

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE SAA MEMBERSHIP

“This volume [*Ethics in American Archaeology*], while representing the next step in a sequence of expanding consideration of the important and complex issues outlined herein, does not mark the end of a process. It is not a final product.” —Bruce Smith, SAA President 1995

On October 1-4, 2008, twelve archaeologists of diverse backgrounds, interests, and ages, met at the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institution at Indiana University (IU), Bloomington, to revisit the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) Principles of Archaeological Ethics and their implications for archaeological practice. This gathering was funded by IU's New Frontiers Program, First Nations Educational and Cultural Center, and the Office of Multicultural Initiatives. Originally inspired by the concerns of Native American archaeologists, our discussion highlighted the need for improving collaborative practice throughout our profession. Starting from the position that collaborative practice underpins high-quality archaeology, we took the opportunity to review the Principles. We considered changes and expansions of the Principles, and new tools archaeologists might develop, that could improve interactions with many affected groups, particularly Native American and Indigenous communities. We are writing you now, as we approach the 75th anniversary of the SAA, with the aim of opening up discussion of these issues.

Dramatic shifts have occurred in the practice of archaeology in the United States as a result of legal mandates such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the 1992 amendments to the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). These laws reflect the challenges of a period in the history of archaeology in which the discipline has incorporated Native American rights and concerns. The Principles of Archaeological Ethics are a product of this transformational period. Much has been accomplished. The growth in the 1990s of public archaeology and the efforts to work with multiple stakeholders has led to a broader recognition of archaeology's role in society. Over time, dialogues resulting from legally required consultations have turned into important working relationships and have led to fruitful and equitable collaborations. At the same time, however, many members of the SAA feel the need for more guidance in these rapidly changing contexts of practice than the Principles can provide; they continue to search for better ways to understand and enact their ethical obligations to Native Americans and descendant communities.

The Principles of Archaeological Ethics were intended to be a living document. The drafting committee recognized that, as the SAA and the profession grows and diversifies, it would be necessary to continually reassess our Principles and codes. In this spirit, they called for regular review of the Principles so that they would reflect ongoing changes within the discipline and its social context. As we near the 20th anniversary of NAGPRA, the debate generated by legal challenges to the regulations governing culturally unidentifiable human remains (CUHR), as well as experience with global archaeological discussions, provide an excellent opportunity to open communication about the implications of these rapidly changing contexts of practice for the Principles. It is increasingly clear that, as archaeologists find themselves working with a wide range of communities, their success in practicing archaeology with integrity is fundamentally tied to their ability to establish good working relationships with Native American, Indigenous, descendant, and local communities. The Principles should address these real and profound changes in ways that will help current and future archaeologists navigate their relationships with Native, local, and descendant communities.

The 75th anniversary of the SAA's founding, as well as the 20th anniversary of NAGPRA, marks an important juncture at which to revisit the Principles. It is an opportunity to consider how they might best incorporate what has been learned through consultation, collaboration and public archaeology and, more generally, how we can most effectively make progress toward the development of archaeologies that meet the needs of multiple communities. In the interest of developing resources and support for effective collaboration we identify the following focal issues for thoughtful discussion.

1. Consultation, reciprocity and partnership
2. Collaborative Stewardship
3. Research practice and integrity
4. Public engagement and responsiveness
5. The global contexts of local collaborations

We urge consideration of each of these issues with attention to the diversity of interests within and among these affected groups. Far from detracting from the rigor of archaeological science, a robust understanding of social context is a strength archaeologists bring to their practice.

Our next step is to move beyond identifying these issues, and initiate a broader conversation among constituent communities. To this end, we have established an on-line information source and moderated blog. This blog (<http://archaeology-ce.info/>) provides a forum to discuss issues, provide tips, and describe successful and unsuccessful case studies. It includes, as well, a set of questions about each of the eight Principles of Archaeological Ethics that were adopted by the SAA in 1996: how they are understood in various contexts; what their implications are for current practice; how they might be amended or augmented to make them more useful. We invite you to visit the blog, respond to these questions and submit an article, comment, or response. Over the next year, we will draw a series of articles and commentaries from these blog posts for publication in the *SAA Archaeological Record*. We plan to engage with SAA committees, and to organize sessions that address these issues at regional, national, and international archaeological meetings. We especially hope to expand the scope of these discussions, to gain wisdom from the experience of cultural resources and heritage management professionals who are often on the front-lines of community collaboration and, crucially, to engage affected communities so that they may offer their own observations concerning archaeological ethics and collaboration.

What do we want from you? We invite your participation. Visit the blog; submit an article or respond to one that's posted; initiate discussion within your regional organizations. Make your voice heard.

The SAA developed out of a need to define what it means to be a professional archaeologist. As we approach two major anniversaries it is again time to reflect on what it means to be a professional archaeologist in today's world. We believe that the future of archaeological science depends on proactive engagement with these challenges.

"The ability to address difficult ethical issues in an ongoing process of critical reflection will be crucial in defining the future of archaeology as a profession." —Mark J. Lynott and Alison Wylie 1995

Sonya Atalay, Indiana University
Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh, Denver Museum of Nature & Science
Ed Jolie, University of New Mexico [present for two days at these meetings]
Paula Lazrus, St. John's University
Janet Levy, University of North Carolina, Charlotte
Dorothy Lippert, National Museum of Natural History
Dru McGill, Indiana University
Mark Oxley, University of New Mexico
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