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Fires uncover new Anasazi sites

BY BILL SCANLON

Scripps Howard News Service

Fires roaring through Mesa Verde National Park are threatening what many call one of the nation's greatest and most mysterious archaeological treasures.

While firefighters struggle to save the Cliff Palace, Spruce House and other famous cliff dwellings, the fires are uncovering scores of previously unknown sites where the Anasazi Indians once lived.

A 1996 Mesa Verde fire burned 3,000 acres, one-sixth of the acreage that has been

scorched this month. In so doing it uncovered previously 440 unknown sites, said park archaeologist Linda Towle.

Scientists hope the new sites revealed this year will help solve the great mystery of Mesa Verde and the Anasazi: Why did the ancient people suddenly disappear from the Four Corners area, and under what circumstances did they possibly turn to cannibalism?

Whatever the fires reveal, scientists will have to act fast. The bonanza for archaeology may vanish with the first heavy rain.

"The fires are great for visibility, but when the rains come, there will be big erosion problems," said Rick Wilshusen curator of anthropology for the University of Colorado museum.

The cliff dwellings were built by 12th century farmers skillfully piling sandstone blocks.

The Hopi, Zuni and Acoma are among the 29 tribes claiming some linkage with the Anasazi, which means

ancient enemies in the Navajo language. The people lived in the Four Corners area for 1,400 years until about 700 years ago.

Dwellings sheltered by rock overhangs, such as the Cliff Palace, are the best preserved and the ones that attract most of the tourists. But the ruins of some 20,000 Anasazi dwellings are scattered through the Southwest,

as far south as Tucson.

The ancient people of the American Southwest were wanderers, surviving on the animals they killed and the berries they gathered, until trade with their southern neighbors brought them something more valuable than gold corn seeds.

With those seeds of agriculture, they settled in, building simple one-story pit houses.

As their farms thrived, and they had more time to spare, they developed elaborate religious ceremonies and crafted intricate baskets and black-and-white pottery.

The Anasazi grew corn, beans and squash on terraces, built to capture precious rainwater.

A fair percentage of children didn't live beyond age 5, said Wilshusen.

If they survived childhood, Anasazi had a good shot of getting to 40 or 50 years old before dying.

Over the years, the Anasazi became adept at architecture and engineering.

To shape the loaf-sized sandstone for their two-story houses, they pounded the rock with a harder substance quartzite, said Catherine Cameron, assistant professor of anthropology at Colorado University.

"It obviously took a lot of knowledge to build something of two stories," said Cameron. The stone fit so tightly in some of the buildings still standing that they didn't need much mortar, Cameron said.

In others, the stones sat in a mortar bed, composed of mud, gravel, leaves and twigs.

They kneaded the mud to the right consistency, added broken pieces of stone, leaves and other vegetation to temper the material.

The walls were lined with a mud plaster, likely mixed with an alkali that made them a brilliant white.

The Anasazi seemed to have abandoned their dwellings in the Four Corners area at least a couple times before the final abandonment around 1280.

They left behind the densest collection of archaeological ruins in the United States. Hillary Rodham Clinton last year called Mesa Verde one of America's great historical jewels and targeted it for increased preservation through the Save America's Treasures program.

But why did the ancient people leave?

There are several theories, most with at least a hole or two.

Overpopulation: There might have been 18,000 people living in the area of the park about 1280, just before the Anasazi seem to have vanished. That could have put a strain on resources, forcing the people to search ever-further for game and firewood.

Drought: A severe 25-year drought toward the end of the 13th century may have forced the Anasazi to abandon the Four Corners area.

Climate change: The gentle spring rains and summer monsoons, which still hit New Mexico and Arizona, might have given way to a pattern of summer thunderstorms.