

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **October 1, 2016**

Destination: **Yucca House National Monument**

Leader: **Tish Varney**

Number of Participants: **14**

On October 1st, fourteen SJBAS members traveled to Cortez and met NPS park ranger Jill Blumenthal, our guide to tour Yucca House National Monument. Jill was well qualified to lead us, coming from 10 years as Crow Canyon Archaeological Center education and lab staff and currently the Education and Volunteer Coordinator at Mesa Verde. Yucca House is under the supervision of Mesa Verde National Park. It is located 10 miles south of Cortez along the flanks of Sleeping Ute Mountain. You'd never guess there was a major archaeological site accessed by traveling a dirt road through private land. We were glad to have Jill leading the carpool as the way is not clearly marked.

Yucca House, one of the largest archaeological sites in southwest Colorado, is unexcavated and appears as two areas with large mounds of rubble. It acted as an important community center for the Ancestral Puebloan people from A.D. 1150-1300. A large spring originally flowed through the middle of the complex, so Yucca House was originally called Aztec Springs, although there is no connection with the Aztec people of Mexico. However, the Sleeping Ute Mountain is called by the Utes and other tribes as the "mountain with yucca", so the name changed from Aztec Springs to Yucca House.



Much of the visible architecture dates to the Pueblo III period and preservation of the site will give archaeologists an opportunity to answer many questions as the techniques for learning about the past improve. Jill warned us that rattlesnakes make this their home as well although only a tarantula and a garter snake were visible. The upper house rises 15-20 feet above the surrounding architecture and plaza area and commands a sweeping vista of the valley. This pueblo has an estimated 600 rooms, 100 kivas and a great kiva, large enough to house the community.

Evidence of the pristine nature of this site shows up with the many potsherds and corn cobs scattered over the ground. Jill demonstrated that the proper way to share an artifact with others was to mark the location with the toe of the shoe and pick it up to show. The object is then returned to the exact same spot where it came from. Collecting and making piles of artifacts for all to see defeats the effectiveness of **provenience** – maintaining the relationship of an object with its original location. Provenience helps archaeologists interpret the culture through its objects. Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 prohibits removal of artifacts from a site.

Although many archaeological sites have disappeared through vandalism and development, Yucca House remains protected well into the future as a valuable intact resource. Jill brought this site alive with her narrative guiding us back in time and presenting many questions to ponder.

- By Tish Varney, SJBAS field trip leader