



The Search for MONASPRING

Goodman Lake, an ancient reservoir in Hovenweep National Monument outside of Cortez, was dry in July.

“Case studies such as this, of ancient societies whose history of choices and decisions ultimately led to untenable relationships with their environment, may provide a cautionary tale to a modern world facing global warming,”

from Kristin Kuckelman’s “The Depopulation of Sand Canyon Pueblo, A Large Ancestral Pueblo Village in Southwestern Colorado,” American Antiquity.

by Justice Greg Hobbs

This is the first of a two-part story on Justice Hobbs’ trek through southwestern Colorado to help survey Ancestral Pueblo water sources. Here, he travels with grandson K.J. and archaeologist Kristin Kuckelman in July.

On-the-ground research archaeologist Kristin Kuckelman has studied the Ancestral Pueblo people of the Southwestern United States for three decades. Working out of Crow Canyon

Archaeological Center near Cortez, her most recent investigations have centered on the Sand Canyon and Goodman Point pueblos located within the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument and Hovenweep National Monument, respectively.

These two sites evidence a concentration of indigenous North American people who formerly lived in scattered family farmsteads, moving into larger communities consisting of 500 to 800 individuals. These villages lasted only a short time, from approximately A.D. 1250 to 1280.

The population in this Mesa Verde/Great Sagebrush plain region, building since A.D. 550, had swelled to approximately 10,000 to 30,000. By the final decades of occupation, they depended almost exclusively on stocks of corn and corn-fed domesticated turkeys to sustain themselves through cyclical droughts they and their ancestors had experienced.

Each was a rock-walled village that guarded a precious spring. Then, the Great Drought set in. Rain did not fall; groundwater receded. After 1277, both of these villages suffered fatal attacks.



Archaeologist Kristin Kuckelman smiles at finding Mona Spring. Though she had studied the Ancestral Pueblo people for decades, she had never seen the spring, which was a water source on which those people depended.

Kuckelman and her fellow researchers discovered the remains of men, women and children killed, apparently, by other Ancestral Puebloans foraging for food.

With the corn crop failing and their food stores depleting, the people turned to subsistence living, hunting rabbits and gathering wild plants. Stressed toward starvation, families began migrating south and southeast, to such places as the Rio Grande River pueblos and the canyons and mesas now occupied by Navajo, Hopi, and other Ancestral Pueblo groups.

Towers among the Sand Canyon and Goodman Point ruins bore witness to the fears of invasion that those who stayed actually suffered. By about 1280, Mesa Verde and the Great Sagebrush plain stood empty and waiting.

On their way out, the departed ancient ones ritually torched the roofs of their kivas, leaving inside skillfully crafted and decorated pots, intact for a possible return when climes might improve.

“The data from Sand Canyon suggest that an important factor in the depopulation of the village was a collapse of the largely maize and turkey subsistence base that was precipitated by an abrupt climatic downturn; population pressures, long-term environmental degradation, resource depletion, and additional social and environmental factors...no doubt exacerbated the impact of this unfavorable climatic shift,” according to Kuckelman.

She also reports on the high food

cost of raising the turkeys they prized because “one average adult turkey drinks .5 to 1 quart of water per day and eats about .5 pounds of food per day. Large turkey flocks would have consumed many pounds of maize daily.”

On July 21, Kuckelman led my grandson, K.J., and me into the Goodman Point Unit of Hovenweep National Monument. There to conduct a preliminary investigation for a larger survey team from the Wright Paleohydrological Institute, we walked through sagebrush and pinyon to water sources the residents depended upon. These include an ancient reservoir, now called Goodman Lake, and two springs, the Mona Spring and the Juarez Spring.

Measuring an acre, capturing

intermittent stormwater runoff shed from exposed and pitted sandstone cap rock, Goodman Lake was dry.

For all her years of work in this area, Kuckelman had never seen Mona Spring. We went looking for it.

We tracked past the ruins of small farmsteads, occupied likely centuries earlier than the Goodman Point Pueblo. Inhaling the smell of native water-loving grasses, we dropped into an arroyo, flashing green, and followed it up through a series of dried-up pools, where the people must have kneeled with their large water-bearing pots, no doubt adorned with beautifully painted stripes and zigzags.

Kuckelman beamed when we found the Mona Spring, a perfect mirror pool sheltered under a prominent ledge, hosting a very happy and sturdy live oak. In celebration of our walk, I write:

Directions

Empty pitted
water pocket bedrock
slopes to a pool,
dry but expectant,

rims of abandoned
weathered farmsteads
poke between pinyon,

follow their middens
through a scattered trail
of broken water vessels,

circle back to the crack
in the center of the earth
smelling of telltale
worn-out depressions,

look to the flash between
the roots of a fast-clinging oak
grin the grin of mirror grasses.

On the trail into the Goodman Point community, we pass through the breached guardian wall surrounding the village to the large rock overhang of Juarez Spring. What a gathering place, a natural plaza of goodly proportion where the people drawing water must have worked and talked, their children playing. When the fatal attack came,

they fought to hold on.

On July 31, when the main Wright survey party joined Kuckelman, monsoon rains had broken a dry spell. Goodman Lake glistened.

K.J. and I were traveling on to Canyon de Chelly for a workshop with the Navajo Teachers; the Hopi Mesas, spotting Old Oraibi in the distance and attending a Kachina going-home rain dance close up at Hotevilla; then to the Colorado River for a run through the Grand Canyon with Hatch River Expeditions.

Everywhere, on sandstone slabs and jutting promontories, we see Ancestral Puebloan handprints and creation panels, replete with mountain sheep, spiraling springs, and Kokopellis. **D**



The view of Mona Spring.



A view of the ledge above Juarez Spring. Hobbs and his grandson, K.J., traveled with archaeologist Kristin Kuckelman to survey Ancestral Pueblo water sources.