

Case study

Open data and risk of looting in archaeology

SOURCE: 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.
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Archaeologists have faced ethical challenges inherent in their research since their discipline's inception. One major concern is historical site looting - unauthorized and often illicit removal of artefacts, objects, and valuable items from archaeological sites. This destructive practice harms sites, fuels illegal antiquities markets, and places human remains at risk. Ethical guidelines for archaeologists issued by professional organizations (e.g., guidelines by the Society for American Archaeology) emphasize archaeologist's duty to protect sites from potential looting. This requirement means also careful consideration of risk before open data sharing and publication in archaeology. Digital archaeology repositories, like Open Context, have addressed this risk by issuing data publication guidelines highlighting researchers' responsibility to assess the necessity to remove or restrict access to location data before submitting datasets to a repository.

In the research interviews that were conducted during the study by Frank et al., archaeologists voiced a particular concern. They feared that sharing location details as open data could lead to site looting and subsequent blame placed on them. An archaeologist recounted a situation where she reconsidered her publication plans due to the anti-looting regulations and the potential harm to the site. She pondered whether safeguarding a site from looters was her duty when the host country already had protective laws in effect and whether she could face legal accountability if any damage occurred to the site.

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?
- 3) What are the responsibilities of individual researchers when depositing datasets into a digital repository?