Private Sector Archaeology: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

THOMAS R. WHEATON
New South Associates, Inc., Stone Mountain, Georgia USA
tomwheaton@newsouthassoc.com

Introduction

The other articles in this book address the issues of development pressure on archaeological landscapes. And as the abundance of examples shows, this has become an increasingly serious problem as the world’s population keeps expanding exponentially. Many countries and international organizations have, over the past 50 years or so, begun to address this problem, a problem which in my opinion poses a much greater threat to our common heritage than pothunters and the illicit relics market.

Countries have increasingly passed laws requiring that earth disturbing projects be subjected to archaeological salvage, or better yet, management of their archaeological and other cultural resources. Some international organizations have promulgated conventions that countries are urged to sign, and instituted preservation procedures that are required before the granting of development loans. Within the past couple of decades it seems that many countries are coming to grips with an increasingly aware public that, quite apart from international conventions, is demanding a say in the preservation of their heritage. Just as development is not going to go away any time soon, neither is this demand that people’s history and material heritage must be considered by governmental bodies. And many governments are also recognizing the importance of heritage to their citizens’ well-being, sense of place and self-esteem, so essential for economic and political development.

Most countries’ do not have the financial wherewithal, and sometimes lack the expertise, to identify, evaluate and mitigate the impacts of this development. The old system of universities and museums that have dealt with archaeology as a leisurely pursuit where researchers could decide where, what and when to study, was not made to handle this dramatic rise in the numbers of sites, artifacts, and data, and certainly not in a timely fashion. Even governmental organizations such as national park systems and granting institutions were not set up, nor are they often equipped, to handle such a situation.

Almost certainly, the solution to this situation will need to include the private sector, whether in the form of non-profit organizations (NGOs) or of for-profit companies. This chapter will explore the role of the emerging for-profit private
sector in dealing with these issues. It is based on over 25 years of experience in the for-profit private sector in the southeastern United States and extensive contacts with other company owners throughout the United States as the system has developed from its infancy in the 1970s to the beginnings of its maturation in the 1990s and continuing until the present. It also is based on observations of the international private sector over the past half dozen years in travels to Latin America, Europe and Africa, and extensive correspondence with private sector companies in other parts of the world. This chapter is therefore unlike the others in this book and derives from a career’s experience rather than a single project or research topic.

This topic is much more complicated than it may appear at first glance. It involves not only the practice of archaeology, but the cultures and the economic and political systems of the countries involved. This discussion is undoubtedly colored by my personal experiences and biases, but I hope that my experience has been wide enough to provide some validity to my examples and conclusions. And while I have benefitted enormously by my contacts with others in the United States and overseas, any errors in fact or interpretation are, of course, mine alone.

The US System

**History of Enabling Legislation**

American archaeologists are fond of pointing out that Thomas Jefferson was our first archaeologist when at the end of the eighteenth century, he had his enslaved Africans excavate a portion of a prehistoric Indian mound on his property. They are also fond of pointing to the 1906 Antiquities Act as a sign that we have been managing our cultural resources for nearly one hundred years. But in reality, these dates are a little early. Archaeology as academic discipline did not really get started until a hundred years after Jefferson’s excavation, and it took another 60 years after the Antiquities Act for the real beginnings of legislation to manage cultural resources in the United States, the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

There was other legislation after 1906 that included mention of archaeology and conservation, and the management of buildings and sites and other cultural resources, but these had for the most part minimal impact on the run-of-the-mill archaeological site. The 1935 Historic Sites Act allowed the National Park Service to become involved in identifying and purchasing sites, managing such sites, and working with local governments in the management of such sites; but this affected only a tiny fraction of the cultural resources in the United States and was geared toward monuments in the sense of only the best known resources, much like the “listed” sites in Europe. It did not target the ordinary sites of ordinary people or those sites rapidly disappearing as a result of development. The 1949 National Trust for Historic Preservation Act, set up the National Trust to protect sites and buildings of outstanding importance in our history and to take over the functions provided for in the Historic Sites Act, purchasing and managing sites, and working