POLAR HERITAGE – Rubbish Or Relics?

Introduction

Polar regions, and in particular Antarctica, were the last frontiers of discovery on earth. They are also recognised today as the most pristine areas on earth and there is strong pressure to keep them this way. This is understandable of course, but it is essential that this pressure is kept in perspective and does not become an overwhelming reason to remove all traces of past human activity. Although it may seem to be in disharmony with current environmental principles, there are also very compelling reasons to retain these human traces. In any event, to remove material from earlier human activity would often not result in a return to any semblance of 'pristineness', especially in areas that are snow and ice free during the brief summers where the fragile nature of the ground surface layer and the scant vegetation, such as in the Arctic, would make this almost impossible. The activities of humankind may not always have been conducted to the same environmental standards that are applied today, but the history associated with them is an essential part of our heritage and must be preserved.

It is true that at some sites relics have decayed to the point where many might claim they have become only rubbish, and this increases the potential for conflict between environmental and heritage interests. The question then arises: At what point, if at all, do relics become rubbish?

At other sites there are places where early visitors, be they explorers, prospectors or hunters, dumped their rubbish – old bottles, cans, clothing and equipment. These are also decaying but, as with such sites in warmer climates, this material can yield important information as an archaeological resource. Currently accepted environmental values require that all rubbish should be removed from polar regions and the wisdom of this is generally beyond dispute, but the question must also be asked: At what point does rubbish, in fact, become relics?

Antarctica

A good example of this problem occurs at Cape Royds on Ross Island. When Ernest Shackleton and the *Nimrod* Expedition left Antarctica in 1909, after his second attempt to reach the South Pole, he left behind a 7 x 8.5 metre hut at Cape Royds where he had made his base. The insulation for this prefabricated building had been improved by stacking boxes of supplies around the outside walls and filling the air space between with volcanic scoria. He also used boxes of supplies to form the walls for a garage and stables. At a number of places in the vicinity, the expedition left other depots of food and supplies. Many of these were unused and were left behind in case future expeditions to the area might find them useful.

As it happened, these became a lifesaver for Shackleton's own Ross Sea party in 1915. They had landed nearby, planning to lay depots towards the South Pole. These depots were intended to sustain Shackleton and his main party, who were to have crossed from the opposite side of the continent on his ill-fated 'Endurance' expedition. The Ross Sea Party was marooned at Cape Evans when their ship was blown out to sea and they quickly became dependent for their survival on the supplies left at Cape Royds.

Insulation for this prefabricated building was improved by stacking boxes of supplies around the outside walls and filling the space between with volcanic scoria. Cape Royds, Antarctica.
(Photo: P. Chaplin)

These dramatic events can in part now be interpreted and relived through the decaying remains of the supplies.

In the mid-1950s the first attempts were made to restore some of the damage at Cape Royds, caused by natural processes over four decades. These efforts certainly helped, but they were not all carried out by qualified people and it is likely that there were some losses of cultural material considered to be rubbish. Since that time a succession of other efforts, culminating with the professional intervention of New Zealand–based Antarctic Heritage Trust, have done a huge amount to save the cultural material at this site.

The fact remains, however, that almost a century of extreme conditions in this polar maritime environment have taken their toll and some of the material around the hut and in outlying areas, including the rubbish dump, are in an advanced stage of decay. Some of the contents have been scattered by wind and there is increasing pressure from environmental interests to 'clean up'. Much has been done to secure leaking cans and contain the spread of material, and these efforts are being largely successful, but there are still those with environmental priorities who claim that all such material should be removed. Although the environmental lobby is well intentioned, it seeks only a return to 'pristine' conditions and is not always able or willing to recognise the historic value of the site.

Arctic

There is a site in the high arctic archipelago of Svalbard that has been so popular for visitors over the last century and more, that the heritage authorities have been obliged to introduce restrictions on the traffic to the site. On a small, rocky beach on the north-west corner of the archipelago, at almost 80ºN, a Swedish engineer at the end of the 19th century and an American journalist at the beginning of the 20th century both erected hangars and established small gasworks in separate attempts to fly to the North Pole by gas balloon and by airship. The site today is characterised by the collapsed remains of wood and metal hangars, dumps of metal barrels and shattered ceramic pipes, spread metal debris and piles of iron filings used for hydrogen production. In 1979 the first heritage protection officer for Svalbard was charged with compiling a recommendation for a good clean-up of the area. The plans were never completed. In 1974, the site had been designated as a protected historic monument, but still it was felt a clear-up could be carried out without disturbing the historic nature of the site. As late as 1995, the (then) Minister of the Environment, who in Norway is (ironically) responsible for both nature and cultural heritage protection, visited the site and exclaimed spontaneously: 'This has got to be cleaned up!'. By this time, however, not only had the perception of relic contra rubbish changed, but in addition a detailed examination of the site by an American historical archaeologist had revealed a wealth of information lying among, and to be inferred from, the various pieces and piles of debris. This site had, in other words, moved from being an abandoned hive of human activity containing useful artefacts, to being regarded as a site of dumped historical rubbish with limited value as a whole, and then to becoming the totally protected historical site of today, where not an iron filing may be removed or disturbed.

It is a perhaps a contradictory understanding of what are regarded as the last great pristine wilderness areas in the world, that visitors to the Arctic and Antarctic mostly also want to visit sites of obvious earlier human activity, without this intruding on their impression of overwhelming untouched nature. Twentieth-century sites of industrial and mechanised activity seem to be as appealing in their way as the white snowy wastes and the endless tundra spotted with delicate and colourful flowers. It is, however, also a fact that these relics can occasion negative reactions and calls for total or partial removal of refuse. Where cultural heritage expertise defines such 'rubbish' as relics, it is essential that wherever possible visitors to the sites receive information about the history of the site, in order that they too may see the values involved. They may perhaps even be able to change their preconceived opinion regarding the distinction between rubbish and relic.

Conclusion

The problem faced in many polar regions arises because there is a new and very different risk to be overcome at historic sites. The risk is that historic material may be considered to be rubbish and removed or destroyed for 'environmental reasons'. If this is to be avoided, clear and widely agreed definitions of 'relic' and 'rubbish' are needed. It is essential that cultural heritage expertise is actively involved in all such discussions at each threatened site. Much closer co-operation between those with heritage interests and those with environmental interests is also necessary in order to prevent loss of cultural material for environmental reasons.

For further information visit the ICOMOS International Polar Heritage Committee (IPHC) website at http://www.polarheritage.no, or contact the IPHC President or Secretary General by email: susan.barr@ra.no *or* pchaplin@online.no

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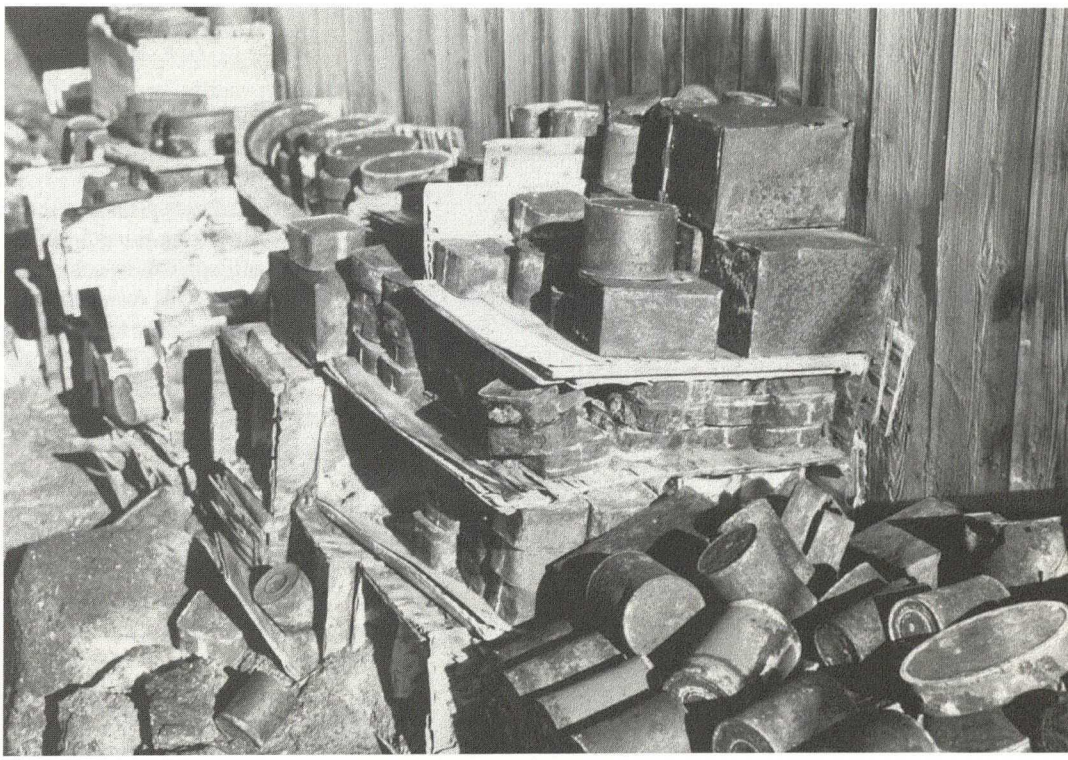
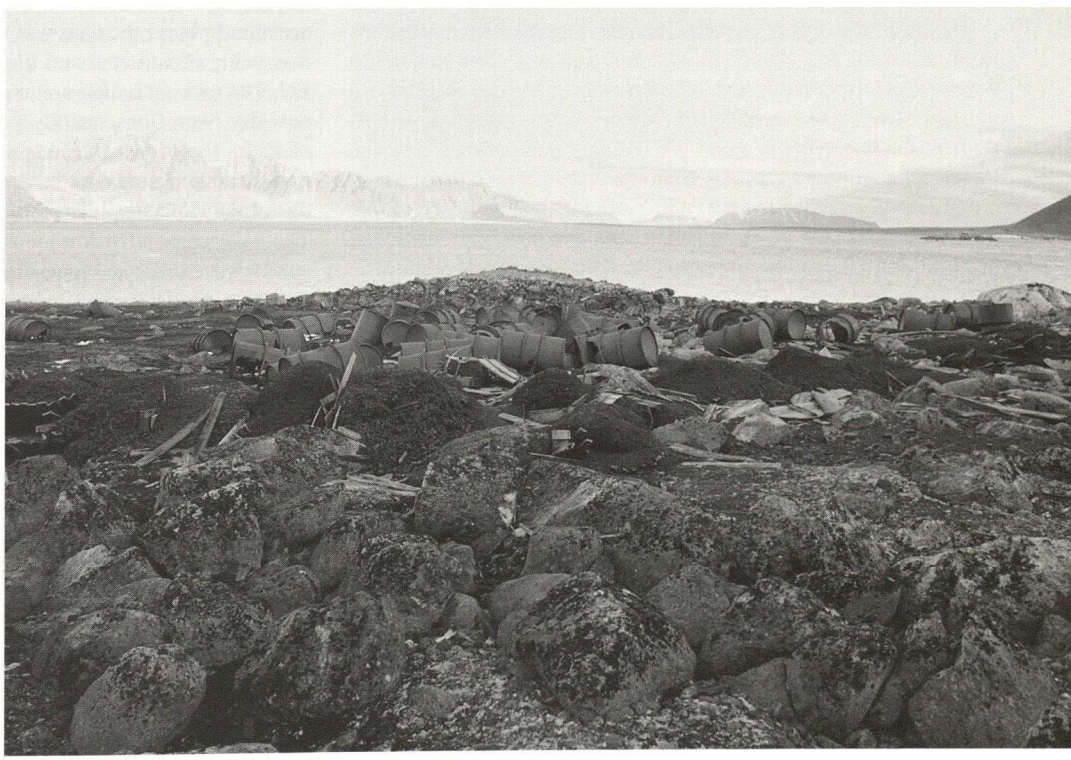


Almost a century of extreme conditions in this maritime environment have taken their toll on some of the material around the hut. Cape Royds, Antarctica.
(Photo: Kirsti K. Paulsen)



Seemingly just a pile of rusting metal rubbish. In fact a materialisation of man's pioneer attempts to tame and conquer the polar regions by mechanical means. Virgohamna, Svalbard. (Photo: S. Barr)