

Trash or Treasure?

If you're hiking and you spot a rusty old can, you may be tempted to pick it up for proper disposal. While that sentiment is worthy of admiration, it might not always be proper, or even legal. Laws protect archaeological resources on public lands and even in rivers, lakes, and the ocean. Sites or objects that are at least 100 years old may be considered archaeological resources. Those older than 50 years of age may be considered historical resources. They are of interest to archaeologists and are protected by law.

While most people don't think much about garbage, trash is beloved by archaeologists because of what it can teach us about the past. A favorite site for study is a *midden*, an old trash or garbage heap. A midden might contain damaged stone or metal items, which tell us about the weapons and tools people used. Softer material such as wood, cloth, leather, and baskets are sometimes preserved. They may tell us what people wore, how they carried things, or the kind of toys used by children. Historic household trash heaps often contain broken pottery pieces and even traces of the food they once held. This can teach us about what the people of the past ate. Designs on pottery, carved wood, and baskets also display people's craft skills and art styles.

Some middens are ancient, such as one found in Rome—a 150-foot-tall grassy hill almost a mile in circumference. This is the ancient world's biggest garbage dump, used for more than 250 years starting in the first century AD. It mainly contains Roman amphoras, the jugs widely used in shipping ancient Roman products. Most of the ones in this midden—perhaps 25 million of them—held olive oil. Archaeologists are studying these remains to understand how food was produced and distributed in ancient Rome.

Most people no longer keep a trash heap by the kitchen door. Instead, garbage is hauled off to landfills. These modern landfills can still attract archaeologists, who see the giant piles of trash as a record of our recent history. The Garbage Project collected information from landfills from 1987 to 1995. Student archaeologists measured tons of material from 15 landfills across the United States and Canada. This garbology, the study of garbage, research led to a better understanding of how people have changed what they consume over recent decades. The findings also led to a better awareness of how quickly various items decay. This helped with city planning for garbage disposal and recycling efforts. So while most people assume archaeology is the study of the ancient past, archaeologists may be equally interested in recent decades.

Some found objects may clearly be of archaeological interest, such as arrowheads and spear points. It is typically against the law to collect these on public lands, so they should be left in place. If you take a photo and note the location, you can notify the proper authorities of the find. Contact the state archaeologist or the government branch that is in charge of the land, such as the National Park Service or the Bureau of Land Management.

The average person may not recognize other ancient items. Most cannot tell the difference between recent and ancient bones. Historical objects made of metal, glass, or brick may also be of archaeological interest. The average citizen might find it difficult to determine whether a rusty tin can is old enough to be considered historic. For this reason, it is best to leave old trash in place. (Of course, you should always

clean up your own modern trash. It is also safe to clean up anything clearly recent, such as a shiny, new soda can or candy wrapper.)

Several laws protect archaeological sites on federal land. State laws may also clarify what is considered an archaeological object in that state. Those wanting to learn more can contact their state archaeologist.

Archaeological sites found on private property are subject to fewer laws. In such cases, protecting and studying valuable archaeological sites may be dependent on the property owner's willingness to notify authorities and to allow access.

Everyone is responsible for protecting archaeological resources, which is a concept known as "archaeological stewardship." Sometimes this even means protecting old garbage.

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. disposal
2. sentiment
3. archaeological
4. midden
5. amphoras
6. decay
7. clarify
8. stewardship

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "If you're hiking and you spot a rusty old can, you may be tempted to pick it up for proper **disposal**."

- a. examination b. cleaning; washing c. removal; act of discarding d. use; development

2) "While that **sentiment** is worthy of admiration"

- a. layers of dirt b. thought; idea c. old items; relics d. action

3) "Laws protect **archaeological** resources on public lands"

- a. commonly owned b. lost c. geological d. relating to the study of civilizations

4) "A favorite site for study is a **midden**, an old trash or garbage heap."

- a. trash pile; dump b. sleeping place c. kitchen; cooking area d. ancient tombs

5) "It mainly contains Roman **amphoras**, the jugs widely used in shipping ancient Roman products."

- a. jeweled plates b. jugs c. stone theaters d. Roman products

6) "The findings also led to a better awareness of how quickly various items **decay**."

- a. increase in value b. move; shift c. became useful d. break down; rot

7) "State laws may also **clarify** what is considered an archaeological object in that state."

- a. punish b. place a value on c. make clear; give specifics d. nullify; void

8) Everyone is responsible for protecting archaeological resources, which is a concept known as "archaeological **stewardship**."

- a. protection; guardianship b. hardship; disability c. governance d. sailing