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The South Carolina Petroglyph Survey

By Tommy Charles

If you love to explore the outdoors you may wish to get involved in the South Carolina Petroglyph (Rock Art) Survey now being conducted across the South Carolina Piedmont by the SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. What exactly are we looking for? Petroglyph is a Greek word meaning "rock writing." And although Prehistoric Native Americans had no formal alphabet, they left thousands of inscriptions on every conceivable kind of rock throughout the world. Most prehistoric carvings are abstract forms consisting of lines or forms that, to us, may appear to be random, unintelligible "doodles." Other carvings are of circles, squares, stick figures of people and animals, foot or hand prints, bird tracks and, perhaps, boundary markers and clan and fertility symbols. Most carvings are simple but some are rather elaborate.

That petroglyphs occur in abundance in the American Southwest is common knowledge, but relatively few have been discovered in the eastern states. This imbalance of discoveries may be due to several factors; one is that in the east, very little effort has been made to find these artifacts, and another is the dense vegetation of the eastern states that effectively hides petroglyphs and makes survey far more difficult than in western states.

Here in South Carolina I recorded six petroglyphs between 1979 and 1990 when I was conducting a survey of artifact collections from prehistoric Native American sites. The knowledge that these carvings existed and that they were an ignored part of our cultural heritage was the catalyst for undertaking the petroglyph survey.

The search for petroglyphs is being conducted in two ways: (1) a pedestrian survey using volunteers to explore certain tracts of land and (2) an appeal to the citizenry for information through various news media.

The first phase of the petroglyph survey was conducted during the months of January and February 1997. Twenty-four days were spent in the field during those two months and another seven days of survey were conducted during June. Part of this time was spent surveying tracts of land, but most was spent responding to citizens who reported finding carvings. Combined, the two methods resulted in the recording of approximately 150 carvings during 31 days of
field work.

Little is presently known about the meaning of Native American petroglyphs. If we are to ever have an opportunity to learn more about them, then it is imperative that they be found and recorded now, before the opportunity is lost forever. These rock carvings are disappearing at a rapid rate—acid rain, freezing and thawing, lichens and mosses—have already obliterated many carvings, and now increasing development threatens many of the remaining petroglyphs. Many petroglyphs are already so eroded that they are almost impossible to see except when the angle of the light is just right. Usually this is in early morning or late in the day, when the sun is at a low angle and dark, rainy days when the stone is wet.

The petroglyph survey is the first attempt ever in South Carolina to find and record these rare artifacts. The Piedmont is a large area and impossible to survey adequately with just a few persons, so the success of this survey depends greatly on the number of citizens that choose to participate.

All it takes to get involved in the survey is a willingness to closely inspect the rocks in your own yard. You can expand this exploration to the degree you wish—your neighbor’s yard, or any lands to which you have access. The entire Piedmont of South Carolina has rock boulders and each one is a potential host for a carving. You might wish to get your school, scout troop, hunt club, church members, and friends involved. The more people involved, the greater the opportunity for success. When you find a carving, first, make sure you can return to it, then call or write Tommy Charles, SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1321 Pendleton Street, Columbia, SC 29208. I will contact you and arrange a visit to record your finds.

The Institute has no interest in acquiring these artifacts, nor will the location of your finds be made public without your consent. We simply wish to record them. With the cooperation of our state’s citizens, the petroglyph survey will be successful and perhaps, someday the meaning of these fascinating antiquities will be known. The survey will continue indefinitely as funding permits.