Archaeological survey of Yellowstone National Park show previously believed beliefs about geyser area settlement wrong

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A belief that Indians held geysers in such superstitious awe that they dared not settle near them has been exploded by evidence turned up in an archaeological survey of Yellowstone National Park.

Actually, man has occupied the site of Yellowstone Park, including the geyser areas, for several thousand years, according to the preliminary report on the survey by Dr. Carling I. Malouf, Montana State University anthropologist.

The survey, believed to be the first systematic archaeological study made of the park, is being conducted under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the University.

Under the general direction of Dr. Dee C. Taylor of the MSU Anthropology Department, a survey party led by John Jacob Hoffman of Great Falls has just gone into the field for the summer. Other members of the party are Paul Lerner of Brooklyn, N. Y., and William G. Buckles, June graduate of the University of Colorado. Dr. Malouf directed the work done last summer by a party supervised in the field by Hoffman. George Arthur, Big Timber, and Lewis K. Napton, Bozeman, were the other members.

The areas of the park selected for study include the parts most frequently visited by tourists because these areas are in most immediate danger of deterioration as far as archaeological resources are concerned, Dr. Malouf said. The more isolated areas will be left for future study as they are less likely to be tampered with, he pointed out.

Dr. Malouf's preliminary report to the NPS discloses that man's occupation of the park region has been continuous and relatively heavy for about 4,000 years.

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Specimens found last summer give a clue to the nature of the occupation. No specimens from the period of Early Man were found, but many signs of habitation by the Foragers have been discovered. The Foragers follow the Early Hunters in the timetable of anthropologists, the MSU professor said.

He places the date of earliest occupation by the Foragers at about 2,000 B.C., when the climate was warmer than it is now. The date is tentative and subject to revision as more becomes known, he said. Heaviest concentration of Forager material has been found near Yellowstone Lake. Later material, dating from the period of the Late Hunters, is most common on the north side of the park.

So far the field party has recorded about 170 sites of early habitation, many of them original discoveries. The sites are classified by type, such as compounds, wickiups, and others.

Compounds, also called traps or corrals, are locations where bison or other animals were driven into a corral or snowbank to be slaughtered and butchered. One of these compounds was found on Slough Creek, a half mile north of the creek's confluence with the Lamar River. Jumps, where animals were driven over cliffs to their destruction, are lacking in the park proper, but they are common along the Yellowstone, Gallatin, and Madison Rivers, just north of the park.

Most of the wickiups (conical lodges made of poles set upright) appear to have been hunting lodges. Many of them were anchored to the ground by placing a log from the apex of the lodge to a point considerably beyond the base of the structure. Much has been written about their use by a primitive Shoshoni people, the Sheepeaters, but the evidence now points to their frequent use by Crow, Bannock, and other people as well, Dr. Malouf says.

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Camp debris, such as stone chips and flakes, charcoal, tools/weapons, indicate there were many occupation sites, particularly dense along the Madison River between the mouth of the Firehole River and the west boundary of the park. Curiously, no tipi rings were located in this area although they are common farther down the river system in Montana, Dr. Malouf noted.

About 150 projectile points have been found, representing all phases of human occupation in the Great Plains except Early Man. Nearly all of these points were made of obsidian, a volcanic glass.

Generally, flints, jasper, and similar materials were used for stone points and tools by the natives who lived in lower elevations of the park and the adjoining area. Obsidian was by far the most frequently used material in higher elevations, such as around Yellowstone Lake.

On the north side of the park, along the Gallatin, Madison, and Yellowstone Rivers, the sequence is tied in very closely with the Prehistory of Montana, Dr. Malouf says. From Yellowstone Lake and southward, the cultural material suggests closer affinity with sequences in western Wyoming and southeastern Idaho.

"Such a crossroads of influences might be expected on a continental crest as broad and as rich in resources as Yellowstone National Park - rich, at least, in comparison with the broad plains, deserts, and plateaus which surround it," Dr. Malouf commented.

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