

Archaeologists and Reality Television

In early 2012 Spike TV and the National Geographic Channel launched television series considered by professional archaeologists to be detrimental to American archaeological sites. In the view of the archaeologists – *Diggers* and *American Diggers* – promote the looting of archaeological sites for monetary gain and equate the field of archaeology with treasure hunting.

Organizations of professional archaeologists, such as the Society for American Archaeology, the Society for Historical Archaeology, the American Anthropological Association, and others objected to these shows in the press and by writing to the networks to express their disapproval and their concern that archaeological sites will be destroyed. In addition, as an alternative, they encouraged the networks to develop programs about archaeological excavations undertaken by professional archaeologists.

Unlike the entertainers who host these “reality” television shows, professional archaeologists are scientists who strictly adhere to a set of ethical standards as they conduct research. Archaeologists “dig” in order to learn about people in the past, not to benefit monetarily.

The attached letters are from Michigan’s State Archaeologist and the professional archaeological organizations noted above. These letters explain the points of view of professional archaeologists regarding these television shows and the preservation of archaeological sites in the United States and around the world.

March 2, 2012

Mr. John Fahey
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street, NW
Washington DC 20036-4688

Dear Mr. Fahey:

Recently the National Geographic Channel began broadcasting episodes of a series entitled "Diggers" that portrays individuals digging on private land in search of artifacts that can then be offered for sale. Perhaps the National Geographic Channel and the individuals doing the digging see this as a glamorous and exciting entrepreneurial endeavor; however, the locations at which they are digging are archaeological sites. It is important to recognize that archaeological sites are much like historic manuscripts that are cared for and protected in archives and libraries. The artifacts and other archaeological information that lies in the ground at archaeological sites are like the pages of those manuscripts. Few people would dream of going into a library and tearing pages out of manuscripts that are hundreds of years old in order to sell those pages for profit. Yet all too often people don't see the harm in "tearing" artifacts out of archaeological sites in order to sell them. Some even try to argue that digging up artifacts in this way contributes to history.

In fact, in the same way that tearing pages out of manuscripts destroys information and robs us of the opportunity to learn about and understand the past, indiscriminately digging up archaeological sites, plucking out artifacts perceived as having monetary value, and then casting the rest aside, destroys the information that sites hold. When archaeologists excavate sites, they treat them like documents that record our human heritage. They dig carefully and systematically; they recover all of the artifacts, and they record everything. Digging for the purpose of extracting only those artifacts that are valuable and can be sold is like pulling pieces out of a puzzle. Worse yet, digging up and discarding the "non-valuable" pieces while searching for the few that may be "valuable" destroys the puzzle entirely. For archaeologists, a fragment of broken pottery has the same value - information value - as a gold coin. The question that archaeologists pose about both the coin and the pottery fragment is: "what can we learn from these objects about people who lived in the past?" For archaeologists there is not a question of which object will bring a higher price.

It appears that "Diggers" will, in effect, serve as an instruction manual for destroying archaeological sites and destroying history in the interest of personal financial gain. It glorifies the deplorable act of sacrificing the record of our shared past to the greed and selfishness of a few. I urge you to halt broadcasts of this program, and to stop any further damage beyond that done by the episodes produced thus far.

Sincerely,



Dean L. Anderson, Ph.D.
State Archaeologist
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SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

February 27, 2012

John Fahey
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688

Dear Mr. Fahey,

I write to you as the president of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) to express concern about the new reality television show, "Diggers," which will premiere on the National Geographic Channel on February 28. We ask in the strongest possible terms that you take steps to alter the message of the show, which, based on our review of the material on the program's website, is contrary to the ethics of American archaeological practice, highly destructive, and possibly illegal.

SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to the research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With nearly 7,000 members, SAA represents professional archaeologists in colleges and universities, museums, government agencies, and the private sector. SAA has members in all 50 states as well as many other nations around the world.

To date, SAA has enjoyed a long-lasting relationship with National Geographic, from co-publishing the educational tool *Archaeology and You* to co-sponsoring the upcoming Presidential forum at the SAA annual meeting in Memphis on April 20.

The program, as described, would appear to violate three of the SAA's long-standing Principles of Archaeological Ethics: *Stewardship*, which involves working for the long-term conservation and preservation of the archaeological record; *Commercialization*, which opposes the buying and selling of archaeological objects and recognizes that such commodification results in the destruction of archaeological sites; and *Public Education and Outreach*, which underscores the importance of promoting public support for the protection, preservation, and interpretation of the archaeological record.

Archaeology is a scientific discipline involving the systematic examination and careful study of evidence relevant to human lives and lifestyles in the past. Members of SAA endeavor to stimulate interest in the past, advocate for the conservation of cultural resources, encourage public access to and appreciation of archaeology, and oppose all looting of sites and the purchase and sale of looted archaeological materials. In contrast to these standards of archaeological research and conduct, "Diggers" presents excavation as treasure hunting. The association of professional archaeology with "treasure hunting" impugns the discipline and the thousands of good scientists associated with it.

Further, the involvement of The National Geographic in this show is particularly troubling to SAA (as evidenced by the numerous letters of concern that we are receiving) because of the iconic position that your organization holds in our nation's consciousness. The National Geographic is viewed as the national authority in many areas of scientific inquiry, interpretation, and understanding of mankind's shared heritage, including

archaeology. It also plays a central role in public education regarding the importance of preserving the historical and archaeological record.

The archaeological record is precious. Once a site is dug, excavations completed, and artifacts removed, the site can never reveal the mysteries of the past again. Archaeologists are careful to preserve buried history so that future techniques and approaches can tease more information from the ground. Excavating in the way you suggest, without a plan, with little regard for science, preservation, or future approaches, is unethical and robs our descendants of knowledge.

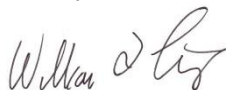
SAA does not know your intentions with regard to acquiring the appropriate federal, state, and city permits for excavation. The Antiquities Act of 1906, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 each provide protection to archaeological sites on federal property. Many states have stricter laws that apply to private property. Although it is legal to excavate on private land in some states, the removal of indigenous artifacts is highly unethical.

We believe that, at a minimum, you should work with the appropriate archaeologist in the State Historic Preservation Offices, the municipalities or, if this is impossible, hire a consultant who is a Registered Professional Archaeologist.

We do think, however, that a series on American archaeology could be exciting and successful if it proceeds within the parameters of good science. Such a series could utilize existing excavations and archaeological work without initiating unnecessary digs.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



William F. Limp, RPA
President

CC:

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A · M · E · R · I · C · A · N
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

March 7, 2012

Kevin Kay
President, Spike TV
1633 Broadway
New York, New York 10019

Dear Mr. Kay:

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) and its more than 11,000 members worldwide join other professional organizations and concerned citizens in urging you to withdraw support or modify the contents of the new “reality” television series entitled “American Digger,” which will premiere on Spike TV March 20, 2012. This program wrongly represents archaeology as a treasure-seeking adventure, in which our collective heritage is dug up and sold for monetary gain.

Founded in 1902, the AAA is the world’s largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in promoting the science of anthropological disciplines. The AAA represents all specialties within anthropology, including archaeology. Archaeology is a scientific discipline involving the systematic examination and careful study of evidence relevant to human lives and lifestyles in the past. It is conducted by highly trained professionals who follow a strict code of ethics in order to preserve and interpret knowledge of the past for the benefit of all peoples.

AAA members are deeply concerned about this television program’s message that it is okay to loot and destroy archaeological sites for monetary gain. The program will undermine critical public support for the protection, preservation, and interpretation of the archaeological record. Archaeological sites and artifacts, like historic monuments and documents, are an integral and irreplaceable part of our cultural heritage.

In the US, the Antiquities Act of 1906, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 each provide protection to archaeological sites on federal property. Many states have stricter laws that apply to private property. Although it is legal to excavate on private land in some states, the removal of indigenous artifacts for sale is highly unethical, and the removal or disturbance of indigenous human remains in the US is forbidden by law. Other countries have even stricter laws protecting their cultural patrimony, even on private land, due to accelerated threats to archaeological sites and remains. We suggest

you consider the possibility that members of the public, having viewed this program, may go out and dig into archaeological sites on federal lands, not knowing this is a felony.

We encourage you to consult with the appropriate archaeologists in the various State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) for advice on the legality and ethics of the exploits shown on this program, and preferably, hire a consultant who is a Registered Professional Archaeologist (RPA), before broadcasting any of the programs in this series.

The content of "American Digger" is contrary to the ethics of archeological practice. The AAA further encourages you to promote television programs and series that enlighten the public concerning the value and ethics of professional archaeology and the scientific study of the past, or withdraw your support of this "reality" television series.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leith Mullings".

Leith Mullings
President



SOCIETY *for*
HISTORICAL
ARCHAEOLOGY

February 27, 2012

Ms. Kassie Canter
Executive Vice President, Communications – Viacom Entertainment Group

Paul Mullins

Department of Anthropology
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Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis
Indianapolis, IN 46202
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Dear Ms. Canter;

The Society for Historical Archaeology is an international organization dedicated to the study of the historic past. Formed in 1967, the SHA is the largest international scholarly association focused on the archaeology of the modern world (A.D. 1400-present). We are fortunate that so many people throughout the world find historical archaeology and everyday heritage fascinating and respect the process of archaeological interpretation and preservation. The Spike network program *American Diggers* professes to share this concern for documenting our national heritage, but it actually promotes the destruction of that heritage. It uses the knowledge compiled by historians and archaeologists to find and plunder the past and risks misunderstanding archaeological research, preservation law, and the community heritage that we all aspire to protect.

Historical archaeologists are fascinated by seemingly prosaic things like ceramics, food remains, and buttons because such objects reflect historical experiences of everyday people who might otherwise pass unnoticed. Many people who are not professional archaeologists become committed and reflective partners with archaeologists—digging alongside archaeologists, reading popular magazines, or watching thoughtful television programming—because they are also fascinated by everyday heritage and respect the complicated process of interpreting and preserving the archaeological past for all of us.

Mr. Savage's passion for history reflects that legions of archaeologists and historians provided stories that fueled his interest. Nevertheless, his show risks using that interest to destroy that past and reduce archaeological artifacts simply to commonplace things to sell. Every historical archaeologist will confirm that the overwhelming majority of the things we excavate are "valuable" not because they can be sold but because they are in many cases the only evidence to interpret some historical experiences and moments. *American Diggers* hazards fueling a misplaced audience desire to reduce history to something that can be bought and sold, and you risk misleading the audience about local preservation laws. As I am sure you have already found out, it is not easy to locate, let alone uncover, significant artifacts. However, all your audience will see is the American Savage team recovering astounding things from typical backyards and missing all the complexities of archaeological method, complicated local preservation laws, and the reality that few archaeological artifacts hold commercial value.

Archaeologists are meticulous because we care as much about the context of the artifact as the artifact itself. When something is taken out of context, its meaning is

simply lost. An archaeologist is not just interested in the artifact; rather, we interpret what a whole host of objects and documents can tell us about the past. Your series claims that "throughout the series, items of great historical and cultural significance will be found," but it is difficult to believe that any communities will learn more about their past after your team randomly picks out a few things that are aesthetic and potentially have some modest commercial value.

We are very disappointed that a show that purports to value our country's heritage seeks only to commercially exploit that heritage. We are advising all history-lovers to not watch the series and instead seek out one of the thousands of historical archaeologists in their community who share their commitment to preserving and interpreting the past for all of us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul R. Mullins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'P'.

Paul R. Mullins
President