For Meghan Howey, the Past is Powerful

For Meghan Howey, UNH Assistant Professor of Anthropology/Archaeology, the distant past can yield clues to solving the environmental problems of the present. Howey’s research is driven by a central question: how did humans in the past transform their environment, and what can we learn from them?

There is history hidden and knowledge inscribed in almost any landscape, even a seemingly “untouched” forest. For an anthropological archaeologist such as Howey, reading the landscape helps lead to understanding the long-term history of human and environmental interaction. “It’s how humans transform shape and modify their environment,” she says. “How we transform space into place.”

Since the early 2000s, Howey’s research has focused on the Great Lakes region of northern Michigan. She currently is in her last year of a three-year National Science Foundation (NSF) grant for her work studying the cultural landscapes of Douglas Lake, located in the Great Lakes region of Northern Michigan. That work, which began as part of Howey’s dissertation research at the University of Michigan, has led to Howey’s first book, “Mound Builders and Monument Makers of the Northern Great Lakes, 1200-1600,” scheduled to be published in Fall, 2012.

She’s particularly fascinated by the period before European contact, around 1200 A.D. That was when “people started growing corn, and that precipitates all kinds of social changes,” she says. That shift, from an egalitarian hunter-gatherer society to farming, caused changes in everything from the way boundaries and territories were determined to ceramics. Howey’s research has shown that ceremonial monuments and common gathering spaces were created as a way to maintain social bonds and trade goods and food.

“You are the places where hunter-gatherers and coastal farmers (came) together. Through communal public ritual, they maintained an egalitarian ethos,” she says.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the region, where farming was difficult and game scarce, Howey uncovered evidence that some indigenous people “hunkered down” and intensified food storage efforts. “We found thousands of storage pits,” she says.

The findings were surprising. “We think of the transition to farming following a straightforward path, but in the Northern Great Lakes, here’s two really different strategies going on at the same time.”

Howey’s work has brought her into close contact with the Ojibwe, Chippewa, Ottawa and other tribes in the area. She went into her research hoping to collaborate with members of the tribe, but her vision and their vision of collaboration were somewhat different.

“My vision was that they’d want to come out and dig at these sites,” she says. Instead, the tribe members were more interested in learning more about the history of the tribe and uncovering pieces of the past. When Howey started asking the tribe members what they wanted to achieve through collaboration, their relationship changed. “As soon as I started listening, we had this beautiful collaboration,” she says.
Howey also works with tribal youth, leading workshops on archaeology and the sciences. In 2011, she took some of the youth out on a dig. One of the kids fell in love with archaeology and now looks to Howey as a mentor. "Now she’s determined to be the first archaeologist of her tribe," she says. "It was pretty awesome."

Howey also recently applied to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) with Michael Palace (a research assistant professor specializing in tropical ecology and remote sensing of biometric properties in the UNH Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans, and Space) for funding for a project that will use remote sensing satellites to study the correlation between burial mounds and microclimates in the Great Lakes region. Microclimates are areas in the region that, because of unique weather patterns, "greened up" faster and produced richer flora and fauna. Howey believes indigenous peoples placed burial mounds in these areas to mark places that were good for farming, hunting, and gathering. "When you put a mound somewhere, you’re staking a claim," she says.

Howey believes that her research can help reveal the history and knowledge inscribed in the landscapes around us—and, by doing so, yield lessons about living within our environmental settings. Above all, her research helps explode myths about indigenous peoples and the landscape in which they lived.

The image of indigenous peoples as “simple primitives” is a common part of the historical narrative, but according to Howey, that is far from the truth. “These were very complicated individuals, with elaborate rituals and complicated social lives,” she says.

“The past is powerful. The narrative, and who controls it—that’s power,” she says. “Archaeology can be a really powerful tool for deconstructing that.”

To learn more, check these web sites:

Megan Howey:
University of New Hampshire Department of Anthropology:
http://www.unh.edu/anthropology/index.cfm?id=13EECE18-EE60-2B53-2FC9BAF783F7E250#Howey

University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology:
http://www.lsa.umich.edu/umma/people/researchaffiliates/ci.howeymeghan_ci.detail

Cultural Landscapes of Douglas Lake Archaeological Research Program (CLOD)
2010 field season blog: http://mblog.lib.umich.edu/archmi/

Story by Larry Clow and Lynnette Hentges. 4/24/12