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Archaeologist, Ecologist Lead A Tour Of Prehistoric Native American Fishing Village

By Alec Brodsky

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Maine Historic Preservation Commission archaeologist Arthur Spiess and Maine Natural Areas Program ecologist Andy Cutko led an exploration of Maine's archaeological and ecological past in Dresden Aug. 21.

The Dresden Falls archaeological site, a division of the Houdlette Conservation Project, is the location of a prehistoric fishing village and said to be one of the most significant finds in Northern New England.

According to Spiess, the Dresden site is said to contain the remains of two cultures, Early to Middle Archaic Native American and Colonial European.

Stone tools from the former, which include knives, tools for making canoes, and spear points, range from 4500 to 9000 years old, Spiess said.

Alongside the prehistoric artifacts, the remains of a Revolutionary War era community are also evident. Spiess displayed a British naval map from 1770 indicating that at least four structures were present on the site.

At the site Sunday, Spiess showed framed stone spear points he said dated to around 5000 BCE. Found alongside the stone tools were charred animal bones, providing a potential snapshot of the ancient community's diet.

The ecological record at the archaeological grounds reveals an area that used to be the location of a major waterfall, rivaling that of the Grand Falls on the Dead River. Migrating fish, finding themselves caught at the falls, became an easy meal for the fishing village nearby.

"It was a good camping spot. You're not going to go hungry," Spiess said.

According to Spiess, natives would come from up to 50 miles around to fish at the site.

The importance of the location is reflected in the number of artifacts found during excavations. Some 5000 to 6000 artifacts were taken from the site, Spiess said.

"We could be here for 25 years and still not find everything," he said.

Many will never be found. The vast majority of evidence is under water, Spiess said. Maine's coast has steadily been sinking over the past several thousand years, taking with it countless artifacts.

The 28-acre Houdlette Complex, which includes the Dresden Falls archaeological site, was almost an eight house subdivision before the majority was purchased by the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay through a bridge buyer.

Prior to being designated for a subdivision, the land was a potato field owned by a farmer who forbid professional archaeologists from excavating the site. It was not until 2008 that professionals were allowed.

The land was bought in 2009 with the help of community members, the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, The Archaeological Conservancy, the Dresden Conservation Commission, and The Maine Archaeological Society.

"Our goal is to fully protect the site visually and archaeologically," said Ed Friedman, Chairman of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay.

The FOMB aimed to protect the archaeological and ecological aspects of the site, Friedman said.

He said FOMB was currently in the process of buying the final portion of the Houdlette Complex, "Parcel 3", with the goal of completing the \$60,000 purchase by March 2012.

According to Spiess, the site will eventually be used for field schools and public education.

FOMB is currently asking for donations to help with the purchase. Those interested are asked to send their donations to Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, P.O. Box 233, Richmond, 04537, or online at www.friendsofmerrymeetingbay.org.

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