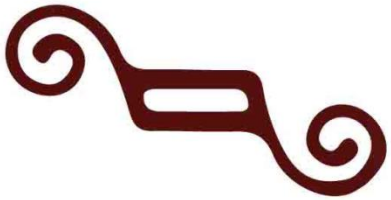
UTE TRAILS OF THE UNCOMPAHGRE PLATEAU: SPRING CREEK SECTION MONTROSE AND OURAY COUNTIES, COLORADO



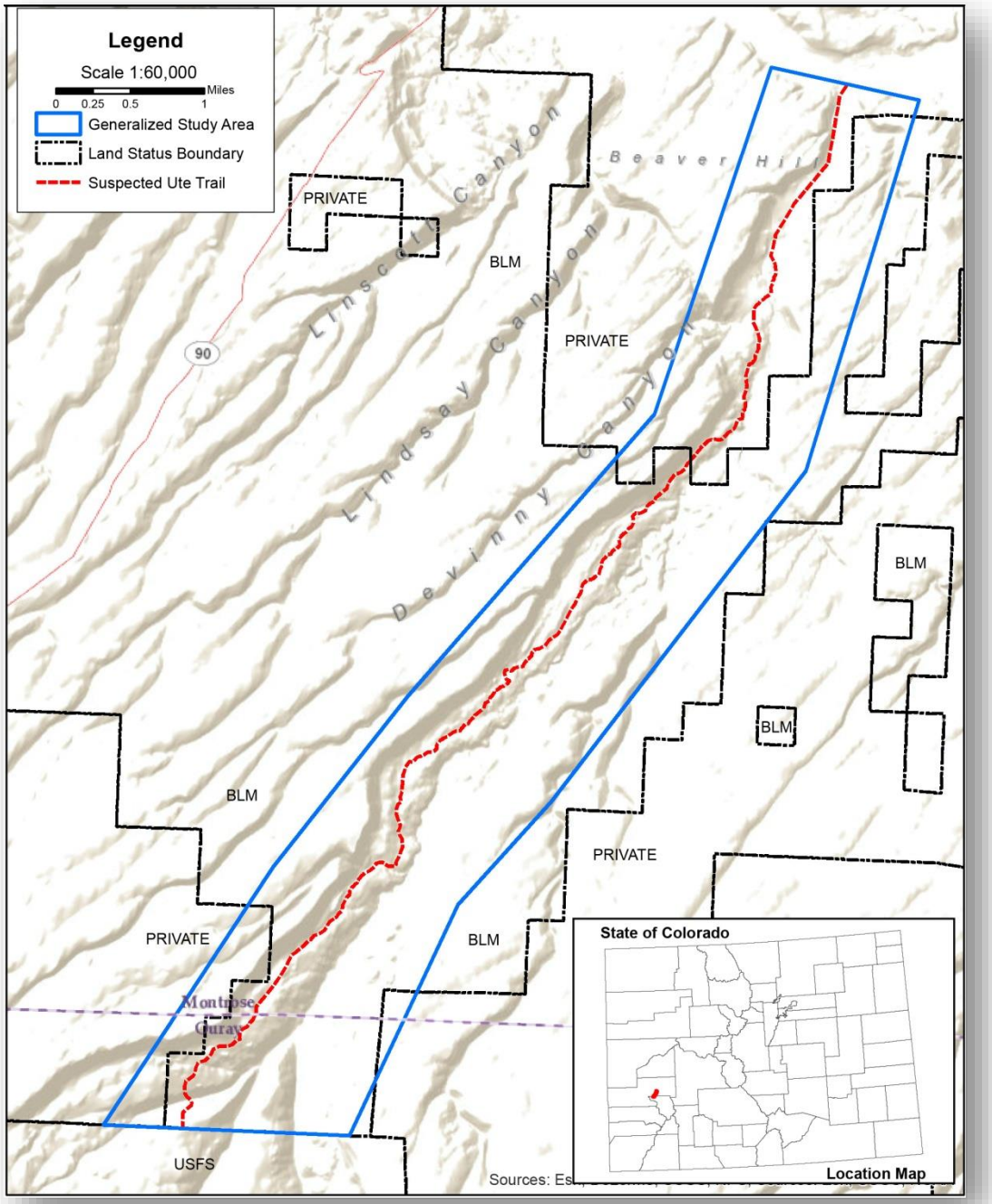
D A R G

Dominquez Archaeological Research Group

This presentation was derived from a project report prepared for a State Historical Fund Grant (SHF #2017-01-049) called Ute Trails Of The Uncompahgre Plateau: Spring Creek Section. We would like to acknowledge not only the support of History Colorado, but also that of the Bureau of Land Management's Uncompahgre Field Office and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service's District Office for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests.

This project examined the prehistoric and historic cultural landscape associated with Spring Creek Canyon by compiling baseline data from archaeological, ethnographic and ethnohistorical records of the eastern slope of the Uncompahgre Plateau, examining curated artifact collections, and conducting a reconnaissance survey that included site-revisits and new recordings. This information is being used in research goals that emphasize the identification and interpretation of regional patterns in prehistoric chronology and settlement, mobility and trade, and resource use and technology.

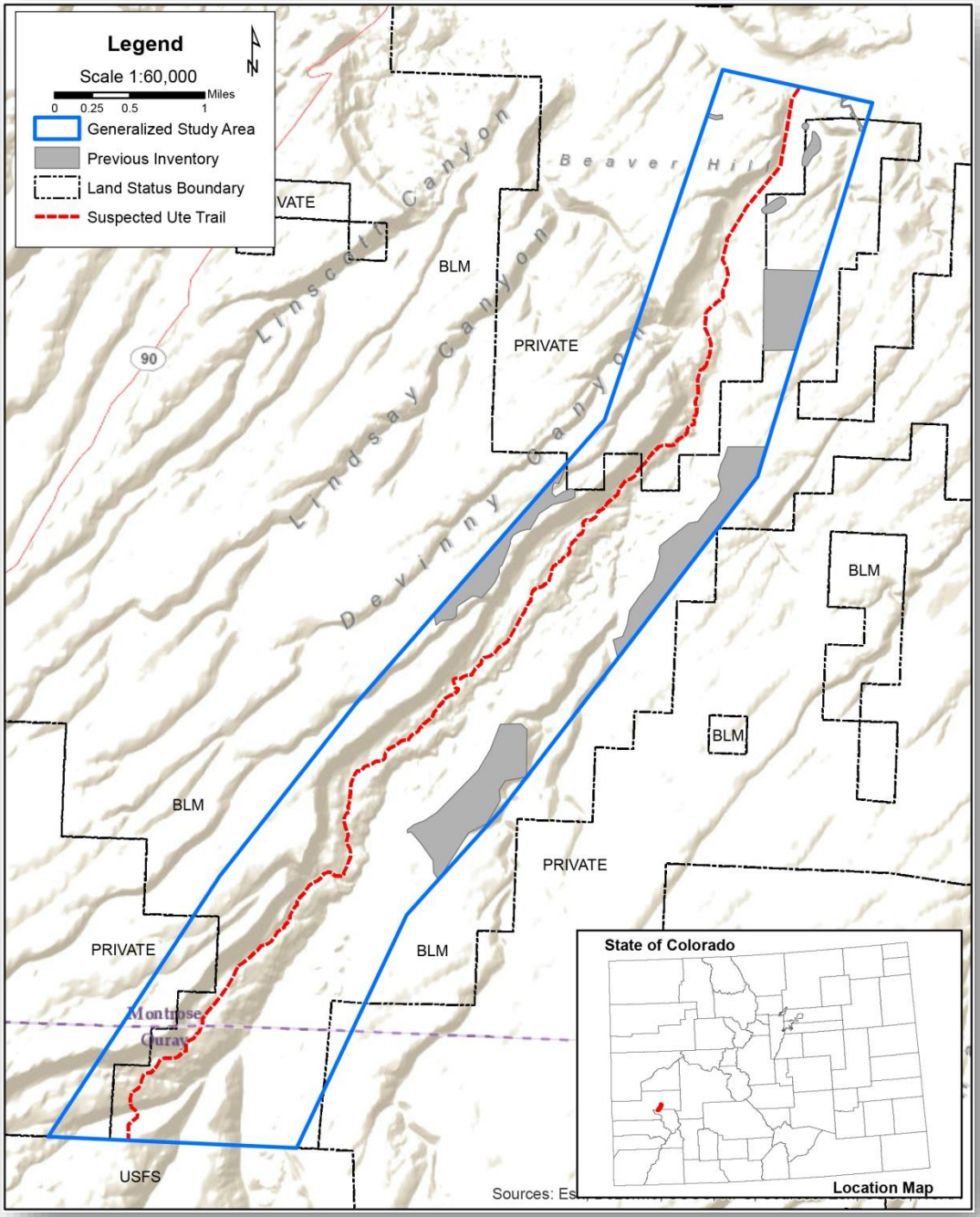
Spring Creek Canyon was selected for the study area because of its location on the Southern Uncompahgre Plateau, it had not been previously inventoried, and it had recently been selected for creation of a walking and bike trail recreation area. As well, the Dominguez and Escalante Trail was suspected to be in its vicinity, but its location had not been established. (Notably, only federal lands were examined in a reconnaissance survey.)



Files Search

Our searches for previous information about Spring Creek Canyon and adjacent areas was carried out using a spatial query of the OAHP Compass database, and conducting a files search at the BLM Uncompahgre Field Office. From these we collected information about projects and cultural resources within and nearby the present inventory boundary. We extended that research to construct a database of prehistoric and historic Native American sites for the Eastern Uncompahgre Plateau to examine a expected site/isolated find density and distribution for the region.

We also consulted the radiocarbon data that Michael Berry, PhD, has been compiling for all of Colorado. As well, for historical and trails information, archives research was conducted in which General Land Office (GLO) maps, other historic maps, census data, cemetery records, and newspapers were reviewed for documentation of the historic uses of the area.

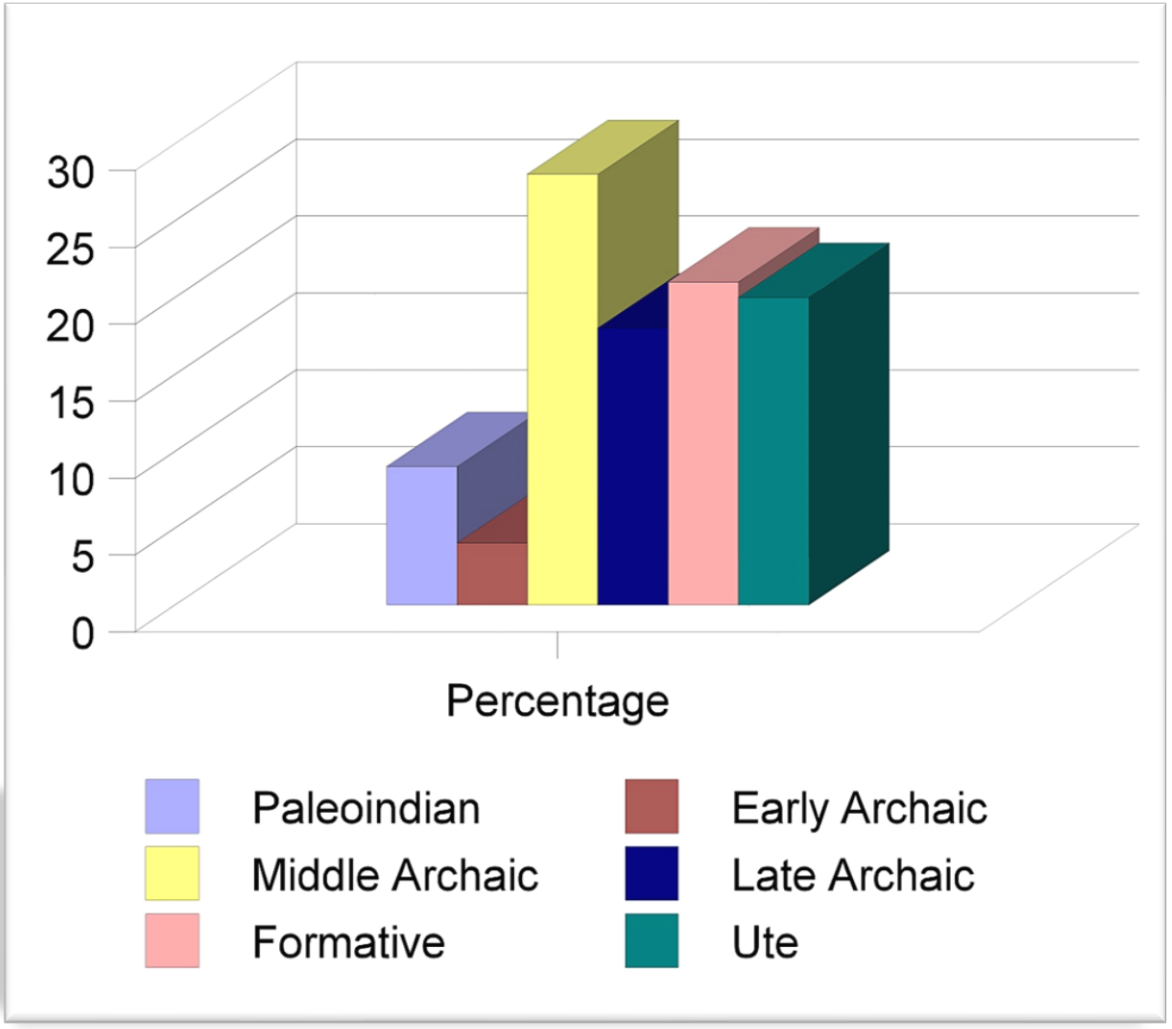


The files search indicated that 560 acres, or about 9% of the general project area, had been inventoried at either the intensive or broad level for cultural resources, and, those inventories occurred over 15 years ago. Twenty-three sites and 21 isolated finds were identified within the present study boundary. This amounts to about 1 site per 24 acres and about 1 isolated find per 26 acres.

A comparison of that data was made with the sums of five other inventories conducted in the same environmental zone as the Spring Creek Canyon study area. Four were in the southeast portion of the Plateau and one was conducted north of the town of Nucla in the southwest portion of the Plateau. Combining the numbers of resources and acres inventoried of those produced an average site per acre ratio of 1/25 within the Upper Sonoran vegetation zone, which is statistically the same.

In examining the types of sites documented, the record becomes muddled for the open lithic and open camp types because they have been variously interpreted by the recording archaeologist(s). As well, through time and experience, the same archaeologist may find new characteristics that separate the two categories, so it is best to combine data of those two types. Sheltered camps, open architectural sites and rock art are categories that seem somewhat easier to quantify because of existing attributes. However, like any conclusions drawn about an archaeological site, archaeologists are limited by what remains to determine its “type” and function.

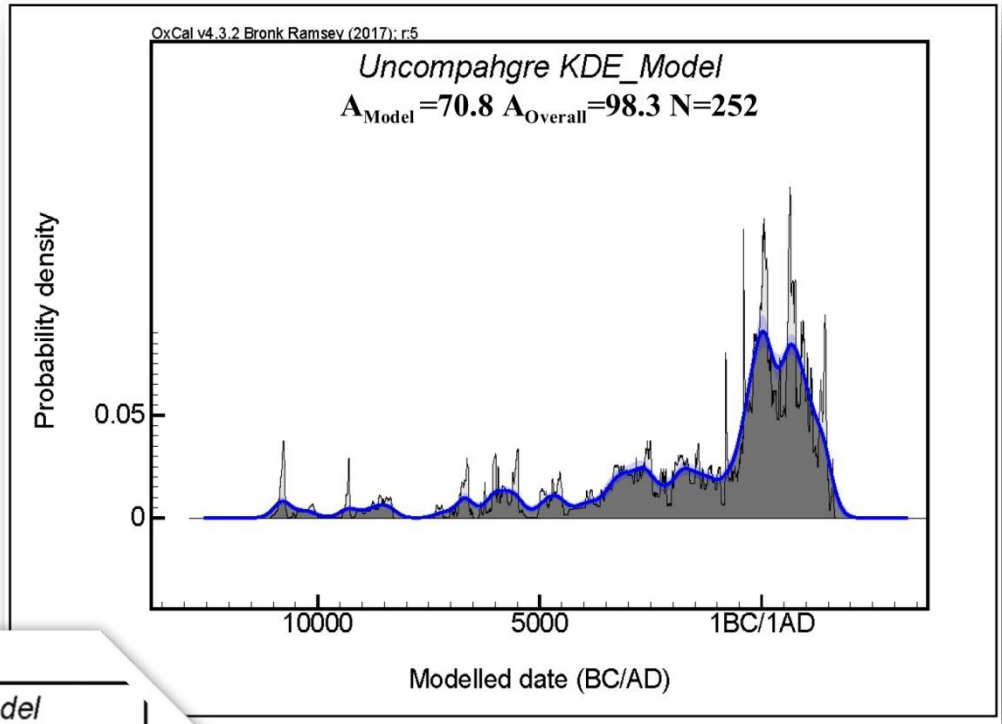
To take a step further we reviewed the numbers and types of projectile points from each of the those five projects to determine temporal distributions. One hundred seventy-seven projectile points were collected during the five inventories (curated at the Canyons of the Ancients Museum, Dolores) and reviewed for this project. The percentages of the various point types collected are shown here.

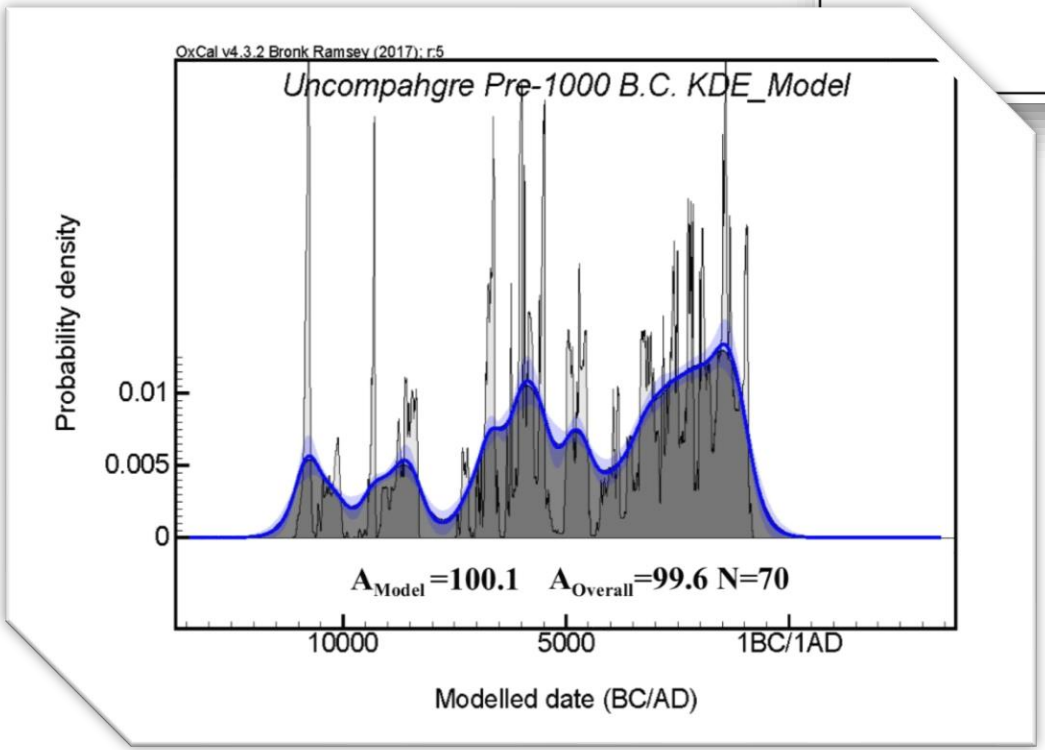


The assigned temporal associations for these points, which were surface collected, seem relatively evenly distributed for the past 3200 years (encompassing the Late Archaic, Formative, and Ute periods). A marked increased is apparent for the Middle Archaic types (ca. 3600-1200 BC), then a significant drop in the numbers for the Early Archaic types (ca. 5400- 3600 BC). The Paleoarchaic period is not represented. Paleoindian points exhibit a relatively high number, but it is notable that the types present have been variously categorized as Foothill-Mountain, Late Paleoindian (James Allan, Lusk, Frederick), and Pryor Stemmed, which taken together represent a period of about 3000 years (ca 9600-6500 BC). The most frequently classified Paleoindian types, however, are James Allan and Pryor Stemmed. These points have temporal associations of 9,350–7,900 BP [ca. 8500-7730 BC] – excluding the Fourth of July site (Pitblado 2003:112) – for the former, and 8,450–7,800 BP [ca. 7530-6620 BC] (ibid.:120) for the latter. Except for the category of Foothill-Mountain that has a relatively long temporal association, Early and Middle Paleoindian points were not recorded during the five inventories.

We also consulted Michael Berry's radiocarbon database, *dargnet.org/net/RCGraph*. He had recently completed *The Uncompahgre Plateau Project: Projectile Point Typology and Chronometry (State Historical Fund Project* #2018-02-035), which brought together 247 dates from the whole of the Uncompahgre Plateau *and the* processing of an additional 41 radiocarbon samples from the Buckles' collection (held by the Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center). Berry's analyses of the radiocarbon data employed Bayesian theorem and frequentist methods combined with kernal density estimation modeling (KDE Model) for his chronometric interpretations (Berry 2019:48). The importance of his analyses is established in the narrowing the temporal distribution of calibrated radiocarbon dates for the Plateau and the identification of high points in the record of regional prehistoric occupation.

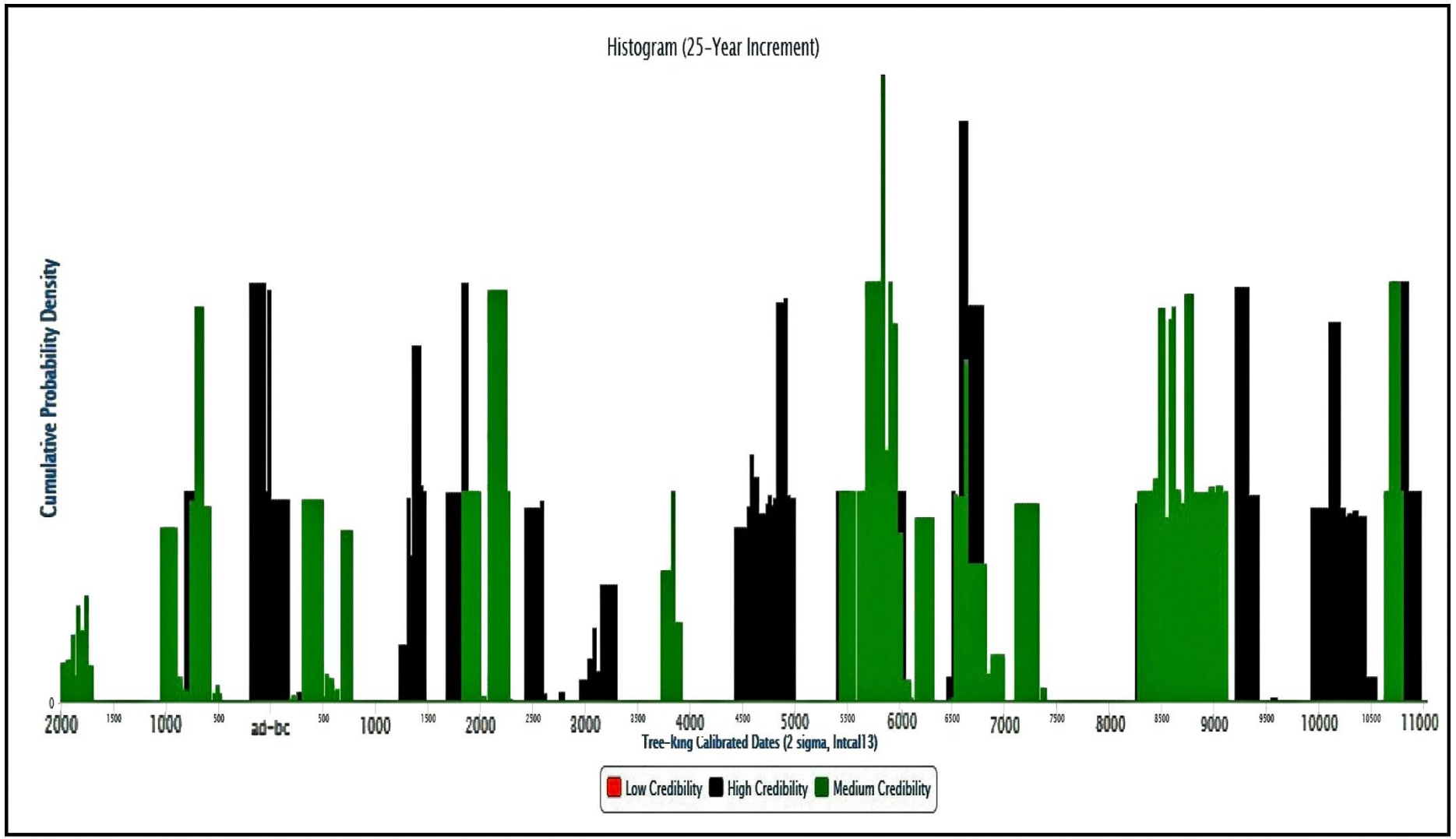
KDE models for the overall data set for the Uncompahgre Plateau (right) and one focused on the pre-1000 BC data (below) are presented in these figures (from Berry 2019, Figures 19 and 20, pp. 49 and 50). The blue lines reflect the KDE smoothing function, and





the thickness of the blue line represents the one-sigma error level. The post-1000 BC era displays two probability peaks: 1 AD and 750 AD; and, the pre-1000 BC era exhibits five peaks: 10,750 BC, 9000 BC, 6000 BC, 4750 BC and 1500 BC (ibid.)

Michael Berry also constructed a histogram of the 14C dates from Eagle Rock Shelter (25yr increment), AD/BC format. Notable is the data gap at the shelter for the period AD1200-1700.



Study Findings

Utilization of the Spring Canyon bottom by Native Americans as one of the main trails to the higher elevations was examined through recording the spatial patterning of the material remains from prehistoric activity in relation to their topographic and other environmental settings.

To accomplish this objective, 1450 acres were examined in a reconnaissance survey that revisited five previously recorded resources and newly identified twenty-two prehistoric sites, one trail (historic/prehistoric), and nine prehistoric isolates. Notably these resources were not evenly distributed across the landscape. Although not allowed to show the exact site locations, the greatest number of sites occurs at the lower elevations of the study area – nearer the river valley bottomland.

To aid in the identification of the temporal associations of the sites, seventeen radiocarbon samples were secured and dated from thirteen sites within and near the study area and compared with data from the region. Interpreting the pattern of settlement/subsistence of a particular group is dependant on the accurate documentation of artifact assemblages and radiocarbon dating. This was done in an effort to further define the temporal distribution of the sites along the east slope of the Uncompahgre Plateau. Sites exhibiting single components (or few components), and preferably containing diagnostic projectile points, were selected.

Dates derived from the thirteen sites ranged from the Middle Archaic through Historic Numic occupations. Three distinct clusters occur during the early Formative (or Late Archaic) ca. 200 BC to AD 300; the Middle Formative, ca. 600-1000 AD; and, the Early Numic period, ca. AD 1250-1640. The majority of the carbon dates fall within the pattern of occupations exhibited in the graphic for the Eagle Rock Shelter. However, the date spread related to the early Numic (Ute) occupation is not represented at the Shelter, which is probably directly related to the lifeway of these people.

The creek within the canyon is a permanent water source, so the expected prehistoric site type in the canyon was “base” camp; however, the types recorded within the middle and upper canyon locals closely resemble those on the surrounding mesa tops in that they are more indicative of camps occupied for short-terms as resource procurement and processing localities. The lower canyon near the mouth was not part of the survey area.

Twelve of the sites had metates in their artifact assemblage, which would imply seed/plant processing or preparation. Others included manos that could have been tasked to either grinding or butchering/hide-processing activities. Butchering tools – large utilized flakes of local materials – were common, and suggestive of hunting and animal processing. Few exhibited tool refurbishing – those that did were temporally assigned to the Numic and Foothill Mountain Paleoindian periods, and may be indicative of a pattern of high residential mobility and use of those camps as a base for all their activities.

Importantly, those dates were secured primarily from surface exposures of carbon. This project has demonstrated that radiocarbon (AMS) samples can be obtained from surface exposures and produce reliable dates from small pieces of carbon. The turn-around times and the costs for dating such samples have been greatly reduced. Considering the limited impact to sites and the considerable research value in obtaining and processing the carbon, the preservation of this data should be paramount in the research designs of future studies. Radiocarbon dating of the camps (and not comparative diagnostic analysis) is the only way to accurately determine the distribution of various cultural groups' activities and thus glean some idea of their purpose.

The location of the small camps within the winter range of the mule deer is probably the most important variable affecting site density and distribution. For nearly five months out of the year, between November and April (which is also the most likely time of food stress for prehistoric human populations), the mule deer are generally found between 6,000 and 9,000 feet in elevation, depending upon the severity of the winter (BLM 1978: Map 2-8). However, it is the *behavior of the mule deer, not just their presence, which has the most profound impact* on prehistoric human behavior in terms of site type, distribution, and location.

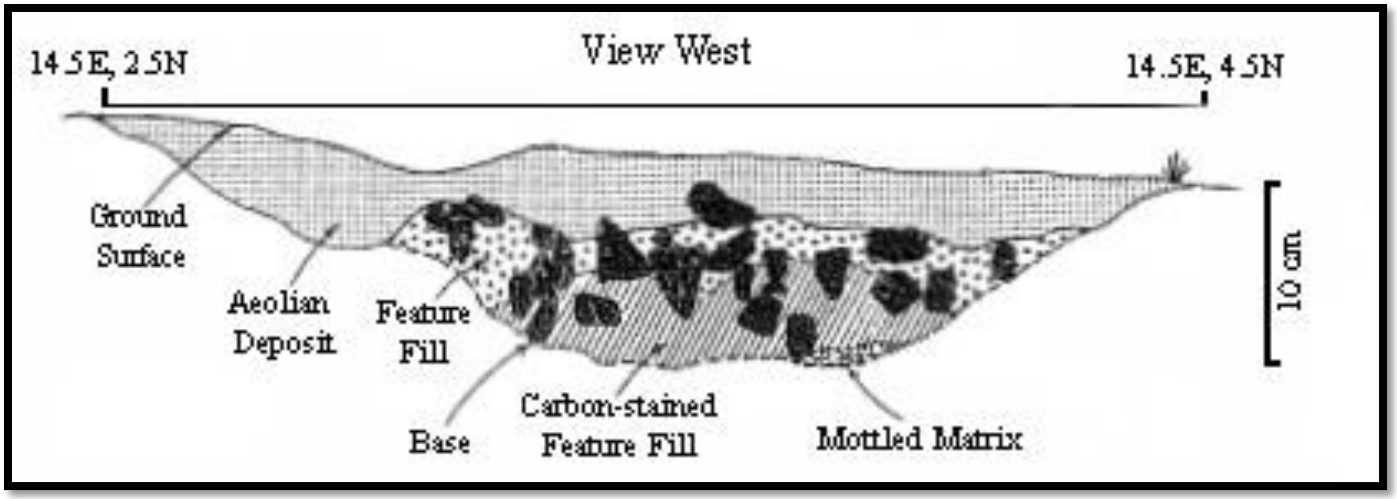
Specific deer populations utilize the same winter range season after season, for generations. The movement between winter and summer ranges is generally slow and casual with the actual migration routes spread out and poorly defined in gentle and open terrain. However, where the terrain is rugged, the migration routes tend to be well defined and able to support high concentrations of deer, which may congregate in groups of 40 to 50 during the fall rut. South-facing slopes with pinyon-juniper, sage and some mountain shrub are preferred. Juniper berries are a favorite autumn food.

Thermal Features

Thermal features were found on nearly all the sites encountered. Types identified during the study include slab-lined, shallow rock-filled, shallow surface, and large surface distributions of ash stained soil and fire-cracked rock. The AMS samples were from distinct thermal features: the Early/ Middle Archaic dates came from slab-lined features; the Late-Archaic/Early Formative and Middle Formative were from rock-filled features; and, the Early and Late Numic from shallow, surface features.

Two collapsed slab-lined features were dated from small pieces of charcoal eroding from their bottoms. Those features were built into the sides of small washes where dirt was soft and relatively deep for easy construction. Dates of 5700 and 3400 years old were obtained from those features. Although the walls exhibited fire alteration the charcoal amounts recovered suggested that the features were heated with low fuel amounts and used as ovens.

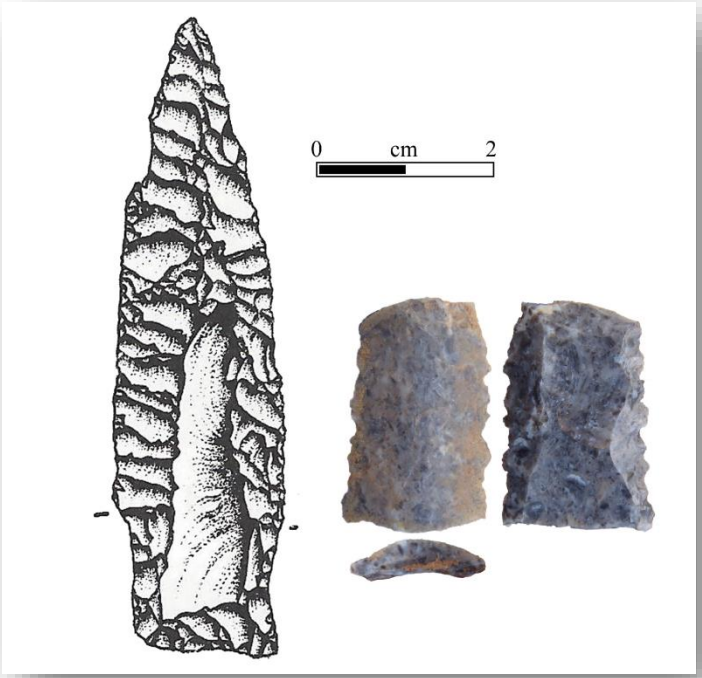
This feature was identified as a surface exposure of fire-altered sandstone. A small charcoal sample from the surface dated about 2000 years old. These thermal features are generally shallow (10-15cm deep) with a flat bottom and are rock-filled. Similar ones have been dated between 2000 and 1400 years old. They were likely multi-purpose features providing heat and used for roasting meat on the surface of the stones. A typical profile is shown below.



Projectile Points and Other Temporally Diagnostic Tools

Few projectile points were found during the survey and we had to rely on the previous collections from the area. As mentioned earlier the two most commonly found types of Paleoindian points are James Allen and Pryor stemmed. Several James Allen point fragments were found at site 5MN7419, Cluster 2 (recorded in 2003).

Along with them was a distinctive butchering or hide processing tool that is colloquially referred to as a "turtlebacked" scraper. The characteristics of this scraper are that it is roughly round, flat-bottomed, and has a distinct "head" or protrusion on the distal end. (Others may not have so pronounced a protrusion, but still exhibit a convex back.)

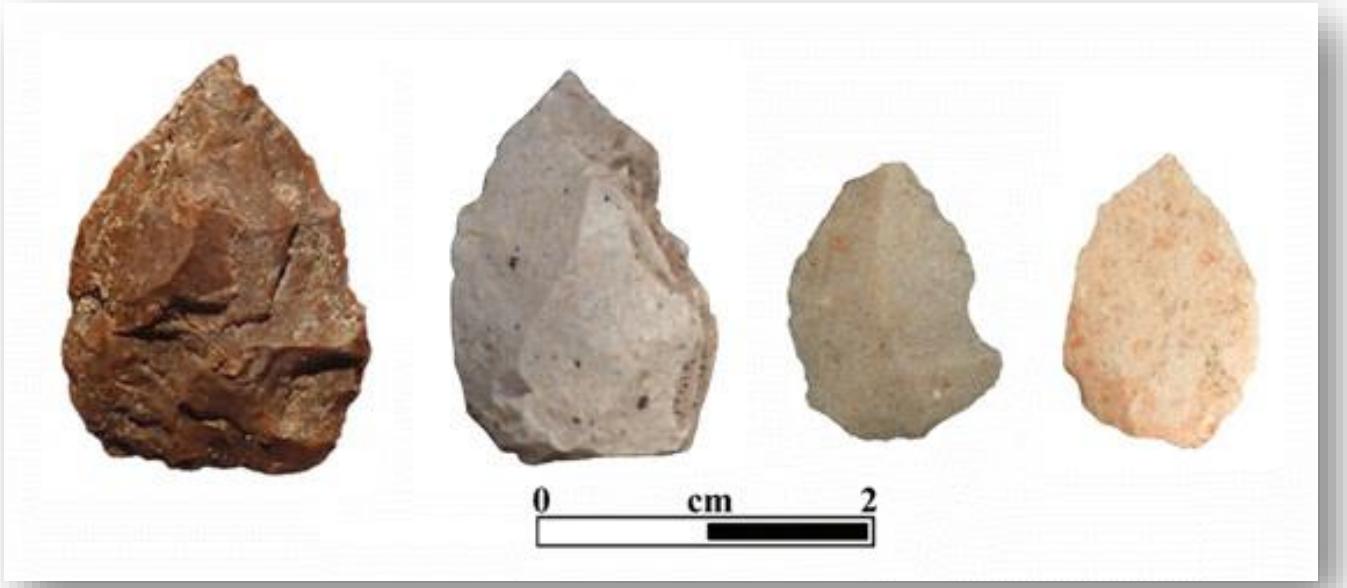


The other distinctive Paleoindian type commonly occurring regionally is the Pryor Stemmed projectile point. Shown is a mid-section -- with ventral, dorsal and cross-section views -- that was recorded at site 5ME22099/5MN10943 located on the northeastern Uncompahgre Plateau. Most notable is the distinctive longitudinal flake on the dorsal side. A recent inventory west of De Beque produced a complete one of this type with a longitudinal flake scar that extended through most of the point. A comparable point illustration was found in *Hunters of the High Plains (*Frison 1991:72, Fig. 2.35,d). The above point mid-section was found in association with the large butchering tools pictured to the right.

The proliferation in projectile point styles after the late Paleoindian era is not well understood. It is possible that this phenomenon is simply a byproduct of time. In other words, “the Archaic lasted a very long time and; thus, there was time for this variability to occur.” Alternatively, the multitude of point styles may be a result of decreased mobility. Decreased mobility inhibits the exchange of ideas- relative isolation would allow point forms to diverge(Reed and Metcalf 1999:83). To help resolve the issue of a “multitude of styles,” at least for the Uncompahgre Plateau, a review of the Uncompahgre Complex projectile point typology and chronometry has recently been undertaken by Michael Berry, Ph.D, a research associate of DARG. The review thus far included artifact assemblages that have been recovered through surface collection and excavation over the last eight decades, but mainly those of William Buckles whose work occurred during the late 1960s and that of the Eagle Rockshelter excavations conducted during the past 15 years. Berry’s research is ongoing, but significant findings have been made and presented in his work entitled *The Uncompahgre Plateau Project: Projectile Point Typology and Chronometry [SHF Project No. 2018-02-035] (Berry 2019). For the projectile points, he* employs a multi-variate cluster analysis based on nine variables, which “unequivocally groups the arrow points separate from the dart points.” Eight point types were identified with the majority dating within the Early and Middle Archaic periods (ibid.:43,66-67)

Another distinctive diagnostic is the Uinta Side-notched point recovered from 5MN6839 in an earlier inventory. It was found with a fragment of a loaf mano and a slab metate. A similar site was recorded as part of a serially occupied camping area located along Battlement Creek (5GF133), within the present Battlement Mesa Community (Conner and Langdon 1987). This point type is associated with the Uinta Fremont, is widely distributed over the northeastern part of Utah and has a temporal span of AD 800-1200 (Holmer and Weder 1980:60). At 5GF133, the point was recovered with three ceramic sherds, one black-on-white and two corrugated. They were analyzed by University of Colorado Museum personnel and were declared to be Tusayan types, culturally associated with the Kayenta Anasazi (Northern Arizona). The Tusayan Black-on-White ceramic was made in the Tsegi area of northern Arizona ca. AD 1225-1300.

Representing the Late Prehistoric period ca. AD 1300-1650 are Cottonwood style points that were found during recent projects on the Uncompahgre Plateau. These are unnotched styles. One is an expedient type simply constructed from a small flake (right two) and may have been made for a child's bow and arrow set (or used for hunting small mammals). The other (left two) is a type found primarily on the Uncompahgre Plateau. It is characterized as "backed" in that it has a raised portion on the dorsal side, which appears to be a hafting element. Both types are relatively short and ovate with convex blades.



The participants of this project have endeavored to accumulate, interpret and distribute accurate information concerning the past history of human occupation on the Uncompahgre Plateau. They have done so by assembling and using baseline data created by legacy research projects, cultural resource inventories, historic documents, and oral histories. New data was infused by additional inventory work, accumulation of new temporal data from radiocarbon sampling of local prehistoric sites, and synthetic analyses. That information was assembled and discussed in various parts of this report and made useful through creation of electronic database structures. Future research will be based on the assembled data. Present and future public distribution of this information and its implications will be part of established DARG processes and procedures that employ web-based internet sites, speeches to public and educational gatherings, and other types of presentations including museum displays.