

Connecting Navajo land, history through archaeology

Written by By Cody Begaye Contributing Editor
Friday, 01 September 2023 04:35



Plateau Science Society hosts discussion with Diné professor

People may have skewed views on archaeology based on what they've seen in pop culture, conjuring up images of characters traveling the world, exhuming artifacts for research or personal gain.

Wade Campbell, Ph.D., is a Diné historical archaeologist who aims to challenge and help people realize the true purpose of archaeology, especially on Navajo land or Dinétah. The latest step in his goal was a lecture sponsored by the Plateau Sciences Society and given at the Octavia Fellin Public Library on Aug. 20.

The Plateau Sciences Society was organized in 1961 to encourage the study and appreciation of the social and natural sciences relating to the Colorado Plateau and its people. They sponsor various events around Gallup.

The lecture, entitled "Viewing Diné History Through An Archaeological Lens," drew a crowded room to hear Campbell speak about his experiences in archaeology.

PATH TO ARCHAEOLOGY

Campbell grew up in Gallup and was often seen at the library in his youth, where he described the beginning of his interest in learning.

“I would come here, hang out with the glonnies, read books, and then take the rest of the books home,” Campbell said.

The frequent studying led Campbell to move to the east coast in 2007 to attend Princeton University. He has since earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and is currently serving as an Assistant Professor in Boston University’s Department of Anthropology & Archaeology Program.

Campbell’s current research examines the relationships between Diné communities and other local groups in the U.S. Southwest from the 17th century to the present day, which include the Pueblos, Spanish, and Americans.

History is passed down in a number of ways, including written accounts, oral stories, and local traditions, Campbell explained. Navajo land is no different, but it comes with unique challenges that require different methods to fully document.

“In some ways, [archaeological study] has been a disserve to studying Navajo land, but in other ways it helps us move forward,” Campbell said. “These methods can incorporate both Diné and non-Diné people into the history of the region.”

WHAT ARCHAEOLOGY MEANS

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Campbell asked guests to define what archaeology meant to them, where some of the crowd admitted that their understanding comes from movies and T.V. that may only present a high-level vision of the field.

He responded by giving what he believes is the most useful definition of the word.

“[Archaeology] is the systematic study of human past through material remains,” Campbell said.

To help the crowd understand the connection of archaeology with Navajo land, Campbell made several examples. One was mentioning how the Diné language stems from the large Athabaskan language family that stems from northern Canada.

The Diné people have their oral history that has been passed down for centuries describing how they emigrated south and ended up in the current day Navajo Nation, but it is through archaeology that people can attain more concrete records of the Diné language and culture as part of the Athabaskan family, and thus weigh the contrasting approaches to Diné history.

“The [Diné] language is fluid, and valuable,” Campbell said. “Our identity is tied to it, but it is not the same as [records]. If you couldn’t write, you lose that ability to date history.”

INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY

Campbell brought his discussion to Gallup as part of his goal to help lead Navajo students into becoming interested in archaeology and want to pursue it themselves.

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He specified this as Indigenous Archaeology, which falls under the same definition he noted previously, except it is performed with, by, and for Indigenous peoples.

“You can see potential for learning more about Diné experience from [decades and centuries ago] through inspecting and archaeology,” Campbell said.

From the stone masonry structures called pueblitos that can be found across the southwest, to the sites where hogans were built near those structures, to the trees that have grown across the region, all of these things can be studied and provide more information about Diné history in the southwest, Campbell explained.

Further, this concrete research will help reinforce the accounts that the Navajo people have existed here for centuries. Thus, reaching out to Navajo youth has become another key area for Campbell’s lectures and discussions in Gallup.

“We need to be more engaged with our youth, teaching them and guiding them into this path of learning about our language and culture,” Campbell said. “Doing this work starts conversations, so I want to keep coming back and educating our youth.”

For more information on Wade Campbell, Ph.D., visit his academic profile on the Boston University website at <https://www.bu.edu/archaeology/profile/wade-campbell/>.

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