

Prehistoric life at Lake Abert

By Helen Schmidling
Correspondent

Lake Abert, our state's only salt-water lake, is hardly capable of supporting a human community these days. But Dr. Richard M. Pettigrew of Eugene claims archaeological evidence that human occupation of the lake's margins was once extensive.

Pettigrew says, "Concentrations of prehistoric habitation sites around the lake, on terraces at different elevations, suggest that ancestral Native American hunter-gatherers were able to support surprisingly large populations from the immediately available biotic resources."

This evidence implies that the ecosystem of the lake and the area around it were significantly more productive at a time pre-dating the 19th century. A reasonable hypothesis is that during the Holocene, the lake was relatively fresh and deep, compared to its current condition, and supported a diverse and sizeable biotic population. In other words, enough fresh water, plants, and fish for humans to occupy the region.

Dr. Pettigrew is president and executive director of the Archaeological Legacy Institute. He will speak on the evidence for prehistoric human use of Lake Abert, and its ecosystem implications, at a symposium about Lake Abert on April 25 at the Black Butte Ranch conference rooms.

Like others who've researched Lake Abert, Pettigrew agrees that the

high-desert lake seems relatively lifeless, outside of the swarms of brine flies that seasonally cover its alkaline shores. "The rocky landscape, while starkly beautiful, appears inhospitable to human habitation. Historical records mention a Native American presence, but suggest fairly light use.

Pettigrew said, "Imagine the great surprise of archaeologists in the 1970s, while examining a proposed highway project along the lake's margins, when they discovered clear traces of many prehistoric village sites! How could this be? We can't even drink the water!

"We archaeologists never would have been inspired to examine such a place in detail, but the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) required serious research during the highway construction planning phase. Whatever our preconceptions, the law demanded that we investigate, so we did.

"After the first inspections," he said, "multiple research phases demonstrated that Lake Abert and its surrounding basin were once home to many people, perhaps thousands of them, who lived in hundreds of clearly defined houses, many with stone architectural features. People moved their houses up and down the slopes as the lake — which was once much fresher — rose and fell with the changing climate. They lived there until fairly recently. So looks can be deceiving!"

Pettigrew said the first surveys took place in the mid-1970s along Highway

395. "When I walked the highway route in 1976, I was stunned to find clear traces of a substantial prehistoric society," he said. "The evidence was obvious, and included a staggering array of circular depressions, art motifs, concentrations of all kinds of stone tools, and even the stone-walled ruins of apparent houses."

Subsequent surveys and excavations took place into the 1980s, both along the lakeshore and upstream in the lowlands of the Chewaucan River basin. The total number of prehistoric sites recorded along the lakeshore and in the basin was 326, including at least 76 village sites.

"Altogether, more than 580 circular features, most of them probably house structures, and 73 rock rings, are recorded," Pettigrew said.

Pettigrew and others have concluded that people have been living in the area for more than 10,000 years, with most of the evidence dating to after 4,000 years ago, and before historic contact. Patterns of site and artifact elevation and relationships with lake terraces indicate fluctuations of lake levels during that period of early human habitation.

There is no currently active program for site protection, beyond the regular Bureau of Land Management (BLM) monitoring of their lands. Tribes were not actively involved in excavations and surveys in the 1970s and '80s, Pettigrew said, but they have become very involved with issues surrounding the River End



PHOTO PROVIDED

Dr. Richard M. Pettigrew will speak in a Black Butte Ranch symposium.

Ranch and the dam that was built there in 1991, which they claim disturbed prehistoric sites and revealed human bones. "No archaeological excavation took place in relation to dam construction," said Pettigrew, "and this outraged both the archaeologists and the tribes."

Pettigrew, along with private landholders, public agency spokespersons, and others concerned with preservation of Oregon's high lakes, will meet for a workshop on Friday, April 24, at the headquarters of High Lakes Aquatics Alliance Foundation (HLAAF) in Camp Sherman.

On Saturday, April 25, a seminar — open to the public — will be held in the conference rooms of Black Butte Ranch Reception Center.

Admission is \$5 for the day's event, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. More than a dozen speakers will present the latest information on the system of high lakes located in South Central Oregon.

Dr. Frank Conte, emeritus professor of zoology from Oregon State University, a resident of Camp Sherman, is the president of HLAAF, and the primary organizer of the two-day event.

For more information or to get a ticket, contact Conte at spfelrecon@centurylink.net. Financial support is coming from HLAAF, the Sisters High School biology program, and various chapters of the Audubon Society, Lake Creek Lodge, Black Butte Ranch, and the Metolius Culinary Club.

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Contributions in Bea's memory may be made to the High Desert Museum, 59800 S. Hwy. 97, Bend, OR, 97702.

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