Breaking free the stones of the past

William Hunt
Ralph Hartley
The oldest cairn was there as Attila the Hun rampaged across Europe, the newest cairn was built when Da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa

Professor William Hunt and Ralph Hartley are both experienced archaeologists and anthropologists within the Department of Anthropology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. They have recently returned from the islands of Southeast Alaska, having set out to identify the source of the mysterious human-built piles of rock called ‘cairns’ scattered over the coastal mountains.

It’s difficult to remember, as we sit in our air-conditioned offices worrying about the latest report and the cost of today’s coffee, that most of human history has been spent in close contact with the soil, the trees – with our ancestors struggling to improve their lives by changing the very landscape they stood upon. Many of these changes are still visible today, from the terraced slopes of Nile agriculture through to fields cleared of rocks for the plough. But the thinking behind many of our ancient modifications is lost in the mists of time – who made this, why did they do it, what were they thinking?

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the existence of cairns, literally a man-made pile of rocks. The simplicity of the materials required (rocks are quite common, after all) combined with the ease of construction – in high-Alpine environments as in Arctic mountainous regions or above the tree-line – have led to cairns being a common sight here. Multiple cairns may point out a path as an unmistakable marker – someone was having been constructed by the native inhabitants – are cairns a feature of the inland alpine regions as well? And if so, why were they made?

Signs of our forefathers

The story here starts with two elders of the Sitka Tlingit. The Tlingit have been a part of the coastal regions of Canada and Alaska, having been constructed by the native inhabitants for all of the purposes described above. But historically, Native Americans in Southeast Alaska had lived along the coast gathering seafoods. Further, the rugged inland landscape had focused modern gathering seafoods. Oral histories referred to them as rock cairns to-slow and generally consider them constructs made by their ancestors in the distant past. The two elders had heard stories in their youth of cairns high on the peak of a mountain near their family’s summer fishing camp. Oral histories referred to them as cairns – are cairns of the inland alpine regions as well? And if so, why were they made?

Enter Professor William Hunt, who at the time was working as an Archaeologist at the National Park Service and who had recently concluded a 4-year study of Sitka archaeological sites. This background made him the perfect candidate to follow up on the request, and so he was quickly roped into the initial survey. As he recalls, the US-COAST Guard flew himself and three others (another archaeologist, an armed ranger to protect us from brown bears, and historian to represent the park) to two different locations to get more information... the team was amazed to find not just one cairn at each location but nine cairns on one mountain ridge and twelve at the other.

Why was this so amazing, we might ask? Until this point the common academic belief was that alpine cairns were rare and relatively unimportant – a belief supported by the lack of cairn site discoveries in alpine area. Suddenly, the common consensus seemed to be wrong. Alpine sites were all over the island, the academic field seemed to be ripe for a breakthrough. Hunt was inflected with this excitement, I couldn’t stop thinking about them. What were these things? Why were they built? Who built them and when? Why did they occur on the steep mountain sides and ridges above the tree line but within sight of the ocean?

Exit right, pursued by a bear

To attempt to answer these questions, Professor William Hunt brought Professor Ralph Hartley into the picture. The two of them successfully applied for funding from the National Science Foundation to follow up on the preliminary results. Up to this point, the existence of alpine cairns in the area was still quite the mystery – to scientists, to native inhabitants, to everyone. The goal of the project was to brush away some of this mystery, to systematically identify and investigate these cairns so as to find out who made them and when.

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Well... no. First they had to deal with the location. Baranof Island lies within the Alexander Archipelago, a breathtakingly beautiful region which is perhaps best described as a series of impenetrable, rugged mountains rising from the water. The zone receives so much rain that it is officially classed as a rainforest. Grizzly bears stalk the islands, hunting Sitka deer and unfortunately academics. Movement around the inland regions requires a
might help in detecting when the cairns to pull out any organic material which who built the cairns, and why, as well as Following the initial survey, four large cairns Leaving no stone unturned out to be an exceptionally useful technique, quickly locate potential cairns which could be properly assessed afterwards. It turned found us doing drone or helicopter inventories of mountains, both inland and coastal, to determine the distributions of alpine cairns across the landscapes of Southeast Alaska. We have also put some thought into looking at similar regions in the world to see if cairns would occur in the same kinds of alpine environments – areas such as southern Chile and Argentina or Norway. The difficulty of traversing the inland regions practically requires an aerial survey, and only with a solid grasp of the numbers of rock cairns present can the researchers determine where to focus their sadly limited time.

Ralph Hartley (left foreground), Michael Chodoronek (left background) and Bruce McCune (right) recording a cairn in the Cross Peak investigation area

We asked Professor Hunt what the next(10,10),(991,992) steps in their research would be: ‘As far as future fieldwork and research goes,’ he commented, we have considered doing drone or helicopter inventories of mountains, both inland and coastal, to determine the distributions of alpine cairns across the landscapes of Southeast Alaska. We have also put some thought into looking at similar regions in the world to see if cairns would occur in the same kinds of alpine environments – areas such as southern Chile and Argentina or Norway. The difficulty of traversing the inland regions practically requires an aerial survey, and only with a solid grasp of the numbers of rock cairns present can the researchers determine where to focus their sadly limited time.

Both William Hunt and Ralph Hartley are currently Adjunct Professors in the Dept. of Anthropology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, roles which have brought them full circle back to their original alma mater (albeit quite a few years later) Not content with turning conventional beliefs on Alaskan cairns on their head, the two are happily planning out a series of future studies. Whatever secrets lie in the frozen tundra, one feels they won’t stay hidden for long.