



Human history on the INL Site spans at least 13,000 years, from prehistoric hunter-gatherers to nuclear-energy researchers.

INL's hidden side protects valuable cultural resources

By [John Howze](#), *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

Recently, members of the public were treated to a special once-a-year tour of Idaho National Laboratory.

Rather than seeing researchers in laboratories or the [Advanced Test Reactor](#), they saw the hidden side of INL — cultural, historical and archaeological treasures that include some of the oldest Native American artifacts and most pristine archaeological sites found in the continental United States.

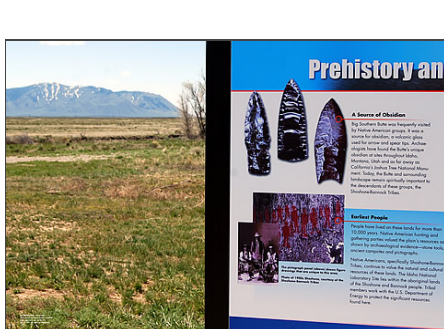
"Creation of the National Reactor Testing Station here in August 1949 resulted in restricted access to most of the 890 square miles of high desert — and, perhaps as an unintended benefit, helped protect many significant artifacts and sites scattered all across that land," said Julie Braun Williams, technical lead for INL's Cultural Resources Team.

"Welcome to our 890-square-mile office," said Brenda Pace. "We work very closely with INL project managers all across the laboratory to make sure that projects don't harm the many types of cultural resources that are preserved in abundance here."

The work is important because once such fragile, nonrenewable resources are destroyed, they are gone forever.



INL guests trek through the sagebrush desert en route to an archaeological area.



A roadside sign shows some artifacts Native Americans made from obsidian they found at Big Southern Butte (in background).

Here is some information staff members shared as they guided the 2010 tour:

- The first prehistoric nomads roamed a much wetter, more lush landscape seeking food, raw materials such as obsidian — glassy volcanic rock — and shelter where they could find it. Two Clovis projectile points have been found on the INL Site. [Clovis points](#) have been dated elsewhere at 13,000 to 13,500 years old and were used during a relatively brief period (an estimated 100-300 years) by a culture that hunted woolly mammoth and giant bison (both now extinct), among other animals.
- Nomadic groups of Native American hunter-gatherers found many valuable resources in the desert, using one of humanity's most valuable inventions, the atlatl or spear thrower, to bring dinner to camp for more than 8,000 years.
- Many generations of Native Americans used the desert for hunting and to obtain plants for medicinal and other purposes, as well as for raw materials such as obsidian.
- The Shoshone-Bannock Heritage Tribal Office has helped INL researchers understand that the INL landscape is filled with archaeological sites, plants, animals and land features that continue to be important to Shoshone-Bannock tribal members for medicine, food, religion, education, culture and landmarks that define home and territory.
- As late as the early 1800s, bison roamed the Snake River Plain.

"We really love our jobs," said Pace. "One day you may find us walking across the desert in skirmish-line fashion to identify artifacts that might have been left behind a thousand years ago, or cooperating with Shoshone-Bannock tribal members to identify tribally important features of the natural landscape, or sorting through historic documents describing early pioneer settlements or first-of-a-kind test reactors."

All of this and more is preserved within the boundaries of today's INL. And once a year, members of the public are invited on a tour of these resources.

Through walking tours of some of INL's many archaeological and historic sites, this year's tour members got revealing glimpses of how people have interacted with the sagebrush steppe here over thousands of years. Cultural Resources staff members Williams, Pace, Diana "Dino" Lowrey, Clayton Marler and Hollie Gilbert took turns sharing information with the INL group — and fielding questions from an interested public.

- Goodale's Cutoff of the [Oregon Trail](#) passed from Fort Hall, near Blackfoot, Idaho, and around the Big Southern Butte on its way to Arco, Idaho. Later, there was a stage station located near the springs at the base of the butte.
- By 1900, the Oregon Short Line railroad crossed the desert from Blackfoot to Arco. And in 1906, the first U.S. transcontinental automobile trip crossed it too, on a road that followed the railroad's path.
- In the early 1900s, homesteaders settled on portions of what is now INL, and eked out a living during a few wet years before a return to normal, drier weather ruined their hopes of farming the arid land.
- In the World War II era, some families lived at housing in what is now INL's Central Facilities Area, because some people involved in testing ordnance for the Navy brought families with them.

"As a manager, I am happy to be able to support public tours that introduce people to our rich heritage of cultural and natural resources," said Jennifer Jorge, manager of the Environmental Resources and Water Management Department at INL. "These tours provide a firsthand opportunity to gauge the success of our stewardship."

Archaeologist Lowrey concurred.

"There is no more satisfying job at INL than helping to preserve a part of our past history for future generations to enjoy," she said. "It is so exciting for us to share a part of INL's amazing history with the public. Most people are not aware of the many natural — that is, cultural, biological, ecological and geological — resources that have been protected at the INL Site. We're keeping custody of these treasures for future generations."

[Feature Archive](#)



An old garbage dump contains World War II-era toys, household goods and other items.