

Submitted Abstract

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First Author First Name Last Name	Bonnie Pitblado
Submitting Author First Name Last Name	Bonnie Pitblado
Correspondence	bonnie.pitblado@ou.edu
Co-Authors >> E-Mails will be not listed	
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>> SYNTHESIZE MOUNTAINS OF KNOWLEDGE <<

Abstract

For the past thirty years I have tried to understand the role of the Rocky Mountains in the initial peopling of the Western hemisphere, as well as how Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene people used the Rocky Mountain landscape. A theme that has pervaded my work has been that to effectively grapple with these issues, one must not conflate the terms “mountain” and “alpine.” That is, mountains are much more than just the windswept expanses above tree line, even if those towering peaks disproportionately capture the imagination of artists, poets, and others.

In fact, in the Southern Rocky Mountains where I have done most of my fieldwork, only a very few archaeological sites have been documented above contemporary tree line. In my experience, those sites tend to be sparse lithic scatters, occasionally accompanied by a chronologically diagnostic projectile point or two. The most ancient sites that have traditionally interested me are rare to non-existent in the alpine zones of my various project regions. And yet, there is something captivating about those highest-of-the-high landscapes, luring me back time after time.

And so it is that at this point in my career, I find myself wanting to better understand what alpine landscapes meant to people throughout the 10,000 or more years that they used them. Did people go there just to hunt, as the lithic scatters and projectile points suggest? Or were ancient people, like me and the artists and the poets, tapping into the sublime power of those places? How can we ever know, with archaeological records that are sparse and located in environments where extractive industries don’t trigger the compliance work that increases site databases elsewhere in the mountains?

I am not sure, but it might help to increase the field of vision. Toward that end, this paper synthesizes data from archaeological sites in the alpine zones of mountains across the western United States—the Rockies, the Cascades, and the Sierra Nevada. I cannot cover such a large area exhaustively, but I cast a wide net, probing site records buried in State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and agency databases. This effort is ongoing, and at IMC, I report what I have learned so far about the archaeological signatures of human activities above tree line. I also offer thoughts as to whether those archaeological signatures are more consistent with strictly economic activities or perhaps something more profound than that.