From Theory to Practice: Public Interest Archaeology in Peru

Melissa Vogel and David Pacifico

Abstract

There is a direct relationship between archaeology, tourism and the economic well-being of Peruvians. Archaeological projects impact the communities near their work, yet the goals of archaeologists are not always shared or understood by these communities. This paper examines the Public Interest component of an archaeological project on the north coast of Peru to determine what methods were successful, and provide insight on what could be improved for the future. The role of foreign archaeologists and their projects in local communities is explored from both ethical and practical standpoints, and placed in the larger context of the archaeological tourism in Peru.

As the center of the most advanced Pre-Columbian civilizations in South America, Peru is more widely known for its archaeological past than its present. Tourism is now one of the most important and fastest growing industries of the Peruvian economy. Hence, the direct relationship between heritage, archaeology, and tourism is essential to the economic well-being of Peruvians. Archaeological projects affect the communities near their work not only during their stay, but also for years to come. These projects employ local people, rent lodging, buy supplies and in numerous other ways stimulate local economies. Yet the goals of archaeologists are not always shared or even understood by the communities in which they work. Sometimes the reverse may also be true, that archaeologists may not fully understand a local community's perspective on their heritage or on an archaeological project. Although archaeologists have always needed to work with local people, some projects react only when a problem occurs, rather than addressing the issue proactively and with consideration for the interests of the local community. Economic difficulties and cultural misunderstandings between foreign archaeologists and Peruvian communities can turn difficult situations into dangerous working environments. As indigenous peoples show ever-greater interest in protecting their past and their property (e.g., Anawak 1996; Mamani 1996), archaeologists need to be proactive in creating projects that identify and incorporate the concerns of local peoples. This paper examines the Public Interest Component of an archaeological project at the site of Cerro la Cruz (Figure 1) on the north coast of Peru to test the efficacy of such an approach and suggest what could be improved for the future.

Definition of Public Interest Archaeology

A relatively new approach, which recognizes the importance of relations with local people, has begun to shape recent archaeological projects. Emerging from postprocessual theory[1] and entitled Public Interest Archaeology, this approach involves the residents of the local community in shaping the goals and outcomes of the archaeological project from the beginning. Residents are recognized as the owners and heirs of the cultural heritage under study; therefore, their needs and interests are taken into consideration during the planning stages of the project and repeatedly evaluated as the project continues. They are also seen as consultants, experts in the local environment and recent history. In some recent North American cases these roles have even been reversed, when the local community has assumed control over the public archaeology project, utilizing archaeologists as consultants (for more

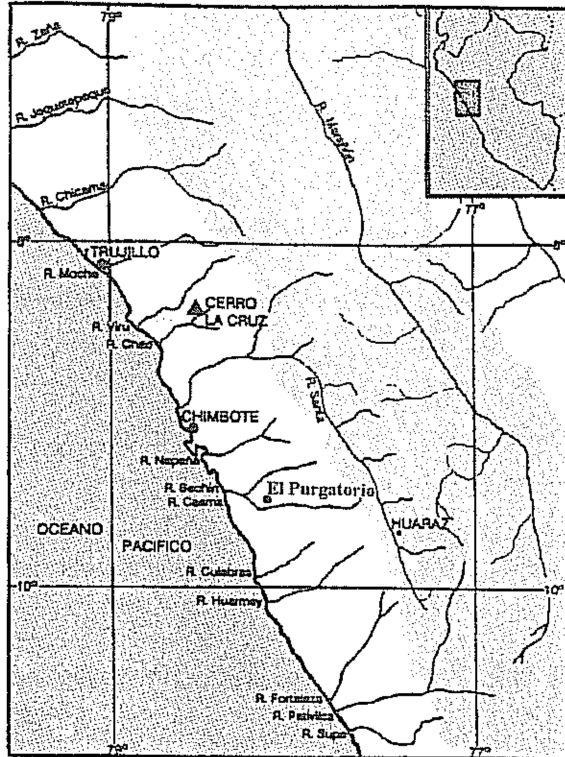

Figure 1. Map of Peru's north coast showing location of Cerro la Cruz

details see Blakey 1995; Blakey 1997; Larouche and Blakey 1997; McDavid 2000; McDavid 2004).

The specific methodologies employed in various public interest archaeological projects differ greatly. Communities can be as involved as they choose to be, so the archaeologist must be willing to accept input from non-archaeologists. The community may also prefer to leave some decisions to the archaeologists, utilizing their expertise. Having seen the significant intertwining of archaeological projects and the lives of local community members on other projects, Vogel and Coronado (the project directors) decided that taking a Public Interest approach would be an important component of their research at the site of Cerro la Cruz in Peru.

Theoretical Background

More and more frequently, archaeologists have been faced with difficult ethical decisions about both the practice of archaeology and its impact on local communities, national discourse, and the international scene. Some groups use archaeology in an exploitative manner, to justify taking lands from indigenous peoples (e.g., Pyburn and Wilk 1995), or to raise the price on illegal antiquities (e.g., Chase, Chase, and Topsey 1996). There is a significant corpus of literature that addresses the issues of looting, public education, ethical standards and museum representations. But until the 1990's, little had been written on the incorporation of local people and their interests into the very earliest phases of archaeological practice, including research design, problem focus, operating plans, and post-excavation activities. An increasing number of archaeologists are currently engaged in the creation of a Public Interest Archaeology to identify and incorporate the desires and concerns of local peoples.

Archaeologists working at Native American sites in the United States appear to have made the most extensive effort thus far to integrate indigenous concerns into their research. This may be due in part to the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) which mandates the consultation of indigenous peoples by archaeologists working in the United States. These archaeologists have become

increasingly dedicated to furthering dialogic relationships between archaeologists and indigenous peoples (Dongoske 2000; Swidler et al 1997, see also Schmidt and Patterson 1995; Watkins 2001). For example, some projects in North America have generated extensive interest within local descendant communities, especially those involving traditionally underrepresented groups such as Native Americans and African Americans (e.g., Larouche and Blakey 1997; McDavid 2004; Reeves 2004). However, the response to archaeological projects in Latin American communities varies greatly. While countries such as Mexico and Bolivia have strong nationalist agendas and vocal public support for archaeology, not all Latin American communities express the same degree of interest at the local level. Our experience on the north coast of Peru, for instance, illustrates that some communities may choose not to fully engage in archaeological investigation when offered the opportunity to do so.

At least two Latin American projects deserve particular mention here, as important contributors to the creation of Public Interest Archaeology, although that specific term is not used to describe them. First, Clark Erickson's "applied" approach to the study of ancient agricultural systems led to an experimental raised field[2] project in Watta, Peru, the town where he worked (Erickson 1992). This concept spread to surrounding communities as the success of the raised fields became known. Thus, an archaeological project was able to benefit directly members of the local community in a practical, economic way. The second project was directed by Anne Pyburn in Belize, who brought American college students to the field to teach Belizean high schools students about archaeology (Pyburn and Wilk 1996). She hired workers through the village council, gave numerous lectures, held an open house to report the results of the project to the community, and exchanged school supplies for rental of the community center as a lab space. This approach successfully engaged the local people's interest in archaeology and offered educational and financial benefits to the community.[3] Both of these projects provide examples for how archaeologists can take a public interest approach to archaeological research. Since this type of methodology is rarely documented in the published literature, it may be useful to experiment with alternative strategies for conducting Public Interest Archaeology. Indeed, the needs of the local community will always shape the outcome of a public interest approach.

One reason for archaeologists' reluctance to engage the perspectives of local peoples is the fear that they could no longer pursue their own research objectives (Meighan 1996). Indeed, as can be seen in North American archaeology since the passing of NAGPRA, archaeologists' interests can be directly contrary to those of the people in the area under study, who may be descendants of the archaeological population. However, as "stewards of the past," a term adopted by the Society for American Archaeology in 1995 (SAA Ethics in Archaeology Committee 1995), archaeologists have a responsibility to recognize the claims of indigenous peoples to have control over their past. This does not mean that all claims are equally legitimate or that local peoples' desires should unilaterally override those of concerned scholars, but there should be some kind of dialogic interaction that attempts to find a solution. In most cases, a compromise can be reached in which all or most of the archaeologist's research questions can be explored while satisfying the needs of local peoples, be they intellectual, financial, spiritual, or otherwise. This is even more important for archaeologists working outside their countries of origin, who are essentially guests in a foreign nation. Such was the intent of the project discussed here.

Proyecto Cerro la Cruz

The site of Cerro La Cruz is a walled, terraced, hillside settlement in the Chao Valley, halfway between the Pacific Ocean (to the west) and the Andes Mountains (in the east). This site shows the spread of a southern group, the Casma polity, to what is most likely its northernmost extent. Artifactual evidence demonstrates that Cerro la Cruz was more than a military outpost but also a regional administrative center, with remains of production, consumption, and

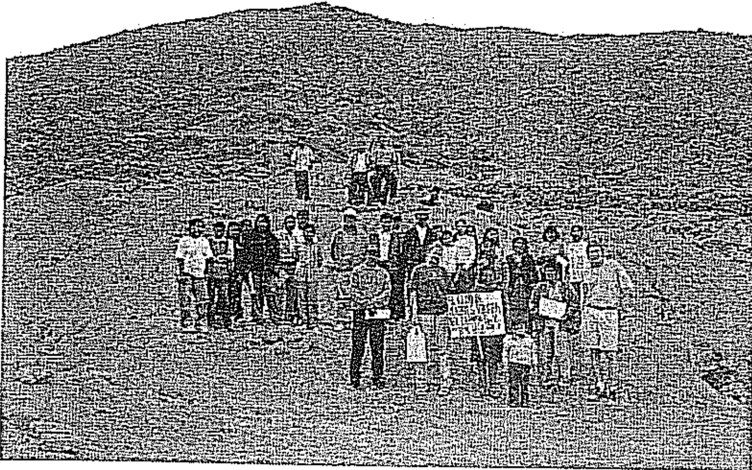

Figure 2: Residents of Buenavista on a site tour.

ritual activities. The Casma polity appears to have taken advantage of a period of instability (ca. AD 900-1250) on the north coast to incorporate the Chao Valley into its territory, only to lose the valley to the Chimú state during the first Chimú southward expansion. After the Chimú conquest, the site was ritually closed and abandoned (for more details on the archaeological aspects of the project, see Vogel 2003). The primary goal of the archaeological project was to investigate socio-political change and identity in frontiers and border zones from the perspective of a mid-size settlement in a small valley on the north coast of Peru.

Town of Buenavista

The municipality of Buenavista lies approximately three miles off the Pan American Highway, at the base of the hill called Cerro la Cruz (Figure 2), and has experienced many socioeconomic changes in its short history. The population there is small, less than 300 individuals, with the majority of the houses situated close to the agricultural fields and to the Plaza De Armas, the large central square characteristic of Peruvian towns. According to Buenavista's former Mayor, the Municipality as it is known today is quite young, but not without an extended history. In about 1936, the Church was built on the Plaza de Armas. For the next few decades, the coal trade helped the economy, and Buenavista became well known for rearing bulls to be used in bullfights. In 1968, the hacienda system ended and a number of Cooperatives existed in the area. However, it was not until 1982 that the town was incorporated as a municipality. Later that decade the local medical post was setup, the Chavimochic canal was built, and foreigners[4] arrived to help build facilities that would aid children in Buenavista. Finally, in 1997, electricity became widely available, but few people have running water in their homes. This description is not meant to cast a primitive light on the area or to suggest that there are no outside influences evident in the community. The purpose is simply to demonstrate the potential for disruption caused by a foreign archaeological project in a small, rural municipality.

Goals of Public Interest Component

The overarching goal of the public interest portion of Project Cerro La Cruz was to create a dialogic relationship: making sure that the local community was informed of the project and their input solicited, their interests taken into account. We wanted the community to be involved from the outset. Since archaeological tourism is a major part of the Peruvian economy, we wanted to convey to the local people as much of the shared local history as possible. Similarly, a large part of the project included learning as much as possible about the local community in order to be culturally sensitive to the residents while learning from them. A cultural anthropologist, David Pacifico, acted as a liaison between the archaeological project and the community. He was available to field questions,

concerns, and give impromptu presentations to any community members who were curious. As anthropological archaeologists, it was our aim to present ourselves as professionals who were not interested in exploiting a community or its resources. Our goal was to leave the community with a better understanding of their own distant past and an appreciation for the fragility of the archaeological record.

The potential benefits of this project for Buenavista included opportunities for employment and training as archaeological workers, educational opportunities through public presentations on Andean archaeology given by the archaeologists, and the exploration of possible tourist development. For the archaeologists, interaction with the community was expected to enrich our understanding of local contemporary perceptions of the past, improve relations between the project and the community, and help to protect the site from further looting and destruction through education. This last objective was especially urgent because several agricultural fields had already expanded across the site boundaries.

Methodology and Execution of the Public Interest Component

To meet these goals, the directors familiarized themselves with the town of Buenavista, which is located immediately adjacent to the site, from the beginning of the field research. During the preliminary reconnaissance in 1999, we met with several community members, including the director of the town's school. Although this season consisted solely of a brief feasibility study, the directors were proactive about introducing themselves to the community during their visit, explaining their interest in the site and their intentions to return.

During both the 2000 and 2001 seasons, members of the archaeological project met with the mayor and school director to inquire about the town's level of interest in the project and knowledge of local archaeology. In 2001, we recruited Pacifico to act as a liaison between the project and the community throughout the season. Several members of the community were hired as archaeological workers. Vogel and Pacifico also gave presentations to groups of schoolchildren and tours of the site to residents, in an attempt to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between the archaeological project and the local community. Co-Director Professor Luis Coronado of the University of Trujillo, Peru, provided valuable assistance with the local government agencies and his university. The project offered paid positions to Peruvian university students and local Buenavista residents as well as unpaid positions to seven University of Pennsylvania undergraduates.

Prior to leaving for Peru in 2001, Vogel and Pacifico developed ten questions intended to facilitate our interactions with the town of Buenavista. These questions were addressed during informal interviews and observations in and around the community. The questions were as follows:

1. Do people visit the site and what do they think about it?
2. Do they have an interest in archaeology? In the site of Cerro La Cruz?
3. Are people interested in learning more about our project?
4. How could our project benefit Buenavista and its citizens?
5. What do the people of Buenavista know about archaeology, particularly in this area?
6. What stories do they tell about the site?
7. What do they know about looters? Do people understand the difference between archaeology and looting?
8. How long have they lived in Buenavista?
9. What kind of *huacas*[5] did people find when building their houses?
10. Can we do a project with the school in Buenavista in which we give the students cameras and they take photos of whatever interests them?[6]

Initially Pacifico planned to spend two days a week in town and three days a week working on site, but the demands of the archaeological work sometimes prevented him from fulfilling this goal. To compensate,

he often spent evenings and weekends in Buenavista. He kept the directors updated on his progress during the field season and helped to coordinate presentations and meetings between them and various groups in the community. After the field season concluded, his summary report included the answers to the ten questions listed above, a short oral history of the town, and the local lore collected about the site of Cerro la Cruz. Our results are briefly summarized below, including the lessons learned that we hope will benefit other Public Interest Archaeology projects.

Project Results: General Interest (questions 1-5)

In response to questions regarding general interest in the site, our project, and archaeology, most local people showed at least a mild curiosity towards what we were doing. The residents were interested in visiting the excavations and staying informed of the results, but for the most part chose not to become involved in the details of excavation and interpretation. This lack of interest in the project's development may be due to the omnipresence of archaeological remains in Peru, as well as the economic reality that demands a focus on fulfilling basic needs. In other words, people worry about feeding their children before they concern themselves with something as tangential as archaeology.

The answers to question five (what do the people of Buenavista know about archaeology) were particularly revealing. To our surprise, most Peruvians have some of the same misconceptions about their own ancestors that many foreigners have: that everything is Inka and the only important artifacts are gold. For example, the archaeological history of Peru that is taught to schoolchildren emphasizes Inka culture. Everyone is aware of the Inkas, and some are even aware of the distinction between the Inka and earlier cultures. Nevertheless, the word 'Inka' is often used in an almost universal sense, both meaning specifically 'Inka' artifacts and culture, and to refer to artifacts and past cultures generally, even when the person is aware of the differences. Secondly, many people have a difficult time understanding what we dig for if we are not interested in gold. We repeatedly explained the importance of architecture, ceramics, and organic remains for understanding past life ways, with mixed reactions. It seemed that many people understand the concept of archaeology, but not the goals.

In general, the response to our project was overwhelmingly positive. There was never a shortage of individuals asking about the archaeology and the site, and it seemed as if just as many were willing to answer questions that we had as well. Everyone, both children and adults, wanted to know more.

Project Results: Oral History (questions 6-9)

From the beginning of our project, we heard different stories about the site of Cerro la Cruz. Few of these stories were particularly detailed, and most stories about the site were more akin to folklore or superstitions. For instance, Buenavista residents said that if you spend the night on the hill, spirits of the Inkas would enchant you. We were also warned that the dead might eat us if we stayed overnight, and were asked numerous times if we had bad dreams because of our digging around the hill. When our night watchman was asked if spirits ever enchanted him, he said he did not believe in such silliness. However, later in the season he told us he might like to move his watch house because strange things were happening. He was afraid it was because it resided atop burials (which it did not). He admitted the phenomena he experienced were probably psychologically based. In any case, stories were common but were not necessarily believed.

The most complete story we collected was the legend that dictates what you must do if you see a large animal on the hill. You must catch it on the hill, slaughter it, and drink its blood. Then its carcass will turn to gold. The catch is that you must, from the time you see the beast to the time you catch it, not turn back, even though you will feel a force tugging you from behind.

Another story came from a family in town that owned a restaurant. They related that

their grandfather had been *huaquero*-ing [looting] when he came upon a pot filled with golden sand that was emanating a golden light. During this amazing moment, he heard someone calling his name and turned around to see who it was. To his dismay, there was no one there, but an even bigger disappointment came when he looked back at where the pot had been, for it was gone. Another anecdote tells of a glow that is known to emanate from the hill.

It is no surprise that there are stories about the site. *Huaqueros* [looters] might invent many of them in a similar fashion to the way anglers create "fish stories." First, *huaqueros* are often drinking alcohol when they go searching for artifacts. Secondly, they usually go looting at night. An archaeological site is a breeding ground for ghost stories in much the same way that a graveyard is—especially since many sites have graves. It is dark and spooky with the remnants of dead people looming in the shadows. A *huaquero* may create a ghost story (or modification of a pre-existing one) given the surroundings, perhaps as a sort of consolation for returning empty handed or to scare others away. More than just entertainment, these stories gave us an idea of how local residents viewed the site, their connection to the archaeological past, and by extension, our project.

Project Results: Photography Project (question 10)

Through the local school, we coordinated a project that would allow us to see, quite literally, through the eyes of the students. Under the direction of a history teacher, Maria San Felipe, a group of students received ten disposable cameras to take photographs of their community and create an exhibit. Our project provided development of the film into prints. There were several difficulties encountered along the way, and we were somewhat surprised by the results. A few cameras were lost and there were rumours that the teacher had taken most of the pictures. The final product was more of a class report than an exhibit, but the students seemed to have enjoyed the project. This aspect of the project taught us the difficulties involved in introducing new curricular experiences on a short-term basis. On a more positive note, it succeeded in opening a relationship between our team and the community via the school.

Dissemination of the Results

The residents of Buenavista were informed of the results of this project through interactive presentations, and a website (http://cerro_la_cruz.tripod.com) we created will keep them updated on the results and publications derived from research at the site of Cerro la Cruz. Given the rapid spread of internet access in coastal Peru (there is now an internet cafe in the Chao Valley), we hope that websites will become an increasingly useful method for connecting communities with researchers. Residents also met with the Co-Director, Luis Coronado, who is a member of the North Coast Committee on Tourism and who pledged to answer any questions the community might have about developing the site for tourism.[7] The preliminary results of this research were presented to the local community, the schoolchildren of Buenavista, the regional government and the Peruvian public through both oral presentations and written reports. Our hope is that our work with the local community of Buenavista may provide an example of how the public interest approach can operate in the field, and that this approach will have an increasing impact on how archaeological investigations are conducted throughout the world.

Conclusions: Archaeology, Site Development and Economics in Peru

There is a constant tension in Peru between the short-term benefits of looting and the long-term benefits of site development for tourism purposes. This is a tricky subject to broach in a country where the sale of one looted vessel might feed a family for a month. However, many people seemed to understand the dangers of looting. With the success of such sites as *Sipán and Machu Picchu,* civic minded individuals have realized that it is through the protection of archaeological sites, not their exploitation, that small communities may be able to use their cultural resources to improve their economic status, as well as the world's understanding of their past. Similarly, people in Buenavista who did not understand the dangers of looting or the difference between

archaeology and theft were both interested in and receptive to learning the distinction. In fact, Pacifico gave a lengthy explanation of the difference between looting and archaeology during an in-class presentation at the local school. Nevertheless, building the infrastructure to support site development is costly and time-consuming, while looting is quick and easy.

Perhaps the most important discovery we made in conducting the Public Interest aspect of this project is that while flexibility is essential in trying to meet the community's needs, we also benefited from bringing some ideas and partial plans to the field. This strategy is not only practical in terms of acquiring the necessary funding and supplies, but also useful for accommodating the degree of preparedness and level of organization in the community. To attain these goals, consistent contact for the duration of the project assists in developing the bonds of trust and understanding imperative for the success of the project.

Recommendations for Future Endeavours

Although public interest methodologies must be tailored to the circumstances of each project and community, some general guidelines are suggested. First, it is important to learn about the local community from the beginning, keep the community informed regarding the archaeological project, and solicit their input, perhaps using a liaison specifically assigned to this task. Buying supplies locally when possible and providing opportunities for employment, training, and education are also recommended. Talking to schools and community leaders is important, but children are also great communicators and may help to generate interest among parents and family members.

We highly recommend that archaeologists adopt a Public Interest approach, involving local communities from the early stages of their fieldwork, and incorporating their ideas and interests into the research design. Local residents may provide a wealth of information on the history of the area and folklore regarding the site, and are clearly the archaeologists' best allies in the protection and conservation of archaeological sites. At the same time, a community's key to protecting and potentially capitalizing on their cultural resources may be an archaeological excavation piloted by a director with the public interest in mind.

An important way to encourage conservation while serving the community's needs is to approach the problem from an economic perspective. In some cases, archaeological tourism may provide long-term economic gain for local communities, but only if the site is relatively accessible, sufficiently appealing, and most importantly the community is well briefed on the fragility of a site. Local contacts (such as a partnership with a local university) and resources for conservation and ongoing education are also important if sites are to be made more accessible to both foreign and domestic tourists. In all cases, the local community would need to set their own agenda for development in order for it to be sustainable.

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Authors and contact details

***Melissa Vogel** is currently a Research Associate at the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology (Email* <mevogel@alumni.upenn.edu>*). She completed her Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania in 2003 and received her B.A. in Anthropology at the University of California Los Angeles in 1995. Dr. Vogel has worked in various parts of Latin America over the last 10 years, including Nicaragua, Belize and Peru. This study represents the results of three years of research in the Chao Valley of northern Peru. Her research on the Casma polity continues in*

the Casma Valley with a study of the Casma polity capital, the site of El Purgatorio.

***David Pacifico** is currently a Research Associate with the Corinth Computer Project at the University of Pennsylvania (Email* <dpacific@sas.upenn.edu>*) and was a Bilingual Crime Victim Advocate working with the Spanish-speaking communities in South Philadelphia. He received his B.A. in Anthropology and in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. Apart from his work in Peru, David has also conducted cultural research and applied anthropology in Philadelphia.*

Notes

[1] Post-processual theory arose in the late 1970s and 1980s out of dissatisfaction with the systems-oriented theory that dominated archaeological thought in the 1960s. What developed was a wide variety of approaches that incorporated such disparate influences as feminist theory, Marxist theory, cognitive theory, and structuralism.

[2] Raised fields are large, elevated planting surfaces that keep crops protected from seasonal flooding and increase crop yields by improving soil conditions and drainage (Erickson 1994).

[3] Pyburn and Wilk have also established a Center for Archaeology in the Public Interest to promote this type of research.

[4] The foreigners who built these facilities came from Germany and Canada, as well as other countries.

[5] *Huaca* is a complex Andean term with several meanings, including platform mound, sacred place, and sacred object. In this case, *huaca* refers to sacred objects.

[6] This project was inspired by a similar project undertaken in Philadelphia by a University of Pennsylvania graduate student, which produced interesting views of the community as seen by the children and which the children seemed to enjoy. Apart from providing an emic perspective of the area, our expectation was that this project could be a bridge between the local children and our investigation.

[7] The responsibility for tourist development was left up to the community to decide and/ or pursue as they saw fit. For example, they could petition the National Institute of Culture for access to the artifacts recovered during our excavations to create a site museum.