

INTRODUCTION TO THE 3-MINUTE SESSION – OUR DISPOSABLE ECONOMY: ARTIFACTS FROM PAST TO PRESENT

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This session highlights the changes to material culture over time, especially during the transition from what is considered the “historic-era” to products in our modern, disposable economy. Many of the consumer goods made of and packaged in materials such as ceramic, metal, and glass have shifted to plastic and other nonbiodegradable materials. Think of a modern plastic toothbrush vs. a bone toothbrush. The presentations in this symposium focused on single-use and disposable items by comparing a modern item to its historical antecedents. The idea for the session is to encourage both presenters and the audience to think about the change of a single artifact or artifact type through time and potential impacts on archaeology and our environment.

If the abstract for this 3-minute session sounds vaguely familiar, that’s because it is. This is the same session that was planned for the Society for California Archaeology’s (SCA) Annual Meeting in March 2020. That meeting, to be held in the looming shadow of a global pandemic, was cancelled. Admittedly, the session chairs, Kimberly Wooten and Julia Huddleson – staff archaeologists with the California Department of Transportation’s (Caltrans) Cultural Studies Office – were a little worried that if this short presentation session was brought back for 2022, it would somehow trigger a mummy-like curse and the annual meeting would once again be cancelled. But apparently, the 3-minute session would not be deciding the fate of the world and the Visalia meeting was a success. The 2022 revived session resulted in 14 presentations, some originally from 2020 and some new for this year.

Two of the presentations from the original 2020 session were published in the SCA’s 2020 Proceedings, including Glenn Farris’s article, *Solving the Mystery of the Black’s India Pale Ale Bottle from the John Marsh House, Contra Costa County, California*, and Wooten’s *What Could Possibly Make Beefamato Better? Plastic!* Those two articles can be found on the SCA web site at <https://scahome.org/sca-publications/articles-of-the-sca-proceedings/?sort=1#34> (Volume 34, 2020). If things start to go strangely awry from this point forward, you can blame Glenn Farris, as he really wanted to give his IPA talk and was the impetus for restarting the 3-minute story session.

The original abstract was inspired by a two-week sailing trip that Wooten joined in 2019 in order to research microplastics in the world’s oceans. The intent of the presentations was to highlight changes in material culture over time, especially during the transition from what is considered the “historic-era” to our modern, disposable economy. Many of the consumer goods historically made of and packaged in materials such as ceramic, metal, and glass have shifted to plastics. Think of a bone toothbrush vs. your typical plastic toothbrush. Both were intended to last three to four months, but only one will still be here in approximately 500 years. With 3.5 billion plastic toothbrushes sold annually, that is a frightening thought (try looking at your toothbrush the same way tonight). Presentations touched on many interconnected themes – including the economy, environment, consumerism, and disposability – all ideas that go towards a broader discussion of plastic products and pollution as contributors to climate change.

Many of these presentations focused on single-use and disposable items by comparing a modern product to its historical antecedents. The idea for the session is to encourage both presenters and the audience to think about the change of a single artifact or artifact type through time, as well as the general idea of consumerism, disposability, and reuse, and the potential impacts of those changes on the archaeological record not only going forward but right now, as well as the overall environment in terms of climate health and sustainability. After a session introduction by Kimberly Wooten, each set of seven presentations was followed by a 15-minute facilitated discussion. Julia Costello and Glenn Farris facilitated the first discussion and Julia Huddleson facilitated the second discussion. Three-minute presentation participants, in order of their session line-up, included:

- Emily Castano (Caltrans) – *Little Dumps, Big Dumps: The Backend of Food Ways Through the Economics of Domesticity and the Evolution of the Diaper*
- Julia Costello (Foothill Resources, Ltd.) – *From Food to Artifact to Art: The Interesting Evolution of Chinese Ceramics*
- Glenn Farris – *Quaffing an IPA in 1855 California: From Aberdeen to the Marsh House*
- Sarah Heffner (California Department of Water Resources) – “Be Sure to Drink Your Ovaltine!": *Childhood Marketing in the Mid-1930s and Little Orphan Annie Decoders*
- Mariam Dahdul (Caltrans) – *Evolution of Writing Technologies and Their Mark on the Physical Landscape* (video presentation)
- Lisa Bright (Caltrans) – *Wonder Soap Bubbles*
- Julia Huddleson (Caltrans) – *Toothpaste Containers Through Time – Reusable, Recyclable, or Rubbish*
- Mary Maniery (PAR Environmental Services) – *Finding Colonel Mustard in the Kitchen with a Knife: Following the Clues to Date Historic Mustard Containers* (presented by Sarah Heffner)
- Kimberly Wooten (Caltrans) – *What Could Possibly Make Beefamato Better? Plastic!*
- R. Scott Baxter (Pacific Legacy, Inc.) – *San Pedro Harbor Token and the Seeds of Modern Consumerism*
- Montse Osterlye (Far Western Anthropological Research Group, Inc.) – *Rude Awakenings: From a Cuppa Hot Brown to a Hot Brown Planet*
- Brian James (Caltrans) – *No Simple Task: Understanding the Complexity of Expediency in Prehistoric Technology*
- Heather Martin (State Archaeological Collections Research Facility) – *From Straight Razor to Bic (How Your Razor Ended Up in the Trash)*
- Justin Wisely (Pacific Legacy, Inc.) – *The Grains Left Behind*

Audience discussions centered around personal decisions that can be made to change the amount of plastic pollution contributed individually, as well as at broader social and legal levels. A discussion of plastic pollution within the field of archaeology also ensued. In a world that can feel like a new challenge is being thrown at us every single day, it is always good to close with positive news: At the time this session was presented in March 2022, nations within the UN agreed to adopt a legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution by 2024 (United Nations 2022). The treaty is being hailed as the most significant climate treaty since the Paris Climate Agreement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As the session chairs, we thank Julia Costello and Glenn Farris for facilitating audience discussions with grace and humor. Thanks and appreciation to 3-minute participants R. Scott Baxter, Sarah Heffner, Mary Maniery, Heather Martin, Montse Osterlye, and Justin Wisely, as well as those who represented Caltrans, including Lisa Bright, Emily Castano, Mariam Dahdul, and Brian James. A genuine thank you is extended to the Caltrans Cultural Studies Office for their continued support of these 3-minute sessions.

REFERENCES

United Nations

2022 *End Plastic Pollution: Towards an International Legally Binding Instrument* (draft report).
https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/38522/k2200647_-_unep-ea-5-1-23-rev-1_-_advance.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

To learn more about eXXpedition and plastic pollution and solutions, we recommend the following web sites:

<https://exxpedition.com/shift-platform-launch> — provides hundreds of solutions to navigate ocean plastic pollution.

<https://exxpedition.com> — to learn more about eXXpedition's mission.

<https://www.nurdlehunt.org.uk> — a citizen science/crowdsourcing project that allows participants to count nurdles (tiny beads of virgin plastic) on local beaches.

<https://www.storyofstuff.org/plastic> — provides excellent information on understanding single-plastics and ways to participate to reduce your plastic footprint.

<https://marinedebris.engr.uga.edu> — a crowdsourcing app that can be used to track plastic debris both in our oceans and on land.