

Rock Art Recording on the Tongass National Forest

This summer Petersburg Zone archaeologists returned to the Tongass Petroglyphs site on the mainland near Petersburg. Over a dozen petroglyphs are pecked into a large bedrock outcrop perched above icy glacial waters. At first glance, the rock appears unaltered but careful scrutiny reveals weathered images of faces, animals, and objects.

Drawing from techniques learned while participating in a rock art recording project on Kosciusko Island (Poetschat and Keyser 2004) Jane Smith, Gina Esposito and Gene Primaky set about using non-destructive techniques that help bring the ancient shapes to life.

Capturing photographic images of rock art is usually challenging mainly because the lighting has to be just right and the images are often severely worn. We used water, an umbrella and a reflector disk to enhance the images. First we wet the rock. Next, we shade the image with the umbrella, and then cast sunlight across the rock with the shiny side of the photography disk. The combination is startling and the figures seem to appear out of nowhere.



Gene Primaky and Gina Esposito at the Tongass Petroglyph site.



A reflector disk is used to cast sunlight across the rock surface.

over an image. Using a dull permanent ink pen we reproduce the peck marks evident on the rock surface. The image produced on the clear plastic can be copied and scanned for publication.

To record the images to scale we used a technique called stippling rather than the previously sanctioned “rubbings” method which has been shown to cause wear to the petroglyphs. To document the petroglyphs in a non-abrasive manner, we lay a piece of clear plastic



Stippled image of a face.

Jane Smith, Archaeologist, Petersburg and Wrangell Ranger Districts

Eventually we will be able to recreate the entire rock art panel with all of the observable petroglyphs. The ability to publish photographs and reproduced images will help us compare and contrast rock art from across the region.



Stippled images from the Tongass Petroglyph site.

The rock art at this site appears to represent faces, animals and abstract designs. Most of the face designs at the site have a circle below the mouth that may represent either a tongue or labret. A labret is a lip plug worn for ornament and status by Northwest coast people and is documented to have occurred for several thousand years. Zoomorphic designs appear in the form of a killer whale to the upper right, a fish or porpoise at central bottom and arcing seals at lower left. Of course all of the glyphs are open to interpretation! What do you see?

We recommend photography as the best and most non-destructive method for capturing the incredible rock art of southeast Alaska.

Reference

Poetschat, G. and J. D. Keyser
2004 *Preliminary Results of the 2002 Rock Art Recording Project, Kosciusko Island, Southeast Alaska*. Forest Service Alaska Region R10-MB-525.