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Virginia L. Butler

Portland State University, virginia@pdx.edu

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Comments on “Identification, Classification, & Zooarchaeology”

Virginia L. Butler

Dept. Anthropology, Portland State University
virginia@pdx.edu

I am pleased to see the republication of Jon Driver’s 1992 paper. He makes many excellent points about zooarchaeological methods and reporting of faunal data, especially the need to be explicit about the basis of our taxonomic identifications, including assumptions we make about which taxa are in our geographic universe and other factors that help determine whether a species, genus, or family level assignment is appropriate. There are many reasons we should follow Driver’s suggestions. Being explicit about the source of our identifications allows for others to evaluate claims, prerequisite to the scientific enterprise. We can also build on others’ work, not having to re-invent the wheel in developing distinguishing criteria. Another reason is associated with data synthesis. Aggregating faunal data across multiple projects and analysts can be challenging, if not impossible when methods of analysis are vague or obscure. In addition, as we work to insinuate zooarchaeological research into more public domains such as wildlife and conservation policy, we will need to defend our identifications in those public domains including the courts. We want the products of our research to stand up to the closest scrutiny as we leave the “ivory tower” and the stakes increase. Driver’s paper provides very useful guidance here.

I have two main points to make. First, I want to explore the use of “identification by association”, which Driver suggests is of little value to zooarchaeology. As Driver explains, this practice begins with the taxonomic assignment of some specimens in a given site context, based on morphological or other criteria, and then “by association”, assigning a larger set of specimens to that taxon simply because of context, not based on independent criteria. For example, if one was able to identify some number of a site’s fish remains from the family Catostomidae (sucker) to the species *Catostomus macrocheilus* (largescale sucker), then by association, one could assign all the sucker remains to *C. macrocheilus*, not just the ones assigned based on morphology, given that this is the only species (of several others in the region) present. Driver suggests that faunal analysts should avoid this practice, arguing instead that each bone be examined and taxonomically identified on its own merit. I argue that the problem with

“identification by association” is not the use of context to make a claim, but rather the lack of background information in a report that would explain the analytic decision used to make the taxonomic assignment. If one is explicit about analytic decisions and protocols used to assign specimens to various taxonomic levels and describes which specimens were assigned based on morphology and association, then other researchers can evaluate the knowledge claims and decide whether to accept them. The key piece here is being explicit, shining a light on the hidden assumptions.

Second, I want to propose a bit of activism in the zooarchaeology community, if we all agree with Driver and the underlying value of promoting rigorous approaches to faunal analysis and reporting of data. As with archaeology overall, in North America most funded faunal analysis and reporting takes place under the umbrella of heritage or cultural resources management. In the United States, state level offices (known variously as Office of Historic Preservation, State Historic Preservation Office, etc.) set guidelines for archaeological work and reporting. At least in Oregon and Washington, guidelines for zooarchaeological data reporting do not exist; I suspect many states and Canadian provinces lack state-level guidelines. I suggest that we come up with some general guidelines for faunal sampling, analysis and reporting and that we work with our state/provincial historic preservation officers to get them integrated into archaeology practice guidelines. Because of varying goals and research interests, we don’t want to mandate that all faunal analyses conform in lock-step to the same procedures. On the other hand we might “raise our game” more broadly, encouraging greater rigor and explicitness regarding taxonomic identification (and other important aspects of analysis and reporting), if we work to develop guidelines/ policies that management agencies could use. Writing papers in peer-reviewed journals may not be sufficient to lead to the kinds of changes Driver and others of us want to see.

Comments on “Identification, Classification, & Zooarchaeology”

Karen D. Lupo

Dept. Anthropology, Washington State University
klupo@wsu.edu

In the nearly two decades since Driver’s (1992) publication appeared in *Circaea*, identification techniques for faunal remains from archaeological sites have greatly expanded and become far more