**Archaeology Paragraphs**

**Mesa Verde Colorado**

1. The spectacular mountains, mesas, and canyons of Mesa Verde Country and the Four Corners region have been home to Native American communities for several thousands of years.

The earliest inhabitants were nomadic peoples who lived here from at least 10,000 B.C., sustaining themselves by hunting and gathering edible plants.

The Ancestral Puebloans (formerly referred to as the Anasazi) occupied the Four Corners from approximately A.D. 1 to A.D. 1300 and left remarkable remnants of their civilization. Whispers of this civilization still echo throughout this ancient land, where cliff dwellings and petroglyphs stand the test of time.

1. The Ancestral Puebloans created a thriving civilization building raised towers and hundred-room cities into the cliff walls. Mesa Verde is known as North America’s richest archaeological preserve because of the several thousand ancient sites in the area.

Many sites are open to the public for visitation, and many local museums and institutions are dedicated and interpreting the region’s culture and archaeology. The most famous of these is award-winning Mesa Verde National Park, but visiting the many other sites throughout the area provides a deeper look into the fascinating culture of the Ancestral Puebloan people.

1. Covering 176,000 acres, the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument is a rugged and breathtaking landscape containing the highest known density of archaeological sites in the United States. 6,000 ancient sites, some visible to the eye, dot the landscape, including cliff dwellings, villages, and rock art. Plus, the monument is just 10 miles from the heart of Cortez.
2. Baseline site survey data is collected at all sites and serves as the backbone of documentation necessary for every archeological site at Mesa Verde National Park. Over 4,700 sites in the park have received this level of documentation since the first survey projects were conducted in the 1930s. Currently, sketch maps, photographs, and a GPS location are part of this documentation package. Our goal is to update the site survey information on all sites documented prior to 1996 when our current methodology was established.
3. Many of the Mesa Verde backcountry cliff dwellings have not been visited or documented by archeologists since they were first recorded during park surveys in the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s. Many of these sites are very difficult to access, and often require aides such as ladders and/or technical climbing gear and rappelling skills in order to enter them.

As a result, there is very little current information regarding the condition of many of these sites. In 1994, park management developed the Archeological Site Conservation Program, the goal of which is to assess the condition of 600 alcove sites, document those that contain intact architecture, and stabilize some of the more severely threatened sites.

1. The Condition Assessment Project at Mesa Verde National Park began in 1996. To date, 230 of the recorded 600 cliff dwellings have been assessed. Under this program, standing walls in the alcoves are assessed for damage from such effects as water, fire, structural instability, and rodents. Recommendations are then made that will help reduce or reverse those adverse effects.
2. The focus of Condition Assessment is to determine what factors threaten cliff dwelling sites that contain standing architecture. Water from runoff is the most serious threat to walls as it speeds erosion at wall foundations and within joints. Left alone, such erosion can result in the collapse of entire structures. Other threats include rodent burrowing and structural weaknesses such as cracking and leaning.
3. If these types of problems are found, then recommendations are made for additional documentation and/or stabilization treatments which will help to preserve the archeological integrity of the sites. Often the most severe water runoff problems can be reduced by installing a bead of silicone caulk along the cliff face which directs water away from archeological features.
4. Architectural documentation is the most detailed type of recordation. At this level, walls are thoroughly photographed, every stone is mapped, and all construction attributes and features are recorded on field forms. The purpose of this type of documentation is to record and analyze architectural details in order to answer specific research questions.

Also, this type of documentation is completed when certain areas of sites are recommended for stabilization. In cases where it is necessary to alter original fabric in order to preserve the wall, architectural documentation ensures that original features and construction methods are recorded before treatments are applied.

1. Architectural documentation records specific details and features, such as building stone shaping techniques, mortar application, doorways, hearths, and vents to name a few. This is done by creating detailed drawings or scaled digital photographs of each wall within a site. To date, architectural documentation projects have been completed at Cliff Palace, Spruce Tree House, Oak Tree House and several smaller alcove sites located in the backcountry of Mesa Verde National Park.
2. Recording architectural features can help us determine how the structures were originally constructed and what alterations might have taken place over time. The use, reuse, and function of each structure, as well as the spatial relationships between rooms and kivas can also be determined.

Features and details can also tell us how individual rooms may have been used, and also help to determine the size and composition of Ancestral Puebloan households. This in turn helps archeologists determine population size not only within certain sites, but in the Mesa Verde region.

Source: <https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/colorado/canyons-of-the-ancients>; <https://www.nps.gov/meve/learn/historyculture/site_survey_data.htm>