Preserving Cultural Landscapes and NEOMAP Project Update for 2011

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Publication Info

Published in Legacy, Volume 15, Issue 1, 2011, pages 22-23.
http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/
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The Neolithization and Modernization of East Asian Inland Seas (NEOMAP) project has provided me with some unique research and educational experiences in recent years. NEOMAPs' host institution, the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) in Kyoto, is an incredible think-tank of international scholars working on an array of topics concerning humanity's relationship with the environment, ranging from prehistoric archaeology to the genetic changes of plant and animal species. NEOMAPs' goals are specifically to gain innovative thinking. In that role, annual meetings and special public symposia have been particularly fruitful. My part in the public symposia has ranged from talks alongside contemporary science fiction writers on the parallels of science-fact and science-fiction (Gillam 2009a)—the most fun I've had in a scientific symposium—to becoming better advocates for humanity and nature (Gillam 2010) with examples of pollution and waste in beautiful Kyoto, as well as the U.S., probably the most contentious talk of my career. For the latter topic, the use of the local setting of Kyoto as a negative example, was a pre-approved and strategic choice to foster debate that successfully ruffled a few feathers in the audience, leading to a fantastic discussion about projected, public, and marketed perception versus environmental reality! Kyoto is the historic jewel of Japan, but is also a large modern city. There too, nature bears the toll of humanity...however, I still love Kyoto!

In March 2011, the annual meeting will focus on cultural landscape preservation, a topic that has international significance given the globalization of modern culture (consumption monoculture) and increasing impacts of population on present and past cultural landscapes worldwide (overpopulation, pollution, waste, mining, built
environments, and consumption infrastructure). This topic will give me another opportunity to talk about the archaeology of South Carolina. As you may recall from prior issues of Legacy, a large part of my mission in participating in international studies is to promote interest in the archaeology here at home. As part of that goal, I have not only given many presentations on the archaeology of South Carolina at international meetings, but have also led three archaeology tours here that have fostered a growing research interest in South Carolina by my international colleagues (Figs. 1 and 2; Gillam 2007, 2009b).

My presentation in March will highlight many well-known archaeological and historical landmarks in South Carolina within the context of preserving cultural landscapes, including historic Charleston and plantations, the archaeology of the Savannah River Site facility, and notable prehistoric sites such as Sewee Shell Ring, Fig Island, and the Allendale chert quarries. Here in South Carolina, coastal sites are perhaps facing the greatest jeopardy. Not only is over-development a problem there, as in other parts of the state, but natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and sea-level rise all have the potential to devastate areas of significant cultural heritage within a single lifetime. Earthquakes might not seem an obvious choice in South Carolina, but elevation shifts and sand-blows can radically alter sandy coastal plain landscapes and are devastating to historic masonry structures, as witnessed by the historic Charleston earthquake of 1886.

Add to that list of hazards the troubled economy that is cutting state and national funding to both natural and cultural heritage interests and the problems become even more acute and timely. There are no simple answers other than public and institutional vigilance to protect and preserve our heritage. Politicians share one common desire that is to keep their constituents happy, so we must all do our best to raise their awareness of these issues. Likewise, “Save-a-site, support your local archaeologist!” Your kind support of archaeological projects both here and abroad is a critical and valued resource. Thanks for your continued support!

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