Petroglyph boulders on the Rogue River at Two Mile Creek: Intentions and Actions, 1974-2015

ABSTRACT. Petroglyph sites are rare in Oregon west of the Cascades. Southwest Oregon’s most important place with petroglyphs is a beach inundated during the high water flow of the Rogue River. In recent decades Two Mile Creek’s petroglyph-bearing sandstone boulders have been honored, studied, ignored, damaged, lost, and removed. Today seven of the boulders are located in a park in Agness, their third location since removal in 1977. Sand, gravel, brambles, and moss cover fifty-nine in situ boulders. My primary purpose is not to analyze the place or the petroglyphs. Instead, I consider our ideas of this place and the petroglyphs and the resulting actions. With a focus on the period from 1974 to the present, 2015, I have assembled and will explicate material from diverse sources. Finally, I encourage the responsible state agencies to complete a baseline study leading to inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Part 1  2001-2014

Gold Beach
Agness
Two Mile Creek
Rogue River

Curry County, Oregon
2001. Curry County Museum at Fairgrounds
Gold Beach, Oregon

2001 Curry County Fairgrounds photos courtesy Linda Nading
2001. “The rocks containing the petroglyphs have significant meaning to our culture and beliefs and should be returned to ... the sacred area in our homeland.”

- Don Fry, chairman of the Tribes of the Lower Rogue, letter to the Curry Historical Society Museum
2001. Interpretative sign on Boulder #18: Petroglyphs  Two Mile Creek  Rogue River
One of seven boulders displayed at the Fairgrounds

2001 photo courtesy Linda Nading
2001. Scraping moss off in situ boulder to reveal zigzag petroglyph, Two Mile Creek, Rogue River

2001 photo courtesy Linda Nading
2002. Seven Petroglyph Boulders moved from Curry County Fairgrounds to Agness near the Rogue River

2002 article courtesy Agness-Illahe Museum
2002: Boulders placed at Agness-Illahe Museum
Upriver 30 miles from Gold Beach,
five miles downriver from original site.

2002 Photo courtesy Agness-Illahe Museum
2002-2010: Boulders displayed outdoors on grass near Agness-Illahe Museum
2010: Agness-Illahe Museum closes.

The seven Two Mile boulders moved to Agness’s old school park, their third display site since removal in 1977 from the Rogue River beach.
2010 - Today. Boulder #18
Agness Park
2002 – Today. Interpretive Sign

Since 2010 in Agness Park with petroglyph boulders
Part 2  1974-1977

Two Mile Creek
Rogue River
Gold Beach
Curry County, Oregon

From the Interpretive Sign, Agness Park:

“They were found on sandstone boulders at Two Mile Creek, six miles up the Rogue River from Agness and removed in 1975 to protect against vandalism.”
1964. Stephen Dow Beckham maps and sketches petroglyph boulder at Two Mile Creek
1974. Malcolm and Louise Loring document 30 petroglyph boulders at Two Mile Creek

Originally published 1983.

This site is recognized as most complex and significant petroglyph site in Southwest Oregon.

In 1976 the site was placed under State jurisdiction after a survey located the petroglyphs below the river’s high water mark.

Photos 1976 CCHS. Left, Dr. Joel Berreman, UO
1977. #2 in situ.
Left: Chalked

One of the seven boulders removed
August 1977

Above: CCHS. Left: from Loring
1977. #18 in situ.

Four views of one of seven boulders removed August 1977

Photo page CCHS
1977. Removal authorized by the Oregon State Land Board in response to studies and requests by the Curry County Historical Society.

CCHS Photo: #18 in situ, one of seven selected boulders removed to Fairgrounds in Gold Beach.
August 6, 1977. One of the seven petroglyph boulders approved for removal from the beach at the mouth of Two Mile Creek, Rogue River. Appears to be Boulder #2.

Removal Photos: CCHS.
One of the seven removed from Two Mile Creek, Rogue River, August 1977, transported 35 miles downriver to the Curry County Fairgrounds at Gold Beach, on the Oregon coast, for “display, study, and protection”
August 6, 1977. Boulders arrive
At Curry County Museum at the Fairgrounds in Gold Beach.

“They figured that those rocks were s’posed to be there forever. The people up there (several of the Indian families in Agness-Illihee) are pretty upset.” - Woody Fry

Today. Two Mile Creek, Rogue River

A petroglyph boulder at river edge, summer season.

Creek and river floods, sand deposition, beach erosion, scouring, and bushes and moss alter or cover portions of the site and its boulders and may have moved or carried away boulders.
Today. Petroglyph, Two Mile Creek, Rogue River

Note missing portion on right; CCHS said in the 1970s this was an intentional removal as vandalism. Petroglyphs on missing portion show in Beckham and Loring sketches from 1964 and 1974.

In upper right of the photo: the drift boat of Don Fry.
Part 3 1985-2000

Rogue River
Two Mile Creek
Curry County, Oregon

From the Interpretive Sign, Agness Park:

“These seven petroglyphs are between 4-8 thousand years old – they represent some of the oldest ancient art forms in America!

“The engravings were already “ancient” when the Shisda-Quatsda tribe, an Athabaskan speaking group, arrived in the region about 1,500 years ago.”
Southwest Oregon
Rogue River
Curry County, Oregon

Two Mile Creek
Marial 8,000 BP

Agness
Tlegetlinten 6,000 BP

Stratton 11,000 BP

Indian Sands 11,000 BP

Port Orford
Gold Beach
Brookings

Image: from Google Maps

Image: from Google Maps

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6,000 BP

11,000 BP

8,000 BP

3/23/2023
Date ranges of human occupations in the region

Tlegetlinten (35CU59) - large site occupied from at least 6000 years BP.
Downriver six miles from Two Mile Creek. (Tisdale 1986)

Marial (35CU84) - evidence of human utilization for the past 8500 years.
A stratified, multicomponent site 20 miles upriver. (Scheindorfer 1987, Griffin 1983)

Stratton Creek (35JO21) - occupation dates from 11000 to 7700 years ago.
- “the earliest dated site in southwestern Oregon.”
With Marial the only two sites within the Rogue River basin documented to the early Holocene. (Bialas 2012)

Indian Sands (35CU67) – occupation at least 11000 years ago.
Early Holocene/Paleoamerican presence on the southern Oregon coast. (Davis 2006, Davis 2008, Willis and Davis 2007)

From 9000 BP to 2000 BP a time of cultural stability
This extended Klamath Mountain region named the Glade tradition. (Connolly 1988)

The sign’s conjecture of dates seems to derive from suggested dates of lanceolate projectile points at two nearby habitation sites. (Scheindorfer 1987, Nisbet 1981)

“The interpretive panels appear to have some wishful thinking in them. I am not aware of any archaeologist who would date the petroglyphs at 4,000 to 8,000 years old. No one knows.” (Stephen Dow Beckham 2012)
Two Mile Creek, Rogue River
Curry County, Oregon

5 miles above Agness
35 miles upriver from Gold Beach and the Pacific Coast

Image: from Google Maps
Early 1900s. Old Diggins Mine

The rapids immediately upriver from Two Mile Creek

Log dam diverted water, an example of the extensive hydraulic gold mining on the Rogue River.

Image from CCHS archives
1920s & 1930s. Dynamite Blasting of river rocks, including Two Mile rapids, opened channels for boats.


In the 1970s massive upstream dams altered seasonal water flows.
Cupule boulders on river edge during high water.

Smoothed grasses show previous week’s higher water flow.

December 2014

Two Mile Creek enters Rogue River during winter’s high water.

Two instream boulders, left, show cupules.

December 2014
1994. Forest Service launches a week-long project at Two Mile with 20 volunteers and a rock art specialist to survey and document the petroglyphs and seek other sites nearby.

Story August 17, 1994. Courtesy Agness-Illihe Museum

Under the supervision of Siskiyou Forest Service archaeologist Janet Joyer, moss was scraped off, the boulders scrubbed, painted with aluminum oxide for ease of photography, then “scrubbed clean.”

August 22-26, 1994. Image from USFS 1994 photo courtesy Southern Oregon Historical Society
Typical moss-covered boulder
Two Mile Creek

Photo 2014 by Douglas Beauchamp
1994. USFS

59 boulders with petroglyphs exposed at Two-Mile Creek.
Revealing
900 cupules
30 zigzags
9 “vulvaforms”
+ grooves
(Study did not include the seven removed in 1977)

Lorings’ documented 30
including 7 removed

CCHS
recorded 22 before removal.
1975-1977

Photos: Scrubbed boulders painted with aluminum oxide for photography,

Images from photos USFS 1994/1996
Part 4   Signs / Designs

2002 – Today. Interpretive Sign, Agness park:

“Petroglyphs are artistic expressions pecked or etched into boulders. Archaeologists believe that one function of the Two Mile petroglyphs during late prehistoric times was to draw salmon and eels to the area.”

“Rock art gives us a glimpse into prehistoric ritual, religion, and symbolism.

“The most common design elements are the cupule (cup shape), zigzag, and the vulvaform (symbols of female fertility).“
2002 - 2015. Interpretive Sign

Agness Park - with the seven Two Mile Petroglyph boulders.
The cupule was the most common design element found at Two Mile Creek. In the Northwest, they are most often associated with weather.

Interpretive Sign: cupules

“The cupule was the most common design element found at Two Mile Creek. In the Northwest, they are most often associated with weather.”

(Image: CCHS. This boulder was not moved.)
Left, chalked in situ.
One of the seven boulders removed August 1977, now in park, above.

Above left: CCHS.  Left: from Loring.  Above: Douglas Beauchamp
Cupules were situated below the tide line, carrying songs and prayers recited in the creation of the glyphs to the "Salmon People."

"Cupules"
Interpreted by USFS, 1994-1996

Image: USFS 1994 photo in 1996 article, courtesy Southern Oregon Historical Society
Interpretive Sign: zigzag

“The zigzag is difficult to interpret, but may be associated with summer rains and female fertility.”

Images: Left, Sign in Agness Park, detail. Right, Curry County Historical Society, 1977. This boulder was not moved.
“zigzags” Two Mile Creek

Images: Left, from USFS 1994 photo. Right, Curry County Historical Society, 1977. This boulder was not moved.
One interpretation of the zigzag designs suggests they represented lightning, symbolizing summer rain and female fertility.

“zigzag designs”
Interpreted by USFS

Images: Above, from USFS 1994 photo, 1996 article courtesy Southern Oregon Historical Society

Right, same boulder, Curry County Historical Society, 1977.
This boulder was not moved.
“zigzag designs”

Images:
Above, Boulder #18 in Park.
Right, boulder in situ on edge of Rogue River,
Right side chiseled off in 1970s per CCHS.
Boulder included in previous photos.
Interpretive Sign: “vulvaforms”

“The vulvaform is a symbol of female fertility and is found throughout the world.”

A few of the nine “vulvaforms” as interpreted by Forest Service archaeologist Janet Joyer (1996)

Ethnohistorian Stephen Dow Beckham observed, “The theories about the symbolism of the designs are nothing more than that -- surmises.” (Personal Communication 2012)

Robert Kentta, Cultural Resource Director of the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz said, “even the descendants of the Rogue River people are unsure about the exact nature of the rituals.” (Bernard 2000)
Part 5 TODAY

Two Mile Creek
Agness
Curry County, Oregon

“ Ancient carvings in stone (Petroglyphs) found on the Rogue River and elsewhere attest to the 20,000 year history of Native Americans in the area.”

-Real estate promotion ad for a Rogue River ranch

“At Two Mile Rapids on the Rogue River, a boulder field contains a number of stones that have been heavily marked with pits, grooves, zigzags, and curved lines. Some of the pits are large and deep enough to be bedrock bowls or mortars. ... the elements overwhelmingly form geometric rather than representational patterns.”

2011. Revised as: Oregon Archaeology

Erasure: no reference to the Two Mile petroglyph site - nor to any rock art sites in Southwest Oregon.
Today. Two Mile Creek / Rogue River confluence

Winter Photo.
Today. Rogue River as Recreation.

Jet boat from Gold beach, Sheriff, and floaters (far right)

Summer photo from beach at Two Mile Creek.
Today. Agness.

Rogue River
Curry County, Oregon

Image: from Google Maps
Today.

Boulder #2 in park.
Though some believe the petroglyphs are safest in the park, others assert the boulders should not have been removed, and some say they should be returned to the original area – the shoreline of the Rogue River.

Today. Seven in the Park.
Today. Since Time Immemorial.
Facebook: Confederated Tribes of the Lower Rogue

Recalling... Don Fry in 2001:
“The rocks containing the petroglyphs have significant meaning to our culture and beliefs.”
Southwest Oregon’s most important place with petroglyphs is Two Mile Creek on the Rogue River.

Offering unique insights and respect for the lifeways of ancient peoples inhabiting this vital region.

I encourage the responsible state agencies to endeavor to include this significant site on the National Register of Historic Places.

Photo: Rogue River and around the bend Two Mile Creek
2014 Douglas Beauchamp
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Thank you to all who care for this place.

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