to spend time with her children exploring the physical remains of Utah’s past. Above, her children help with metal detection while she maps metal ‘hits’ at the Bear River Massacre site in southeastern Idaho. (Courtesy photos)

That old sliver of purple glass? It’s an artifact, too

By Molly Cannon
We set off the other day, my husband and my two oldest children, for a reconnaissance, an assessment for a potential field project along the Transcontinental Railroad National Back Country Byway in Box Elder County, Utah, with snacks packed, grumpy dispositions stashed in the backseat, and a knowing sense of discovery in the front seats, leaving Logan and beginning our journey west.

The Transcontinental Railroad National Back Country Byway is an amazing public resource dedicated to the preservation of a pivotal moment in American History when Euroamericans migrated West, disrupting indigenous communities and, with the help of American entrepreneurship, connecting a continent and setting a course for American expansionism.

I enjoy visiting the archaeological sites along the byway – and so many places in Utah – because Utah’s past lives right on the surface. The archaeological record can be found at great depths in some locations, calling to mind the familiar scenes of massive excavations, screens, grids and the like and yet at other locations the archaeological record preserves the daily lives of many over thousands of years – just lying together on the surface. My profession has spent many decades studying this phenomena and how to extract information from this record of rather unassuming objects.

It is easy to recognize an interest in the distant past for we have no written account of life of Utah’s first inhabitants, although Utah’s native communities preserve a story of their ancestors through their oral traditions, informing on their own distant past. But many of us struggle to see value in a more recent material record comprised of glass bottles, tin cans, broken tea cups and bowls of the past hundred or two hundred years. What could possibly be learned that is not found in diaries, newspaper articles and other written records?

Often the questions we ask and the answers we seek from the historic archaeological record do not differ from the archaeological record of the distant past. As anthropologists, we are interested in human experiences, relationships, problems and their solutions, compromises and conflicts – all observable through an intricate assessment of material objects preserved within the archaeological record – with the goal of seeking the voices of those individuals not found in our institutional archives.

Many events contribute to, or disturb, the integrity of objects and their setting within the archaeological record. Natural events such as earthquakes, flooding, fire or simply the freezing and thawing of the ground cause changes in the distribution of objects under the ground, leading to preservation in some cases and complete loss of information in others. Natural agents such as grazing cattle, burrowing prairie dogs, shrews, badgers and even ants can displace artifacts.

Natural agents, however, are not the only disruptors of the archaeological record. Rather enormous detriment to our shared past occurs through our recreational looting, shooting and scooting, resulting in decreased preservation and ultimately destruction of our public resource – the archaeological record.

As with any scientific inquiry, the resolution of questions asked by archaeologists is dependent upon the richness of the data. For archaeology this means a contextual setting preserving spatial relationships between objects and a range of material and artifact types. When objects, features or entire classes of objects go missing from the archaeological record, the questions we ask must be
softened and knowledge of the past and those with little or no voice are left behind.

A shout rippled through the wind – “What’s this mom?”— as we searched for the remains of the now-deserted town of Lake. My son stood over a small, broken, white piece of porcelain and next to it, shining in the brilliant spring sun, a purple rim of a glass bottle.

With excitement in his eyes and a sense of discovery, he continued searching, calling out enthusiastically at each new sighting. We sat our backpacks down, took photographs, I took a few notes, recorded the GPS locations of each concentration and returned home, fulfilled by a shared outdoor experience of northern Utah’s open landscape and historic past.

If you are as thrilled by the sense of discovery, if the past places you in a moment of awe, I ask that you join us in our next field excursion or on your next hike. Record your discovery, take photographs, sketch, write of your experience but leave contextual information from the archaeological record, be it on deeply buried or lying on the surface, intact for the future researcher.

Protecting our past

According to data compiled by the Archaeological Records Office at the Utah Division of State History, humans have taken a toll on Utah’s archaeological sites.

# More than 60,000 pre-contact sites (prior to the arrival of white explorers and settlers) have been identified; 8,397 have been vandalized.

# Of more than 9,000 historical sites (pioneer, for instance), 753 have been vandalized.

Explore! But be safe

Archaeological sites can be dangerous. Sites such as old mines may have dangerous open shafts, and critters love to nest in rocks. Keep alert, and stay out of dangerous situations.

Explore buildings and structures; however, if it looks unsafe, assume that is the case. Don’t climb on fragile walls or try to put rocks back in place. Look out for nails and other sharp objects. If you see a problem or want to report artifacts, contact the agency that manages the land where you find a site or damage.

Measure, draw, photograph, but don’t take artifacts

Staying on the trail protects buried artifacts, and camping in designated spots helps keep archaeological sites tidy.

If you find something that might be an artifact, you can measure, draw, and take a picture of the artifact, if it’s safe. Just remember to put it back where you found it! When you take an artifact away from where you found it, archaeologists lose the chance to learn more about past people.

Take pictures or drawings of rock art and historic inscription. If you want to make rock art “pop” in your photographs, try using different filters.

Source: Utah Division of State History

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Molly Cannon is a professional practice assistant professor of Anthropology and director and curator of the USU Museum of Anthropology. She also directs USU's Spatial Data Collection, Analysis and Visualization Lab.