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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/783745b6>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 17(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

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Publication Date

1995-07-01

Peer reviewed

COMMENTS

Comment on Chartkoff's *A Nested Hierarchy of Contexts: An Approach to Defining Significance for Lithic Scatters*

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In this issue, Chartkoff (1995) outlined an approach to enable researchers to evaluate the significance of lithic scatters, a ubiquitous site type in California and elsewhere. He defined five levels of hierarchy: (1) The Within-Site Context; (2) The Assemblage as a Whole; (3) A Site in its Environmental Context; (4) Context of Cultural Systems; and (5) Context at the Regional Level. This approach is a useful tool in site research and likely will open new ways of thinking about lithic scatters. My comments here are a reemphasis, rather than a disagreement, of several important points noted—but not driven home—by Chartkoff.

The first issue is that of “significance.” As the title of Chartkoff’s (1995) article stated, his goal was to allow for the definition of site significance, an application primarily for cultural resource management (CRM) purposes. “Uniqueness” is a primary criterion in agency significance evaluations. Although Chartkoff (1995:28) noted that lithic scatters are unique entities, it must also be recognized that all of the data they contain also are unique. This latter point was not made by Chartkoff, although he did hint at it. All sites are the result of unique functional, symbolic, and historic events by unique individuals. As such, every site and all the data contained within a site are unique and thus “significant” in that they could provide information that would expand our

understanding of the past. If a site is not identified as significant, it is because we archaeologists, for whatever reason, have constructed an inadequate understanding of its potential, not because it has none. While this view is admittedly impractical in the milieu of CRM, it remains true even if inconvenient. We must remember that the determination of significance is research-driven and then used in CRM situations by managers, not vice versa.

I am fearful that any method(s) used to determine significance will generate a classificatory scheme, and some sites will thus be classified as nonsignificant. In the context of CRM, significance determinations are required; thus, it is implied that not all sites are significant. Sites that are nonsignificant can then be ignored in CRM. However, by *excluding* sites, we defeat the very purpose of our discipline, even if CRM managers like it (i.e., they have fewer sites to manage). Any program or scheme that systematically excludes a portion of the archaeological record from consideration and analysis (as all methods to determine significance must do) is contrary to our goals. Further, when applied, such systems tend to reinforce and perpetuate themselves, leading to the view that they are correct. Thus, they become self-sustaining. An example of this is the Sparse Lithic Scatter Program developed by the California State Office of Historic Preservation.

Chartkoff (1995:37) proposed testing a number of lithic scatters to determine what sample size and what kinds of data would be necessary “in order to study the kinds of questions that interest researchers today and in the future.” As research methods improve and research directions change over time, concepts of significance will change. The danger is that such a

classification will become entrenched and so limit our ability to ask new questions of lithic scatters.

Second, many archaeologists (including Chartkoff) view lithic scatters as having a poverty of attributes. By attribute, Chartkoff (1995:28) was referring to the number of data classes present at a lithic scatter (e.g., primarily debitage; a site containing a greater number of artifact classes would not be called a lithic scatter). What is critical to recognize (as Chartkoff did but did not emphasize) is that debitage is *attribute rich*, a view seemingly few archaeologists (and managers) comprehend. The problem lies in the lack of understanding and analysis of lithic attributes, not in their absence. As we understand more about lithic technology, a very considerable quantity of information will begin to emerge from the study of debitage, from both large and small sites. We have not even approached the potential for information in lithic scatters, and it is premature to define the data needed for present and future research. The identification of trade materials, the "dating" of obsidian flakes, spatial analysis, etc., are all important but say nothing of the technology of reduction or tool manufacture. Flake analysis could identify the types of tools being produced and so could be used as temporal markers (e.g., if a group of flakes was found to be the result of the manufacture of an Elko series point, we could "date" the scatter the same way as if we found an Elko point on its surface).

All in all, I like the general nested hierarchy approach as *one* method to examine lithic scatters (and other sites as well). It is worth pursuing, but I am concerned that if it is rigorously applied to evaluate a site as to its CRM significance, too many sites would be classified as nonsignificant and so be lost to archaeology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Mike Glassow for helping to temper some of my thoughts.

REFERENCE

- Chartkoff, Joseph L.
1995 A Nested Hierarchy of Contexts: An Approach to Defining Significance for Lithic Scatters. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 17(1):28-40.



Reply to Sutton's Comments on A Nested Hierarchy of Contexts: An Approach to Defining Significance for Lithic Scatters

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Sutton's (1995) thoughtful comments on my paper (1995) raise several anthropological, philosophical, methodological, and managerial issues. These issues are of considerably broader significance than is the modest paper to which they refer. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Sutton's comments and hope the dialogue will help cause these issues to be addressed more widely.

Sutton's central theme concerns the concepts of significance and uniqueness for archaeological sites, particularly with reference to cultural resource management (CRM). Sutton was quite correct in noting the importance of uniqueness within the context of CRM as a definition of site significance. He also was correct, I believe, in stressing that archaeologists generally have failed to appreciate the unique attributes possessed by lithic scatters. My paper certainly did not emphasize this point clearly enough, much