

# Americans Dig Archaeology!

## archaeology



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

[www.saa.org](http://www.saa.org)

### Media Audiences Hungry for Details of the Past

According to a recent Harris Interactive poll, Americans rely heavily on the media for archaeological information. The study, "Exploring Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Archaeology," found that the public has a large appetite for learning about human culture through archaeological study. Primary sources for learning about archaeology include:

Television 56%      Magazines 33%      Newspapers 24%

### No Stone Unturned: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How?

Media audiences have become riveted by the "unsolved mystery" aspect of archaeological investigations, especially when a new discovery is made.

Much attention goes to the artifacts themselves. These objects found at archaeological sites include animal bones, shells, charred seeds, and other everyday items that help archaeologists understand the environment in which past people lived.

But the true focus of archaeology is the people who left those objects behind. Studying the objects and the surrounding environments helps us better understand the behaviors of past people. The object plus context is the key to understanding human behavior - which is a topic of great interest to the American public.

While the Harris poll findings reveal a high level of interest in archaeology, even more potent evidence comes from the tourism industry.

According to a Travel Industry Association of America survey, 65% of American adult travelers visited cultural heritage related locations in 2001.

Yet despite their keen interest, many people are unclear about what archaeologists actually do. The media can play a vital role in furthering the public's knowledge by portraying archaeology accurately.

### What do Archaeologists DO, Anyway?

Many people assume that archaeologists spend a lot of time digging for artifacts. In reality, much of archaeological study is centered on interpreting data, analysis, reporting, and piecing together bits of evidence to better understand past people in their social and environmental contexts.

### Myth Busters

The media, with such a strong influence over the public's understanding and perceptions of archaeology, can help replace myths with truths.

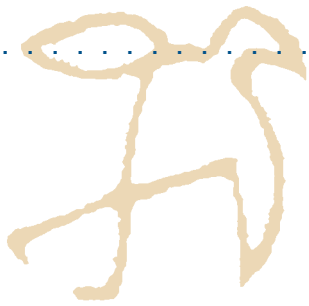
**Myth:** Archaeologists study dinosaurs and rocks.

**Truth:** Archaeologists study people of the ancient and recent past through their material remains. Paleontologists study the fossil remains of plants and animals, including dinosaurs. Geologists study rocks.

**Myth:** Archaeologists spend all of their time digging.

**Truth:** Archaeologists actually spend a relatively small amount of their time excavating, compared to the time spent in the laboratory, analyzing and interpreting their finds, and preparing written reports about their findings. Some archaeologists "dig" into collections of artifacts and field documents to make new discoveries about past lifeways.

Archaeology is the systematic study  
of human culture through material remains.



# studying

past cultures allows one to examine and anticipate the consequences of human behavior and decision making.



**Myth:** Archaeologists only work on dry land and in exotic locations.

**Truth:** Underwater archaeologists study shipwrecks and ancient cities below our lakes, rivers, and oceans. Archaeologists also work in cities, suburbs, and rural communities – everywhere!

**Myth:** It's okay to pick up any artifacts you find.

**Truth:** Removing artifacts without using proper scientific methods destroys information. In addition, federal and state laws prohibit the removal of artifacts from public lands without a permit.

Finding a bone or piece of pottery is only the tip of the iceberg. Lots of archaeological work happens back in the lab. In fact, contrary to popular assumptions, archaeologists spend relatively little time in the field digging.

Not all professional archaeologists are based in universities. Many are involved in the management and protection of archaeological sites. For example, as mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act, archaeological investigators often study the impact on surrounding archaeological sites when developers are constructing highways, housing communities, and other buildings. Other archaeologists work in museums and parks, caring for artifacts and sites, and using collections to interpret the past for visitors.

## Find the Facts

Archaeological terms and processes are often misunderstood and misrepresented. The resources below can help you uncover the facts and explanations you need for accurate reporting:

### Society for American Archaeology

[www.saa.org](http://www.saa.org)  
202-789-8200

Media Contact:  
[publications@saa.org](mailto:publications@saa.org)

The SAA can put you in touch with archaeologists who specialize in all areas of archaeology.

### National Park Service

[www.cr.nps.gov/aad/public](http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/public)  
[www.cr.nps.gov/archeology.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/archeology.htm)  
202-354-2100

### Archaeological Institute of America

[www.archaeological.org](http://www.archaeological.org)  
617-353-9361

Media Contact:  
[publications@aia.bu.edu](mailto:publications@aia.bu.edu)

### Society for Historical Archaeology

[www.sha.org](http://www.sha.org)  
856-224-0995

Media Contact: [hq@sha.org](mailto:hq@sha.org)

### About.com Archaeology Web Site

(good web site for fact checking)  
[www.archaeology.about.com](http://www.archaeology.about.com)



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

900 Second Street NE #12  
Washington, DC 20002-3557  
Tel: 202-789-8200

Email: [publications@saa.org](mailto:publications@saa.org) [www.saa.org](http://www.saa.org)

