

## Case study

### Open data and risk of looting in archaeology

Frank, R. D., Kriesberg, A., Yakel, E., & Faniel, I. M. (2015). Looting hoards of gold and poaching spotted owls: Data confidentiality among archaeologists & zoologists. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 52(1), 1-10.

“Since the establishment of their discipline, archaeologists have struggled with the unique ethical challenges inherent in their research practices. [...] One of the main concerns in the field has long been the practice of looting historical sites and the threat this poses to both cultural heritage and future archaeological work. Archaeologists today condemn looting for its piecemeal destruction of archaeological sites, its effect on illicit antiquities markets, and its secondary effects, wherein the search for valuable objects places human remains at risk (Kersel and Chesson, [2013](#)). The current version of the SAA “Principles of Archaeological Ethics” makes reference to protecting sites from potential looters, noting the need to “[preserve] and [protect] in situ archaeological sites... when publishing and distributing information about their nature and location” (Society for American Archaeology, 1996). While short on specifics, this principle builds upon earlier pieces of the document, which call for more widespread data sharing and publication across the field. Digital archaeology repositories, such as Open Context, also have addressed this concern with regard to research data. Their “Data Publication Guide for Contributors” explains the responsibility of individual researchers to decide about any desired restrictions on location data before depositing datasets into the repository (“Open Context,” 2015).

[...] Researchers in archaeology expressed a particular concern. If they made location information available and the site was then looted, they feared they might be held responsible. Archaeologist07 described a situation in which she found herself reconsidering her publication plans in light of the country's anti-looting laws and the potential damage to the site. She questioned whether it was her responsibility to help protect a site from looters if her host country already had laws in place to safeguard archaeological sites, and whether she would be held legally responsible if the site was in some way damaged.”

### Questions for discussion:

1. How to responsibly implement the principle “as open as possible and as closed as necessary” regarding archaeological research data?
2. Who should make decisions about whether and how to manage access to sensitive archaeological data? Who should decide whether data is sensitive?