

This is an electronic version of a report which was originally published as: Hutchings, R.M. (2014). *Lies, damn lies, and CRM: A response to the Austin Declaration on the excavation of archaeological material in the popular media* (ICTH Bulletin 2014-3). Retrieved from Institute for Critical Heritage and Tourism website: <https://criticalheritagetourism.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/icht-bulletin-2014-3.pdf>.

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2014

Lies, Damn Lies, and CRM:
A Response to the Austin Declaration
on the Excavation of Archaeological
Material in the Popular Media



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Bulletin 2014-3

October 2014

Lies, Damn Lies, and CRM: A Response to the Austin Declaration on the Excavation of Archaeological Material in the Popular Media

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The business of archaeology is the present.
– Laurent Olivier, 2013

The future is at once both very bright for the employment of ... archaeologists but very gloomy for ... cultural heritage.
– Joseph Flatman, 2009

THIS IS A STORY about rocks and glass houses. In August 2014, an undated document titled “Excavation of Archaeological Material in the Popular Media” was released online (CAA 2014; WAC 2014). Various referred to as a “position paper” and the “Austin Declaration,” the document was signed by seven major archaeology organizations from around the world.¹ According to one source, the declaration was brought to life “after discussions initiated at a meeting of presidents held on 5 April 2014 in Austin, Texas, concerning the proliferation of content in popular media that celebrates and encourages the destruction of the archaeological record” (ICCROM 2014).

I ask in this short response why archaeologists, in this case the declaration’s authors, persist in drawing archaeology out to be the ethical savior of heritage, despite all the evidence to the contrary. At best, the Austin Declaration paints a grossly misleading and self-serving picture about the practice of archaeology, largely through the time-tested practice of omission (see below). Based on how long and how often these misrepresentations (tropes) have been recycled by the discipline, however, it could be argued that they now constitute mere lies.

To be clear, my concern here is not with a critique of how Hollywood portrays cultural

heritage—it is truly horrible, just like its portrayal of men, women, children, minorities, animals, the planet, etc. *But that is not what the Austin Declaration is about.* Rather, the declaration, which is 482 words long, devotes about half its space (234 words) to explaining how scientific archaeology is ‘good’ and how everybody else’s approach to heritage is ‘bad.’ Read for yourself:

Excavating an archaeological site is an unavoidably destructive process. Archaeologists mitigate this destruction through the use of careful excavation techniques, documentation, preservation, and reporting procedures that have been developed over the past century, and are updated as new technologies become available. Procedures include documenting exactly what was done in the field; analyzing and describing in detail all that was found that might be pertinent to a wide range of questions regarding human and environmental history; obtaining and analyzing samples of material relevant to those questions (for example, soils, pollen, micro faunal remains, and charcoal or other organic materials); comprehensively documenting, describing, and analyzing of all recovered artifacts; developing a catalogue of artifacts and other material taken from the site; preparing field notes each day that include photographs and drawings; treating all materials taken for storage and placing them in an environmentally controlled facility; and writing a report that describes all the above activities and provides an interpretation of what was found in the context of current research questions and interests. Further, anyone excavating archaeological sites has an ethical responsibility to engage with all interested and affected parties, in particular local communities.

Having now made it half way through the declaration, you should be asking: So, what is actually being “declared” about popular media?

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Brace yourself, because here it is: “To excavate a site without following such [scientific archaeological] protocols is unmitigated destruction of the archaeological record, and with it, all of the information that might have been gained from that record about human history and the changing relationships among human groups and the environment.”

My concern here is not just with overt scientism but also the conflicting and disingenuous nature of the declaration. Is the claim that archaeology is *scientific* the only evidence these authors’ have for it being “good”? What about the decades of critiques that repeatedly demonstrate archaeology’s overwhelming modern, Western, nationalist, and capitalist tendencies? What about cultural resource management (CRM)—*a term that is not mentioned once in the entire declaration?*

In terms of the declaration being disingenuous, I will begin with the most obvious: “Excavating an archaeological site is an unavoidably destructive process.” While excavation is indeed a destructive process, such destruction is, contrary to what is stated, *entirely avoidable*: simply don’t excavate! (see Kintz 2012 [1998]²). In this way, the declaration’s authors imply CRM archaeologists are hapless victims of capitalist developers and state heritage laws. Sadly, development and concomitant heritage destruction constitutes a “taken-for-granted” in archaeology (Hutchings 2014). This dangerous ideology is evident in the recent assertion that “global warming is proving something of a boon for archaeology” (Doyle 2013)—“It’s worrying that glaciers are melting but it’s exciting for us archaeologists ... This is only the start.”

The Austin Declaration is disingenuous—to the point of undermining its own point—insofar as its authors completely ignore the subject of cultural resource management (or cultural heritage management). I posit that by omitting CRM/CHM, the authors’ are actively working to distance themselves from the controversial practice, this despite the fact that academic archaeology exists as it does today largely because of the rapid growth of state-sanctioned

compliance archaeology³ after the 1970s. As any claim that archaeology/CRM can be divided into two separate institutions is illogical⁴, CRM must be hidden from sight, rationally expunged as irrelevant rather than confronted.

Further, an underlying assumption of the declaration is that a scientific understanding of the past is a limiting factor when it comes to contemplating contemporary social and environmental problems—that is, that more archaeology is needed (rather, see Olivier and Flatman’s points above). However, such socioenvironmental problems are generally well understood (Bodley 2008, 2012; Homer-Dixon 2006); what is not so clear is archaeology’s role in those problems.

In reality, very little quantitative sociological data exists about archaeology’s social function, or about its role in contemporary cultural and ecological crises. More on point, very little is known about its ability to protect heritage landscapes. While the vast majority (>90 percent) of archaeology done in Northern America (USA/Canada) every year is done so under the auspices of for-profit CRM, a billion-dollar-a-year industry (ACRA 2013), the institution’s rate of success for protecting sites remain largely unexplored, thus misunderstood and misrepresented.

To address this foundational shortcoming, I recently studied the ability of archaeology/CRM to protect heritage, looking at sites in the traditional territory of the *shishálh* First Nation, located on British Columbia’s amenity-rich “Sunshine Coast,” southwest Canada (Hutchings 2014). I analyzed three culturally significant regions within *shishálh* territory, which included 129 registered archaeological sites, in terms of past, present, and future impacts. Despite my low expectations going into the study, the results were alarming.

The level of impact in my study area is demonstrated to be very high, with 75 percent of *shishálh* sites disturbed or destroyed and 88 percent at immediate risk of inundation and/or erosion resulting from future sea level rise. While the prime driver of site destruction has shifted over time from logging to amenity

migration-driven residential development, the inability of the *shísháhlh* Nation to protect its heritage has remained constant. That constant derives from a lack of local control, as virtually all authority over heritage stewardship has been taken by archaeology/CRM, whereby state experts “manage” *shísháhlh* heritage bureaucratically from afar, working in the province’s metropolis and capital city, Vancouver and Victoria, respectively. If the goal of archaeology/CRM is to protect sites, then the *shísháhlh* Coast study demonstrates that is an ineffective strategy (Hutchings 2014:227).

This study supports Thomas King’s conclusion that archaeology/CRM is “a sham” when it comes to actually protecting heritage (King 2009:7). Based on my analysis, British Columbia archaeology/CRM, like Hollywood, largely “celebrates and encourages the destruction of the archaeological record” (CAA 2014; ICCROM 2014; WAC 2014), a process neutralized and made “ethical” through the scientization of—and ultimately the fetishization of—“the past” (Gero and Root 1990).

Archaeologists whitewash CRM (King 2009) because that is all they really can do. For to confront CRM is to confront what the institution of archaeology really is—neoliberal statecraft and disaster capitalism (Hutchings 2014; Hutchings and La Salle 2014b). While the first concept frames archaeologists as tools of the capitalist state (remember that the vast majority of archaeology done is done so as compliance archaeology), the latter concedes that most archaeologists by and large “make money out of misery”—that is, out of socioecological destruction.

While Hollywood certainly is not the answer to our crisis of heritage, there is little evidence to suggest that archaeology is either (King 2009; McNiven and Russell 2005; Nicholas and Hollowell 2007). Rather, the evidence overwhelmingly points to archaeology “being part of the problem, not the solution” (Hutchings 2014:ii). For the Austin Declaration—or any such future declarations about heritage destruction—to be taken

seriously, archaeologists need to step outside of their glass house, or at least admit they’re residing in one.

As Nicolas Zorzin (2011:119) has pointed out, “the current political economy of Western archaeology has ignited a series of new discussions and debates which call into question archaeology’s capitalist influences and its materialisation as a profession.” This includes understanding the social function of CRM/CHM (Hutchings 2014; Smith 2001, 2004; Zorzin 2014), especially in colonial contexts where Indigenous heritage—thus Indigenous people—are the primary focus of compliance archaeology (Hutchings and La Salle 2014a, 2014b). It is time for archaeologists to seriously reexamine their institution’s role in our unfolding global ecological crisis. Calling for more PDF reports and artifact boxes is no longer an acceptable response.

Notes

1. The seven signatories to the Austin Declaration are: Australian Archaeological Association (AAA); Canadian Archaeological Association (CAA); European Association of Archaeologists (EAA); ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management (ICAHM); Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association (IPPA); PanAfrican Archaeological Association (PAA); World Archaeological Congress (WAC). Notably missing from this list is the Society for American Archaeology, a point I find interesting, especially given that the 5 April 2014 meeting took place at the SAA’s own 79th Annual Meeting in Austin, Texas.

2. Consider also Buffy Sainte-Marie’s 1964 anti-war song ‘Universal Soldier’ [Vanguard Records]. Saint-Marie’s universal soldier is “the one who gives his body as a weapon of the war. And without him all this killing can’t go on.” Her conclusion that “[t]his is not the way we put the end to war” is apropos. Archaeologists view themselves as “rescuers” and “saviors” of heritage (think “rescue archaeology” and

“salvage archaeology”) when in fact heritage destruction typically does not proceed without their involvement, per federal, provincial/state, and local law.

3. Also known as contract or commercial archaeology.

4. Splitting CRM from archaeology is illogical on a number of fronts. Such a position would have to maintain, for example, that the teacher-student union does not exist; i.e., that academic archaeologists do not teach CRM archaeologists the tools of the trade. In reality, academic archaeologists not only train CRM archaeologists but they also legitimize the practice with their expertise (La Salle and Hutchings 2012; Hutchings and La Salle 2014a). Without such legitimacy, the entire practice could be easily called into question. I equate academic archaeologists openly criticizing CRM to them freely admitting their discipline has little to offer society in terms of practical application (think about how a practical-minded university president might respond to such a claim). Ultimately, archaeologists have very little to gain—but a lot to lose—by thinking reflexively and critically in public.

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Please cite this document as follows:

Hutchings, Rich

2014 Lies, Damn Lies, and CRM: A Response to the Austin Declaration on the Excavation of Archaeological Material in the Popular Media. *Institute for Critical Heritage and Tourism Bulletin 2014-3*. Institute for Critical Heritage and Tourism, Nanaimo.

We would do well to remember that heritage preservation and the presentation of the past are processes that erase the past just as surely as warfare, looting, or development do.
Bettina Arnold, 2014

Is there a market price for ethnic cleansing and environmental damage?

Kimiye Tommasino, Francisco Silva Noelli, and
Lúcio Tadeu Mota, in P.P.A. Funari, 2001

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