

Interview: Archaeologists Collaborate with Looters to Uncover Mysteries of Spirit Eye Cave

Bryon Schroeder interviewed November 21, 2018 for West Texas Wonders on Marfa Public Radio

Transcript by Diana Nguyen

Across West Texas, there are numerous caves prehistoric people lived in, but many of these sites have been destroyed by looters. They've made it difficult for archaeologists to learn about the people that came before us. Out on Pinto Canyon Ranch — about 16 miles from Ruidosa — there's one distinctive cave called Spirit Eye. This site is forcing researchers to collaborate with looters, giving more insight into what life was like thousands of years ago in the Big Bend.

Getting to Spirit Eye is a long drive from anywhere. On the rocky, dusty ride to the cave, Center For Big Bend Studies archaeologist Bryon Schroeder says working on this project has turned out to be a little different than he expected. He explains, "I never, ever thought I would do so much sleuthing."

Schroeder's been following clues and tracking down artifacts taken from the cave, finding items like baskets, sandals, and corn. He's had to comb through letters and photographs that show Spirit Eye has been haphazardly dug for several decades.

"A lot of really important stuff is in people's houses," he says. "If we don't talk with them then we're not going to get access to any of that stuff, and we're going to miss a big chunk of prehistoric peoples lives."

It's easy to see why people would be drawn to exploring this place. It has two distinctive triangle-shaped entrances (which is why it was named "Spirit Eye" by former CBBS director Robert Mallouf). Once inside, you can't help but marvel at what's in front of you. It's the kind of cave you'd imagine exploring as a kid. You walk through a triangle-shaped corridor that opens into a larger chamber. From there, there's a narrower shaft that goes all the way to the back, most of which has remained untouched.

Schroeder and his crew have been carefully identifying what parts of Spirit Eye were disturbed by the folks who would dig up artifacts. On this particular day, the team is going back through the dirt that's already been sifted by looters towards the front of the cave, trying to see if they've missed anything of value.

But who lived here? That's what Schroeder and his crew are still trying to figure out. Right now, they don't really know because the research is in such early stages. (Schroeder's been studying the cave since 2017). But he has identified three distinct periods of occupation — 1,500, 2,000 and 5,000 years Before Present. As they continue to date items he's found scattered across the country, the archaeologists will start to get a better idea.

Although there are looted caves across the region, Spirit Eye is distinctive because the correspondence he's pored over explicitly describes *this* cave. Its unique qualities make it possible for him to confidently tie back the far-flung collections to this particular location.



The upper opening of Spirit Eye.
(Diana Nguyen / Marfa Public Radio)



Archaeologist Bryon Schroeder
standing in Spirit Eye. (Diana Nguyen
/ Marfa Public Radio)



The crew sifting through looted dirt
to see if any valuable artifacts were
left behind. (Diana Nguyen / Marfa
Public Radio)

Schroeder says looted sites often go unresearched because archaeologists view them as being destroyed. "We can learn a lot at these sites if we don't walk away from them," he says. "So I think that in and of itself is a pretty big finding to the archaeological community."