



E64 Standard Protocols: Forensic Archaeology Integration With Standard Archaeological and Anthropological Methodologies Following Natural Disasters

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand a non-**Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT)** response scenario that requires a new set of standard operating protocols.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the need for standard procedures in response to natural disasters when national response teams are not activated.

Forensic archaeology is a discipline formed by the need for practical application of archaeological and anthropological techniques to address unique scenarios involving legal matters. Incorporation of techniques from forensic science coupled with standard archaeological and anthropological methods allows for the creation of new protocols to use after natural disasters ensue. In particular, this presentation suggests how agencies may utilize first responders to create a response plan addressing legal issues regarding human remains and employing recovery teams to ensure that proper documentation, recovery, and identification occurs. Highlighted here are unique problems related to cemetery impacts, and the focus centers on the necessity for both the implementation of legal and scientific efforts early in the process to minimize misidentification, appropriation of remains for trafficking, and the incorporation of bioarchaeologists with experience in archaeological excavation and historical documentation.

When communities are devastated by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, frequently the dead are impacted as well. In South Louisiana, where bodies are often entombed in above-ground vaults, family crypts, or mausoleums, the effects of torrential rain, wind, and flooding that accompany such storms on these cultural features may be acute, sometimes resulting in disinterment. First responders to situations such as this encounter a plethora of legal and logistical problems. In the wake of natural disasters, local and national officials often seek the expertise of forensic archeologists and anthropologists in the recovery of disinterred human remains. Crucial at this juncture is the implementation of protocols that assess the unique aspects of the situation, address the law concerning the dead, and use available expertise from those that specialize in archaeological and anthropological methodologies. While federal response teams such as DMORT have protocols established for handling these concerns, the scale of the disaster's impact and the cost of deployment, even with government subsidies, can be prohibitive for smaller jurisdictions needing assistance. In such instances, the response must be coordinated on a state or local level. This presentation provides an example of one such situation.

Hurricane Isaac hit southern Louisiana in August 2012 as a category 1 hurricane and resulted in some parishes experiencing flooding up to 15 feet. Plaquemines Parish, located southeast of New Orleans along the Louisiana coast, was hit particularly hard. Significant damage to three cemeteries in the area resulted in the displacement of numerous caskets, burial vaults, and crypts and the scattering and commingling of human remains. With no activation of DMORT, a mixture of local, state, and private entities coordinated cemetery response efforts, recovery planning, and assessment of the damage reported in Plaquemines Parish. This coordination was a crucial step in ensuring that proper protocols were implemented and provides a model depicting how multiple agencies working together can solve multifaceted scenarios similar to what is reported here; however, this approach also highlights the need for a local point agent in order to provide full resolution of the recovery effort. This person not only adds an important feature to the recovery team to ensure all operations are concluded, he/she also remains the conduit point for family or agency assistance after recovery and cleanup is completed, and after responders have returned to their normal activities. The use of recovery archaeology can be vital in preserving cemeteries and memorial grounds and, in this case, was necessary for returning skeletal remains to their graves.

A set of uniform response guidelines is proposed that might prove useful to local officials concerning such recoveries. The response to Hurricane Isaac provides one example of a natural disaster that, when handled appropriately, resulted in the documentation of not only human remains, but cultural materials and identification of the dead.

Forensic Archaeology, Hurricane, Disaster Response