ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES OF THE PICEANCE CREEK BASIN AND VICINITY, COLORADO

by

James J. Hester

ABSTRACT

With the exception of the Mesa Verde region, the archaeological and historical remains of western Colorado are poorly known. Northeastern Utah and southwestern Wyoming similarly are poorly known. The only area in the entire oil shale region that has been properly inventoried for archaeological sites is Dinosaur National Monument. Heretofore, only preliminary surveys have been carried out at 2 locations within the Piceance Creek basin, Colorado. The largest part of the lands underlain by oil shale is as yet completely unknown in terms of its archaeological and historical potential. We cannot, therefore, make accurate estimates of the quantity and type of remains possibly present on both federal and private leases to be developed by an oil shale industry. The increasing scope of development of mineral resources, such as oil and gas, oil shale, saline minerals, and coal, in the entire region will require close and diligent cooperation among all parties concerned to insure that these cultural resources are properly recognized, evaluated, and, where possible, preserved in-place for posterity.

INTRODUCTION

Based on studies made in surrounding areas, we predict that remains of several major cultural groups will be found in the Oil Shale Country. The earliest peoples in the region were hunters and gatherers who moved from place to place throughout the year, often occupying rock shelters. Their camping areas date as early as 5000 to 6000 years B.C.

Later, peoples in the region adopted agriculture of corn, beans and squash and began living in permanent villages that included pithouses and above-ground masonry rooms. Known as the Fremont culture, these peoples lived in the region from 500 to 1200 A.D. or slightly later (Table 1). They are perhaps best known for their art represented by designs both painted and pecked on sandstone cliffs in the region. Large standing human figures wearing elaborate headdresses are the best known (Fig. 1). Other designs include handprints, shield figures, and animals. Within the rock shelters, which they also occupied, are perishable remains such as cordage, basketry, and even remains of headdresses (Fig. 2). Use of pottery was another common Fremont characteristic. Most striking, perhaps, is the evidence from some of the human bones found that the Fremont peoples practiced warfare and cannibalism.

Later peoples shifted back to a hunting-gathering economy and occupied temporary campsites on ridge tops rather than permanent villages (Fig. 3). These later peoples include the Historic Utes, some of whose pole structures, termed wickiups, still stand.

Finally, evidence exists of the immediate ancestors of the present occupants of the region. The remains of mining camps, line shacks, corrals, and horse traps are part of Colorado's historical heritage — a heritage which would not be destroyed in our search for additional sources of energy.

Early Hunting and Gathering Peoples

Excavations of cultural levels containing evidence of the earliest occupants of the region have primarily been confined to rock shelters. Most are known from Dinosaur National Monument: Swelter Shelter, Serviceberry Shelter, Deluge Shelter, and Hells Midden (Breternitz and others, 1970; Wormington, 1955). Artifacts include stone tools, corner-notched and straight-stemmed indented-base points, oval and triangular bifacial knives, and grinding stones. Bone tools include awls, pendants, rings, and gaming pieces. Dates on these remains have been assessed primarily on the occurrence of types of projectile points dated elsewhere by radiocarbon. Most of these assigned dates range between 4000 and 1000 B.C., although one Mohave Point from Swelter Shelter could date as early as 7000 B.C. The general cultural position of these early sites shows affiliation with the Desert Culture tradition of the Great Basin as well as with some sites in the Western Plains and Intermountain regions. The life style of these early hunting-gathering peoples as yet has not been summarized in detail.