

PaleoIndian Lifeways: Questioning Assumptions

Speaker: Dr. John D. Speth, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan

Host Department: Museum of Anthropological Archaeology

Date: 11/05/2015

Time: 12:00 pm

Location: Room 2009 Ruthven Museums Building

Description:

This talk will question some of the basic assumptions that have achieved near-gospel status in the interpretations of North American Paleoindian lifeways. Included among these are the view that: (1) High-quality flint was essential to successful Paleoindian big-game hunting, and its procurement was almost invariably embedded in the annual subsistence round; (2) Paleoindians occupied annual foraging ranges that not uncommonly approached the size of US States; (3) Paleoindian communal bison drives were motivated first and foremost by subsistence needs; and (4) Paleoindian bifaces represent a technological response to the need for light-weight, functionally flexible tools in the context of high mobility and uncertainty in the availability of high-quality raw material. This presentation in no way represents an attack on those who originally developed these ideas. Quite the contrary; when new, these were brilliant insights into Paleoindian lifeways that stimulated a great deal of creative thinking and productive research. The problem comes twenty or more years later when others treat these same ideas as established fact, as conventional wisdom that lies beyond scrutiny or question. This presentation will look at some of these assumptions and the conclusions drawn from them, both to highlight ways in which they may be fundamentally flawed and to suggest alternative perspectives that may prove more productive.