

Vandalism at Red Rock damages ruins

By JEFF POPE

The evidence of crime was plain to see.

The top bar of the stockade fence hung loose from where trespassers broke it to make their entrance easier. Dozens of shoe prints were left behind. Elsewhere, vandals marked their presence with graffiti dangerously close to priceless works of art. But what isn't obvious is how many cultural artifacts thieves have removed from the restricted areas of Red Rock Canyon.

Before the Bureau of Land Management made the canyon a National Conservation Area, the canyon was home to ranchers, American Indians and unknown ancient people.

They left behind shards of pottery, rock art, mining equipment and other signs of civilization that are still being uncovered and discovered. In fact, all of Southern Nevada has been a busy crossroads for many cultures since long before Mormon settlers built a fort in the Las Vegas Valley in 1855.

How many artifacts exist in the area's mountains and canyons is anybody's guess, said George Phillips, project manager for the Cultural Site Stewardship Program.

The state Legislature charged the UNLV Public Lands Institute in 2005 to work with federal, state and nonprofit partners to promote education of local history, engage the community in public lands stewardship and protect culturally significant sites in Clark County.

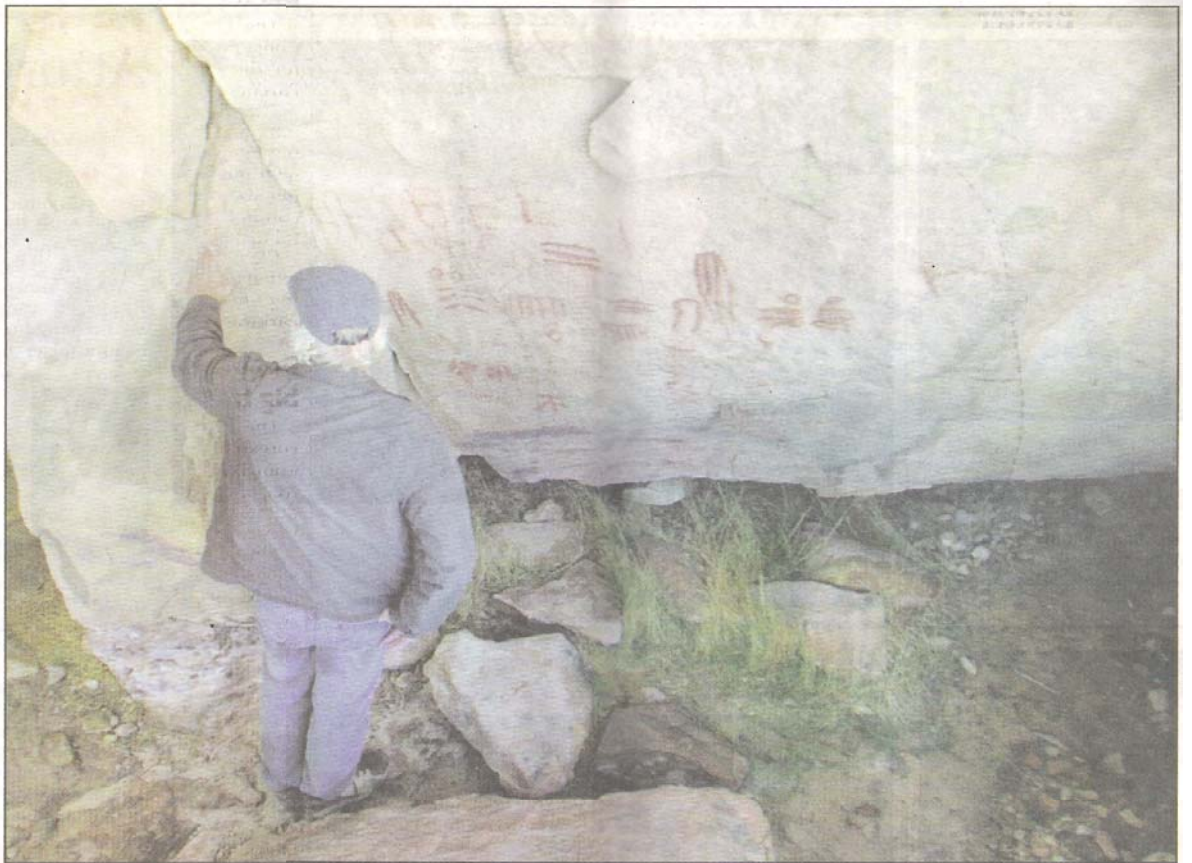
"We're watching it and protecting it because we don't know what's out there," Phillips said. "We don't want it destroyed before we've had a chance to study it."

Yet the allure of getting up close to history has been difficult to control. It's especially difficult in areas like Red Rock and Sloan Canyon, which were popular recreation areas for decades before they became federally managed lands.

The program is a compilation of efforts among the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Forest Service and run by the Public Lands Institute. It is funded by the Southern Nevada Public Lands Act until 2010. Phillips said the program then likely will be turned over to the State Historic Preservation Office.

The federal land-managing agencies rely on stewardship program volunteers to observe and report on activities in more than 10,000 culturally significant sites on 7 million acres of government property.

The sites can be as close as the other side of the wall marking a backyard in Summerlin to the desolate arroyos in the Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area.



HEATHER CORY/STAFF PHOTO

Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Mark Boatwright looks around a cave at Red Rock National Conservation Area that has archeological significance on Jan. 10. As a group leader of the Cultural Stewardship Program, Boatwright is looking for vandalism or natural disruption to the site.



HEATHER CORY/STAFF PHOTO

This pictograph of a handprint, believed to be left by an American Indian long ago, decorates a rock on a Red Rock Conservation Area trail. The UNLV Public Lands Institute is creating a database of cultural heritage sites in Clark County.

There were about 115 volunteers when Phillips took over the program in 2005. There are now 320.

The volunteer stewards are assigned a few sites to oversee. They clean up garbage, photograph signs of human activity and changes. Over time, volunteers get to know every rock, every agave plant and grain of sand in their areas.

"It does become theirs," Phillips said. "It's like monitoring the neighbor's house while they're on an extended vacation."

The data are used to de-

velop management plans for the sites. The county recently gave the program \$25,000 to create a computer database. The stewards file 2,400 reports each quarter, Phillips said, all kept in file folders.

Most of the sites are well-kept secrets. Others, like the rock art and fire pits at Willow Springs in Red Rock Canyon, are part of the BLM's attempt to make history accessible to visitors.

Mark Boatwright, an archaeologist with the BLM and a volunteer leader in the stewardship program, said the federal agencies have received a black eye for preventing the public from using public lands.

With the right plans, the site can be developed for the public to use while still protecting endangered areas, he said.

"It is public land but on the other hand, we're compelled to protect and preserve our resources," Boatwright said. "Every site is potentially endangered."

Most of the damage is not intentional. Some people pick up shards of pottery or arrowheads and give them to federal officers thinking they're helping protect the historic pieces. But they're actually disturbing the site.

"If it's a petroglyph, people recognize the significance," Phillips said. "Most cultural artifacts, the average person is not going to recognize the significance."

The BLM is playing catchup

with demand, Boatwright said.

The Red Springs recreation area in Calico Basin is an example of the BLM's plan for combining public use and preservation. In summer 2005, the BLM reopened the popular site with picnic tables, canopies, grills and a larger parking lot located where people had been gathering for centuries for cookouts.

The boardwalk was perhaps the most significant addition at Red Springs. It allows people to visit the high meadow

without disturbing it and has informational signs to help visitors understand and appreciate the history and wildlife in the canyon.

"This is how to protect a site like this," Boatwright said. "It keeps people where they're supposed to be going but it's not off-limits. I came out here one day and found people playing a guitar and a flute. They were just sitting out here enjoying it."

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