

Jay von Werlhof's Trail of Dreams

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Abstract

Jay von Werlhof's contributions to archaeology were truly remarkable. Though primarily renowned for his research in the Colorado Desert, his rock art studies are important not just for what they have told us about petroglyphs and especially geoglyphs, but because of the way that he approached archaeological interpretation using ethnographic information and Native American commentary. His many contributions are reviewed here, illustrating both the scientific and humanistic significance of his archaeological career.

Introduction

"Leadership and learning are indispensable to one another," John F. Kennedy once said, and few archaeologists exemplified these related abilities better than Jay von Werlhof. Jay led by deed and example, motivated not by an interest in fame or monetary reward, but by curiosity and the desire for knowledge. This allowed him to investigate topics that few of his colleagues valued at that time (Whitley 2001)—art, religion and spirituality—which he addressed from the archaeological perspective of rock art. As a result of Jay's early commitment to these topics, I have frequently found myself following in his footsteps in my career, whether working in eastern California, the southern Sierra Nevada, the Carrizo Plain, or the Colorado Desert. Almost invariably, his original site records, manuscripts, and publications have been the starting points for my own studies.

Jay's contributions include much more than simply foundational descriptive research in numerous regions. Perhaps more important was his methodological advance. In hindsight this seems both obvious and straightforward. Often, however, the most profound

discoveries are only obvious once they have been revealed by someone looking beyond the normal boundaries, seeing what everyone else has missed. Jay's advance involves the ethnographic approach to rock art research—the use of Native American commentary to understand the origin and meaning of the art. It might surprise non-archaeologists that this would constitute a methodological step forward. Isn't it obvious that Native Americans have information about their heritage and that asking them about it would be the best way to conduct research?

Archaeologists in fact largely ignored Native Americans for much of the twentieth century, for a variety of social and historical reasons (Whitley and Whitley 2012; Whitley 2013). Perhaps the most common argument against consulting the ethnographic record, let alone contemporary Native Americans, involved chronology. Archaeologists were certain that rock art was older than the existing tribes (e.g., Heizer and Baumhoff 1962; Grant 1968), making ethnography irrelevant to its study—or so they claimed. Yet, as subject matter in the art (Figure 1), chronometrics, and the ethnographic commentary itself all demonstrate (Whitley 2000), this opinion is simply false. It was based not on empirical facts but instead reflects a larger social and historical phenomenon, the "silencing of the Native American voice" (Round 2008). Like the rest of American society, archaeologists were guilty of disregarding the Native American perspective for social more than empirical reasons.

Jay's contribution was then the recognition that Native American ethnography is critical to understanding



Figure 1. Horse and rider with bow and arrow; Coso Range. Photo by David S. Whitley.

their past, although he was not the only archaeologist to arrive at this conclusion. At roughly the same time, Boma Johnson, Travis Hudson, Ken Hedges and I, in California, also became aware of this fact, as did certain archaeologists in South Africa. But Jay was certainly the elder statesman for this change in analytical perspective, and those of us utilizing ethnographic approaches stand on his shoulders.

In the following I discuss three kinds of rock art that Jay studied and what Native American information, in the form of direct testimony and reasonable inference, tells us about the origin and meaning of this art. In some cases this consists of a summary of Jay's own research; in others, I move beyond the point where his research ended. But the sum of the discussions is a view of how much we truly can understand about rock art once we are willing to accommodate the Native American voice in our study of it.

Colorado River Intaglios

The Colorado River Valley intaglios, or geoglyphs, are large images that have been scraped into the desert pavement, often on river terraces. Many of these designs are massive in size, as much as 50–60 ft (15–18 m) in maximum dimension. A common motif at many

of the sites is one or more large, stick-figure anthropomorphs, accompanied by other cleared spaces and rock features (Figure 2). Similar to the more famous Nazca Lines of Peru, the Colorado River intaglios have also generated wild speculations about aliens and outer space connections. But what in fact do they represent, and why were they created?

The longstanding enigma of the Colorado River intaglios was solved by Jay in a book he published in 2004, based on his discussions with Joe Homer, Preston Arrowweed, Lorey Cachora, and other local Native American consultants (von Werlhof 2004; see also von Werlhof 1995; von Werlhof et al. 1995). The book is small in size, resulting from repeated parings to eliminate (as Jay once told me) all extraneous matter, until he had distilled the key information down to essential elements. Size, however, is no indication of importance. This short work is perhaps the most insightful book that has been written on North American rock art.

As Jay's tribal consultants informed him, the intaglios are at the locations of important mythic events. They depict the actors and occurrences linked to those locations, and many of the sites have associated ritual trails and dance areas (see also Johnson 2007).

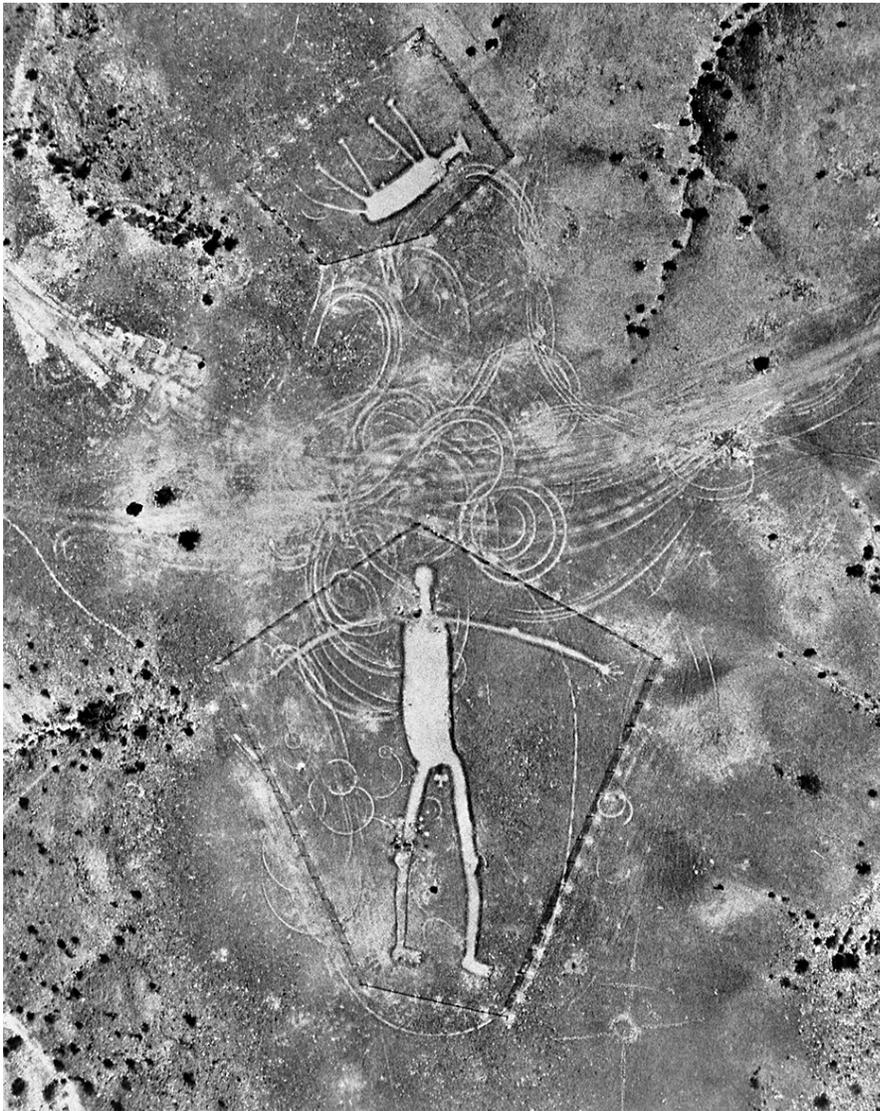


Figure 2. The Blythe intaglios, showing Kumastamho and his mountain lion spirit helper. Photo by and courtesy of Harry Casey.

Perhaps the most important of such trails is known as *Xam Kwatca'n*, from whence the tribal name Quechan (*kwatca'n*) is derived. *Xam Kwatca'n* translates as “another going down,” referring to the route of the creation story (Forde 1931:88). The trail follows the culture hero Kumastamho, the primary mythic character and most commonly depicted image in the intaglios, as he traveled south from the origin point at *Avikwa'ame* (Newberry Peak or Spirit Mountain) to *Avikwal*, the Land of the Dead, where he performed the first mourning ceremony. Kumastamho created the

Colorado River Valley and its various tribes during this journey.

The *Xam Kwatca'n* trail was and continues to be used as a ritual pilgrimage route that follows and commemorates the creation. Led by a shaman, groups of supplicants stop at each of the locations of described creation events for singing, dancing, and ceremonial purification as they follow Kumastamho's trail across the landscape. Many of the intaglio sites, like Black Point (Figure 3), depict this most important mythic

actor (Johnson 2007), sometimes with his twin or his spirit helper, with cleared circles and trails within the sites used for dances, and with rock cairns.

The Colorado River intaglios and related ritual sites then delineate the creation landscape of the local Quechan and Mohave tribes. The symbolism and use of these sites emphasize the close connection that these tribes maintained between mythology and ritual—a relationship that is characteristic of the Colorado River region (Kroeber 1925), but not necessarily present among other Native California groups (like the Numic-speaking Paiute and Shoshone to the north). Quechan and Mohave ceremonies, in a fashion that is analogous to Judeo-Christian ceremonies, were reenactments and commemorations of mythic events. (The Catholic Sunday Mass, for example, is a ritual reenactment of the Last Supper.) The *Xam Kwatca'n* pilgrimage can be understood as similar to the Catholic Stations of the Cross ceremony, though conducted

across the landscape and at the specific locations of each event in their creation story.

Colorado Desert Petroglyphs

The close connection between myth and ritual that characterizes the Colorado River region tribes, revealed by Jay's 2004 book, is further illustrated by the petroglyphs in this same area. These appear to have been made in at least two contexts. The first involves a concentration of large rock art sites around the base of *Avikwa'ame*. Unlike the intaglios, the art at these sites is almost entirely geometric in nature (Figure 4). How then are the petroglyphs related to mythology and to the intaglios?

The available ethnographic information on Colorado River region petroglyphs is not as complete as the data Jay was able to collect concerning the intaglios, but enough has been recorded to provide, in combination

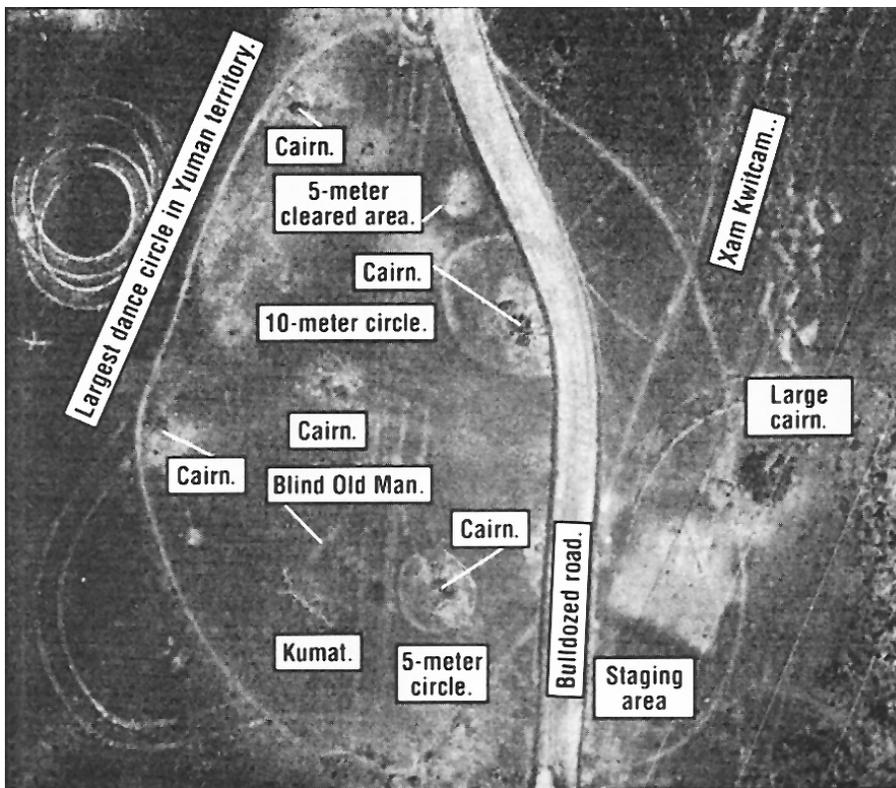


Figure 3. Jay von Werlhof's 2004 monograph included detailed interpretations of the archaeological features at a series of sites, such as Black Point, shown here. Figure from von Werlhof 2004; original air photo by Harry Casey.



Figure 4. *Avikwa'ame* (Spirit Mountain, or Newberry Peak) is the mythic home of Kumastamho and the location where shamans conducted vision quests. The resulting petroglyphs are predominantly geometric, as are these examples. Photo by David S. Whitley.

with a few reasonable inferences, an understanding of the meaning and symbolism of the motifs. First, shamans received their supernatural power in a prenatal “dream” (i.e., a vision) of the mythic creation of the world, which was actuated later in life by a vision quest. During that dream/vision quest, the shaman was thought to reexperience the creation of the world, obtaining his power and a ritual song describing this event directly from Kumastamho (Kroeber 1907:329–330, 1925; Laird 1976:46). It appears likely, next, that shamanic vision questing would be associated with *Avikwa'ame*, given the connection between myth and ritual in the region and the role of this mountain both in the creation story (e.g., Forde 1931:201) and as Kumastamho's residence (Harrington ca. 1906–1915). The power song obtained by the shaman during his vision quest, third, was the creation story; indeed, this etiological myth was so closely associated with shamans that it was referred to as the “shaman's tale” (Kroeber 1925:771). Fourth, the song itself was not a narrative recitation of the sequence of creation events. As Forde (1931:127) instead noted, “The songs consist of a few disconnected words taken from the subject matter of the legend and is [sic] often mean-

ingless apart from its context.” This last circumstance resulted, as Devereux (1957:1038–1041) and Kroeber (1957:231) observed, because the song was intended to communicate the “pattern” or “essence” of the creation myth—the details of which everyone already knew and did not require repeating.

Instead of a narrative sequence of events, as portrayed by the iconic imagery of the intaglios along the *Xam Kwatca'an* trail, the shaman's tale was more like a depiction of the Big Bang, or perhaps similar to the Hindu word *Om*, the “sound of creation.” It follows that the concentration of geometric petroglyphs around the base of *Avikwa'ame* can be interpreted similarly as shamanic representations of the essence or pattern of the creation. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the geometric motifs correspond to variations on entoptic images, the geometric light patterns that are generated in the human neural and optical systems during visions (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988).

This suggests that shamans made and used two very different kinds of rock art: intaglios and petroglyphs, one emphasizing iconic motifs and a narrative

sequence of event and the other illustrating an abstracted symbolic representation of that same mythic event. Yet, at least a third kind of rock art is also present in the Colorado Desert region, again petroglyphs but in this case rock art made by male puberty initiates.

Boys were sent on a lengthy “spirit run” through the desert, following the “Trail of Dreams” (Figure 5) as part of their initiation into adulthood. The boys were initially tasked with helping to maintain this trail by clearing it across the desert pavement, tamping its surface down with logs, and sprinkling broken quartz along its sides—so that the path could be seen easily at night as they conducted their run. One purpose of the subsequent spirit run was to induce a dream (vision), thereby providing that individual with the supernatural power that was necessary for any kind of success in life. Another aim was to have the nasal septums pierced for a nose ornament, which was required to



Figure 5. The Trail of Dreams was used by young boys during a puberty initiation “spirit run” through the desert. White quartz was broken and scattered along the trail to assist running at night. Photo by David S. Whitley.

become a warrior and ultimately enter the land of the dead. This part of the initiation was conducted at the mythic location of the first septum piercing ceremony, which is marked by petroglyphs (Bourke 1889:115; Johnson 1985). Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these too are geometric (Figure 6), again illustrating the entoptic patterns that are characteristic of visionary imagery.

The Quechan and Mojave creation story, like all such stories, involves a specific sequence of events. This was commemorated with the *Xam Kwatca'n* ritual pilgrimage and its intaglios and other rock features. The creation for these tribes is also the source of supernatural power, similar to the Judeo-Christian concept of “grace.” Such power is necessarily a nonmaterial force, and a non-material force can only be depicted as an abstraction, as is shown in both the shamans’ and the boys’ petroglyphs. (In the Christian tradition the receipt of grace from the Holy Spirit is sometimes graphically depicted using a specific symbol—a small flame. Although the flame symbol has been culturally conventionalized, it too represents an abstraction, not a “real” flame.) The multiple ways that these Colorado River tribes illustrated the importance of and their



Figure 6. The nasal septum piercing ceremony was conducted as part of the boys’ puberty initiations, with petroglyphs created nearby. This example is from the Indian Pass region, along the Trail of Dreams. Photo by David S. Whitley.

relationship to their creation signals the complex and sophisticated nature of their metaphysical beliefs.

Mojave Desert Rock Structures

Jay's research interests extended north from the Colorado Desert to the petroglyphs, rock alignments (geoglyphs), and cairns of the northern Mojave Desert (von Werlhof 1965, 1987, 1995; see also Cervený et al. 2006). This region is occupied by the Numic-speaking Paiute and Shoshone. Unlike the Quechan and Mohave tribes to the south, there is little direct connection between mythology and ritual for Numic speakers (Whitley 2000). Although myths are certainly recognized as important, Numic rituals emphasize shamans' individual ceremonial acts, sometimes conducted alone or at other times in group settings. Numic rituals are also closely tied to the supernatural world, entered through a dream or visionary experience. However, the Numic supernatural world and the *poha* (or power) that was derived from it were not directly associated with the creation, or any other mythic events. The shaman, or *pohagunt* ('man having supernatural power'), obtained *poha* during a vision quest, often from an

animal spirit helper. Shamans inscribed depictions of their visionary experiences at petroglyph sites, *pohakanhi* ('houses of power'), the "foremost places of spirit revelation" (Hultkrantz 1987:52–53). Numic petroglyph sites, in other words, are shamans' vision quest locales (Lowie 1924; Park 1938; Shimkin 1953; Hultkrantz 1961, 1981, 1986, 1987:49, 53; Malouf 1974; Riddell 1978; Voget 1984; Liljeblad 1986:644; Fowler 1992; Carroll 2007:177, 202).

Jay's interest in rock alignments and cairns focused on an unusually large concentration of these features in the Panamint-Searles Valley region (Figure 7). Previous archaeological interpretations of rock cairns, alignments, rings, and talus pits have typically been hunting-related—"dummy hunters" and hunting blinds (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962; Grant 1968). Yet, evidence from across the far west indicates that the construction and use of rock structures occurred for a wide variety of purposes, including ritual and vision questing, not just for hunting or habitation (Whitley et al. 2004, 2007).

This last fact is especially well documented on the Columbia Plateau, where the ethnographic evidence



Figure 7. The Panamint Valley contains the largest known concentration of cairns and alignments in the Great Basin. This example of a cairn is in the Slate Range, immediately overlooking the Panamint Valley. Photo by David S. Whitley.

is detailed (e.g., Teit 1906, 1930; Steward 1936; Cline 1938; Caldwell and Carlson 1954; Chartkoff 1983; Buckley 1986; Keyser 1992; York et al. 1993). Rock alignments and cairns were and are possibly now being created in this region during individual vision quests. These were conducted by boys and girls at puberty, by shamans, and by non-shaman adults during life crises, such as the death of a spouse. The purpose was to complete a ritual act of physical exertion in combination with fasting, isolation, and meditation in the hopes of inducing an altered state of consciousness and thereby a vision. As noted previously (Whitley 2005; Whitley et al. 2007), the resulting rock features are not truly “art” in the sense that they typically lack iconographic systematization and have no specific referential meaning. They were constructed as instrumental actions—the process of building the features was an end, in and of itself—rather than for symbolic or communicative purposes. They are arrangements of rocks, not glyphs or motifs, and they may be conceptualized as analogous to cupules, the creation of which likewise occurred in a ritual context but without iconographic meaning. Importantly, although the rock structures were created during the vision quest ritual, they are not necessarily or even commonly located near rock art sites. This results from the fact that the vision quest was a ritual process that included the use of a variety of locales, involving movement across the landscape, conducted over a long time period.

Ethnographic data from Native California demonstrate that the Plateau pattern was widespread. Stacked rock cairns were created in south-central California by shamans during their vision quests (Gayton and Newman 1940:43; Applegate 1978:34), for example, whereas cairns were created by non-shamans seeking supernatural aid in the Colorado Desert (Patencio 1943:73; Bean et al. 1991:96). In both cases these features resulted from ceremonial, not “utilitarian,” activities, suggesting that the Panamint/Searles concentration might have a similar origin.

The size, physical setting, viewshed, associated artifacts (or lack thereof), and other factors in fact disqualify a utilitarian interpretation of many, probably most, of the rock constructions in the Panamint/Searles area where Jay worked. Archaeologically identified “hunting blinds,” for example, often lack a viewshed that would provide an adequate line of sight for a game ambush, and they do not have the kinds of associated artifacts, such as projectile points, that this use would imply. In other cases the rock features are in locations, such as open alluvial fans, unsuited for hunting. There are also dense but localized concentrations of rock features at some locations in this area. The Mirror Point site, for example, contains 110 rock features (31 percent cairns and 69 percent alignments) (La Pierre 2012). This is a number and density that cannot be reconciled with any practical function or explanation. The nature and context of these features suggest that, like on the plateau, they were produced by rituals (Miller 1983:72).

While habitation debris and other evidence demonstrates that many rock circles were used as simple house rings, recently collected ethnological research in the southwestern Great Basin has positively confirmed that some rock cairns, alignments, and stone rings are ritual constructions made during vision quests. At the Southern Paiute vision quest locality known as Buckboard Mesa in southern Nevada, the vistas themselves are important aspects of the ritual landscape, signaling the fact that high promontories in this region were also used for vision questing, along with rock art sites. Stoffle et al. note:

The vistas begin at the rim of a prominent place and there are rock cairns commemorating a successful vision. Large basaltic boulders (*Tu-ca-po-go-tub* in Northern Paiute) seem to be a place for information about the vision to be recorded. On the side of the boulders is a slight grinding slick where medicine plants were ground, apparently as part

of preparation before and/or after the vision [Stoffle et al. 2004:30].

An elaboration on the importance of rock cairns relative to vision questing was provided by another Southern Paiute consultant, quoted by Buttram:

“They came up here to do their spirit seeking. Have to be a group—the seeker needs helpers. There were no women in these camps. The rock piles are where they stayed to seek their vision/medicine. A person who received the medicine made the pile. The later ones would use the same piles. They have been reused for thousands of years” [Buttram 2006:unpaginated].

Mention here of “a group” appears to reference the possibility that a vision quester may have been accompanied by older shamans (Whitley et al. 2006). Regardless, the ritual use of cairns is confirmed by Zedeño et al. (2006), who noted not simply that cairns were part of vision quest sites but also that they served so that these sacred places could be seen from a distance. The association of petroglyphs with rock circles has also been cited as an indication that a site was used for vision questing by Northern Paiute (Carroll 2007:177) and Southern Paiute (Molenaar et al. 2011) consultants. This last group referred to these features as “fasting circles.”

What then can be said about the Panamint/Searles concentration of rock features that intrigued Jay? The first point is that with only an occasional exception the rock alignments exhibit little in the way of geometrical regularity (perhaps with the exception of simple lines). They do not represent an iconographic corpus in the sense of a recognizable, systematic, and coherent set of symbols or patterns, instead appearing to be instrumental rather than referential in intent. Like the Columbia Plateau rock structures, they were created as ritual actions rather than for ceremonial

communication, and a search for identifiable “motifs” in these rock structures is likely to be fruitless.

It is also especially important, secondly, that this unusual concentration of rock features is located adjacent to the largest corpus of petroglyphs in the Americas—the Coso Range area, which lies immediately to the west of the Panamint and Searles valleys. As noted above, Numic rock art was made by shamans during their vision quests. The combination of the concentration of rock structures in the Panamint/Searles area and the petroglyphs in the adjacent Cosos signals the fact that this region was a large ritual landscape. It thus has similarities with the Colorado River Valley to the southeast, but even though both landscapes were used by shamans, they reflect very different ritual practices and beliefs. This last circumstance emphasizes the great variability of shamanistic religions, even ones practiced by immediately adjacent tribes.

Jay's Trail of Dreams

Understanding rock art benefits not simply from but requires the use of ethnographic information, and Jay was an early proponent and practitioner of this fact. He fully recognized the need to involve Native American knowledge and beliefs in archaeological interpretation and also in the larger archaeological process. This was most clearly illustrated by his involvement with cultural resource management. In his efforts to preserve sites, Jay saw beyond the research values of the archaeological record, important though those may be, to its heritage and spiritual significance for the tribes. He was not simply an archaeologist but also an active advocate for the protection of their sacred sites.

This last circumstance was perhaps best illustrated by the Glamis Gold Mine case, during which he served as an expert witness for the Quechan (Cleland 2007). The proposed mine would have resulted in the destruction of the Trail of Dreams and one of its main ritual foci at Indian Pass. This location contains a remarkable

concentration of petroglyphs, dance circles and other ceremonial structures (Figure 8), and it may have been used for the boys' nasal septum piercing ceremony. After an initial project denial by the Bureau of Land Management, the foreign mining firm sued the U.S. State Department, alleging violation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Along with the tribes and a series of other local archaeologists, Jay fought the project. Remarkably, the litigation was resolved in favor of the preservation of sacred sites, demonstrating that in some cases dreams are more important than gold.

Throughout his career Jay both recognized and lived by this fact. His contributions as an archaeologist are a testimony to his belief that archaeology involves



Figure 8. The Indian Pass region contains an important ceremonial complex which includes a series of dance circles and other features, in addition to the Trail of Dreams and petroglyphs. Jay von Werlhof was instrumental in having this location preserved. Photo by David S. Whitley.

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people, dead and still living, not just artifacts and sites. As a profession, we have been slow, but not entirely unwilling, to learn this fundamental lesson. But archaeological practice is guaranteed to improve, as Jay's career message becomes more ingrained in our approach to our work.

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