

TEN BASIC POINTS CONCERNING HUMAN REMAINS SCENES (OR, Why the Police Need Anthropologists)

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- (1) **Decomposed human remains are nearly always found by accident, by civilians.** Mother nature does a great job at hiding remains (especially when buried). Therefore, a search for a missing individual must be VERY well organized and large in scope to have any chance of success.
- (2) **Just because the scene is old doesn't mean that there's nothing left to recover!** Bones and soft tissues, even from very young infants, can preserve for hundreds or even thousands of years given the right conditions. Hairs, fibers, foot and shoeprints, hand impressions, clothing impressions, and tool marks left by the assailant have been found at human remains scenes, sometimes buried far below the ground surface. Therefore, don't assume that time has erased the evidence.
- (3) **The recovery of evidence from a human remains scene is difficult.** Decomposing remains go through a series of physical changes and interactions with the environment that make them difficult to locate, recognize, and collect. Anthropologists are used to seeing bones and evidence in this context.
- (4) **Your typical law enforcement and medicolegal personnel will NOT be adequately trained to handle the recovery.** The vast majority of crime scene technicians, coroners, and pathologists do not know how to conduct a recovery (particularly for buried remains), and so significant evidence may be missed. We ALWAYS find more evidence at a human remains scene that has already been processed.
- (5) **The decomposed human remains case is already 'cold.'** Therefore, take your time and do it right from the start. There's no need to rush. Call in the experts and wait for them to arrive. Plan on at least a full day for a typical recovery, and two days if a burial is involved. Don't allow yourself to be pressured to begin the recovery late in the day or during heavy rain.
- (6) **The scene is ALWAYS larger than it appears at first glance.** Scavenging animals, flowing water, and gravity can scatter bones and evidence away from the body. Insects that infested the body move away from it into the surrounding area as they complete their life cycles. Fallen leaves and vegetation then hide the scattered evidence, and you will trample it as you move through the scene to get to the body. Always string the periphery of the scene with yellow tape at least 10 yards out from what you believe to be the central concentration of remains, and keep all unnecessary personnel behind the line until the real scope of the scene can be determined.
- (7) **Your goal should be 100% recovery of the skeleton.** There are over 200 bones in the adult human skeleton, many of which are tiny and can easily be missed or mistaken for pebbles or debris. Children have even more bones. Total recovery is important because (a) the anthropologist needs as many bones as possible to help in the identification of the individual, (b) perimortem trauma may be present on any part of the skeleton, and (c) the relatives of the deceased are counting on the recovery of ALL of the remains of their loved one. **Complete recovery is perhaps the most important reason to have an anthropologist at the scene** -- the expert can quickly recognize bone fragments even when dirty or burned. In addition, the anthropologist can keep a running tally of what has been recovered and what still remains to be found.

(8) **To recover everything, careful and tedious methods must be used.** Anthropologists use very straightforward archeological techniques and procedures -- they just take time and training to implement properly. These techniques include surveying, gridding, 3-dimensional mapping, trowelling, and screening of soil and debris. In other words, just because a crime scene technician knows how to operate a metal detector and a GPS unit does not mean that he or she can conduct an adequate recovery. Excavation with shovels or heavy machinery is almost never appropriate at a human remains scene.

(9) **CONTEXTUAL CLUES can be just as important as the physical evidence.** The positions of evidence, their relationships to each other and to the environment, and even the absence of certain items is sometimes even more important than the physical evidence itself. This contextual information is what allows you to interpret the scene and to reconstruct what happened there.

(10) **Recovery is by nature a DESTRUCTIVE process because you destroy the scene while processing it.** If you cannot reconstruct the scene from the data you collected, then you are defeating the purpose of processing it: (a) to RECONSTRUCT (for the courts) the exact condition of the scene before you messed with it, and (b) to reconstruct the chain of events that produced the scene.

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