ANNUAL REPORT: ARGENTINA–USPALLATA 2017 FIELD SCHOOL

Director: Dr. Erik Marsh, CONICET, Laboratorio de Paleo-Ecología Humana, UNCuyo, Mendoza

This was the second year of the Uspallata field school. Students actively participated and contributed to the project's research goals and to the archaeology of the Argentine Andes. This was a small project so everyone's participation was important in the field. Back at the hostel where we were staying, students took charge of organizing field forms, photographs, and artifact bags. We surveyed a burial site, Usina Sur, where we collected human bones eroding of natural cliff face and recorded surface artifacts. Next we excavated a rock shelter that had been previously dated at 6000 years old.

After completing the readings and discussion section of the course, we visited Usina Sur, a site excavated in the 1970s and 1980s. Originally, this was to be an exercise in locating a site from old descriptions and perhaps elaborating on the very brief published description. The site is located near the hostel and we walked there, providing a welcome break from readings. We located the site as well as the adjacent rock art. We noted that the original publication had not mentioned some of the more important rock art designs, which are known at other regional sites. One may be Inca-related, which coincides with the site's one radiocarbon date. This re-examination revealed the site to be the second most important rock art site in the Uspallata Valley. The site's burials were near the edge of a cliff. We located the probable location of the original excavations before evaluating the erosional cuts, which had revealed additional human bones. We recovered these bones, including a mandible with teeth, which will be sent for radiocarbon dating and isotope analysis for dietary information. This fortuitous discovery was exciting for the students. We were also able to locate other rock art blocks mentioned in the publication and mark them with GPS points. In the survey, we marked other areas' approximate artifact density to produce a much improved map of the site.

Students actively participated in writing a report on the visit to the site. We used an online shared document, so everyone could add sections simultaneously. This is a major contribution to research on the site because the details the students recorded will go directly into future publications. The report itself is a basic rough draft that the project's Teaching Assistant plans to publish in a student journal, and all the field school students will be authors.

The more intensive part of the field school was excavating a rock shelter site, Paso de Paramillos. This site is located along the historic road between Mendoza and Santiago, which crosses the Andes. A previous excavation reported two radiocarbon dates of over 6000 years old, though details of this excavation were never published. Finding an old occupation was one reason to choosing this site. Also, it is located near excellent chert sources, so we found a large quantity of chert flakes of various colors in the excavation. The previous excavation in the 1980s was never backfilled, so the students saw firsthand what happens to sites left open, and this led to a discussion of archaeological ethics. The first half of the excavation was challenging: there were many large rocks that made it difficult to dig. Below these rocks, there was a thick layer full of rodent tunnels. These tunnels had to be treated as separate contexts, which was challenging to excavate, screen, and record. Students patiently learned the excavation's field forms and how to excavate rodent tunnels and surrounding contexts without mixing dirt or artifacts from adjacent areas. Back at the hostel, students meticulously organized and corrected photos, forms, and bag labels and learned the importance of keeping these records organized.

The site turned out to be deeper than we anticipated, so the field school crew was unable to finish excavating the site. After they left, I organized a local team to finish excavating and backfill the site. We discovered the field school crew had excavated to within 15 cm of the bottom of the rock shelter.

Students have access to the shared online folders so they can see our updates to the photos and the reports. These can also be used in presentations at the universities at anthropology club meetings, for example. Students were invited back to work on artifact analysis and use this season's data for independent research, conference presentations, or theses.