

Pack-Rat Middens Hold Keys To Past

At Lava Beds National Monument in northeastern California, pack-rat middens are shedding light on historic vegetation patterns. Two middens, which have been analyzed and carbon-dated by Dr. Peter Mehringer, Jr., of Washington State University at Pullman, have returned dates of 2600 years B.P. and 5300 years B.P.

The information contained in the plant remains preserved in the middens reveals historic vegetation in the headquarters area to be nearly identical to that present today. Another midden indicates the former dominance of associations whose current abundance here and elsewhere has been partially attributed to historic fire suppression and livestock grazing. Five additional middens currently are being analyzed and dated.

The information generated by this project will be useful in reconstructing historic vegetation patterns and may influence fire management decisions on utilizing prescribed fire to return an area to "historic conditions." The carbon-dates are helping to establish minimum ages of lava tubes where the middens are found. Only small portions of each midden are collected, leaving most of the middens intact for future study and visitor interest.

*Dennis Schramm
Resource Management Specialist, Lava Beds NM*