

Wildfires reveal artifacts; officials try to stop looters

By Associated Press

The four-year drought that has ravaged California and the wildfires charring through the state's dry forests have exposed prehistoric Native American sites as water levels drop and thick brush and poison oak are burned away.

That has helped artifact looters searching for obsidian spear points and other artifacts.

"Drought brings the water down. Much of the lake (normally) hides cultural sites and villages," said Bill Salta, the state parks superintendent in Lake County.

The looters know this, flocking to the water's newly exposed edge. Or they traverse the scorched earth looking for signs of Native American sites, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported Sunday.

Taking the artifacts is illegal, in some cases a felony. Still, it's typically an under-the-radar crime, but in Lake County and some other places, there's a new effort by officials to attack the problem before it gets worse.

In mid-August, several members of the Lake County Sheriff's Office attended training on illegal looting of artifacts, and learned that many times looters are looking for quick cash to buy drugs.

Two days after the training ended, a Lake County deputy ran across an artifacts looter while checking on a report of a man trying to approach an underage girl. The deputy saw the suspect, Brian Gene Smith, had a satchel full of spear points, serrated hand tools and obsidian flakes. Some were attached to

index cards noting where and when the items were found, sheriff's officials said. They said Smith – his hands unable to remain still – said he was writing a book and was going to return the items to the tribes.

Everything from the artifact training was playing out in front of the deputy, officials said: the drugs. The documentation. Photos of finds on a digital camera.

Smith was jailed on suspicion of crimes including possession of Native American artifacts and removing objects of archaeological or historical interest.

The arrest was a milestone in efforts to get law enforcement to recognize such crimes, said Dino Beltran, treasurer of the Tribal Council for the Koi Nation, one of the Pomo tribes in the region.

“The whole Native American community up here in Northern California is absolutely elated, rejoicing that there is a feeling of respect,” Beltran said.

Human artifacts in the region date back more than 14,000 years, when humans settled around what is believed to be the oldest lake in North America. Anderson Marsh State Historic Park, comprising 1,700 acres south of Clear Lake, was created in 1985 to preserve archaeological interests

Public officials in Lake County and elsewhere are urging people to report looting and to leave artifacts where they are.

To some people, such relics represent a curiosity or a quick buck. But to Native Americans “that’s one more taking of their heritage,” said Beverly Ortiz, cultural services coordinator for the East Bay Regional Park.