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The Archaeology of Range Creek Canyon: An introduction

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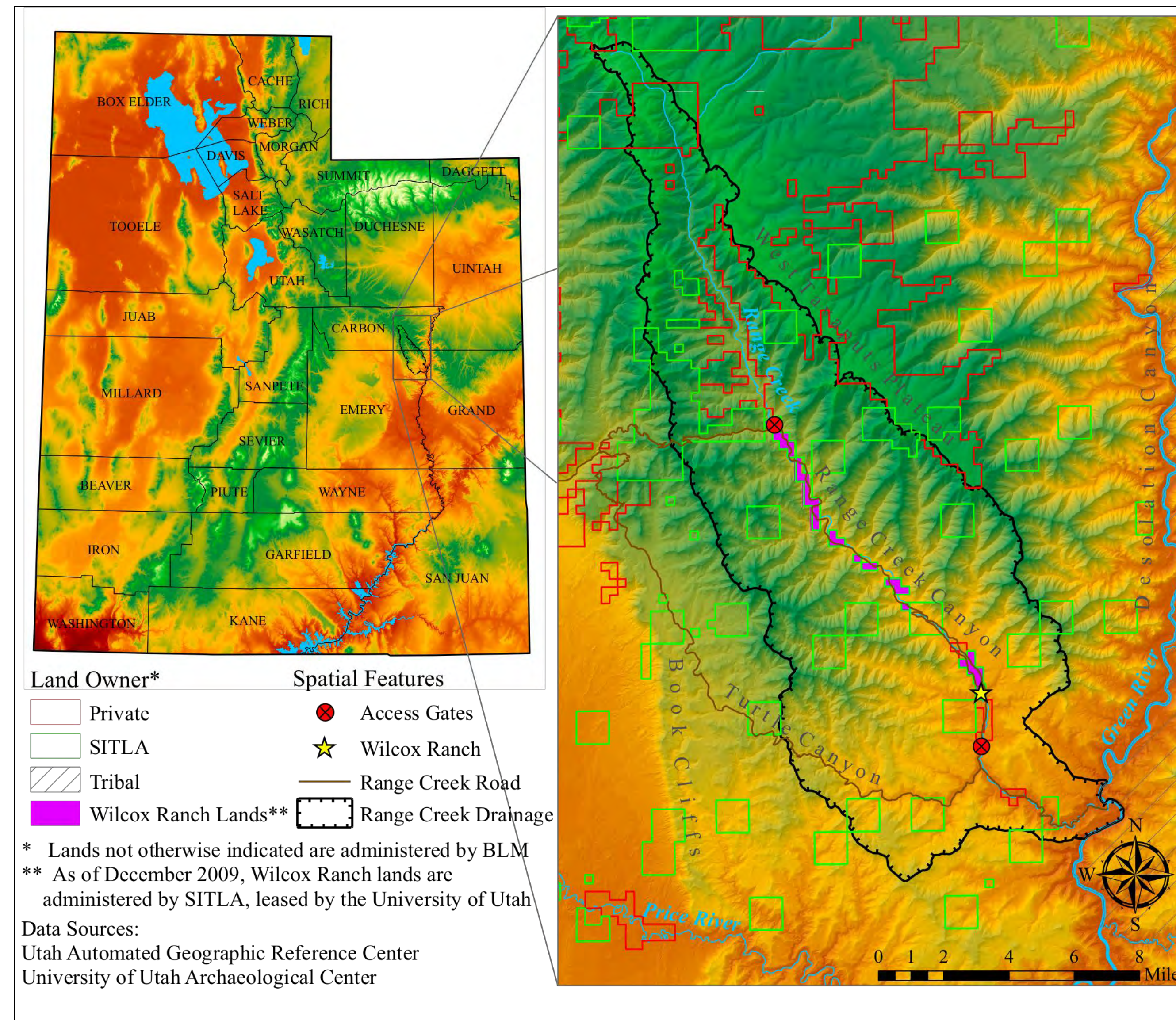


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Range Creek is a tributary to the Green River located in a remote part of central eastern Utah between the Book Cliffs and Desolation Canyon. Range Creek holds the highest density of undisturbed prehistoric archaeological sites in this region of Utah. Sites in Range Creek contain a robust record of human activity dating from as early as 400 A.D. and lasting until perhaps as late as 1200 A.D. The highest occupation occurred between 900-1100 A.D. The prehistoric archaeology of Range Creek is characterized by numerous isolated pit-house type structures, pit-house villages, grain storage bins high on cliff walls and rock art sites characteristic of the Fremont archaeological complex.

Range Creek's archaeological resources have been protected from vandalism due to its remote location and tenacious protection by the Wilcox family who controlled access to the canyon during the bulk of the 20th century. Because of the nearly pristine condition of many of the sites, Range Creek today is a natural laboratory for testing archaeological hypotheses. Since 2003, our archaeological research in the canyon has been conducted under the auspices of the Utah Museum of Natural History's Range Creek Research Project. Over 400 prehistoric sites have been recorded to date and 3 test excavations have been conducted by the University of Utah's archaeology field school. Additional excavations have been conducted by the College of Eastern Utah. The University of Utah's department of Geography has operated a geography field school since 2006 in conjunction with the archaeology field school, giving students a unique opportunity to work in a multidisciplinary learning environment combining archaeological theory and field methods with fundamentals of biogeography and paleo-ecology.

Archaeological research in Range Creek is geared toward understanding the origins & disappearance of the Fremont archaeological complex, focusing on how ecological, demographic and environmental conditions might have tempered these events. The high density and diversity of prehistoric sites, and high temporal resolution make Range Creek an ideal place for this kind of research. Additionally, the canyon's isolation and lack of impending development will enable the formulation of a multi-decadal research agenda, a unique opportunity in a traditionally time-sensitive, salvage-driven science.



Range Creek detail showing land ownership, access gates and the Wilcox Ranch. In an administrative land swap with DWR finalized in December 2009, SITLA gained control over the canyon. This land swap will enable the University of Utah to turn the Wilcox Ranch into a world-class multi-disciplinary natural history field station.



Range Creek is home to a diverse collection of rock art. From Barrier Canyon style panels left by some of Utah's earliest inhabitants to proto-historic Ute pictographs and turn-of-the-century cowboy inscriptions, nearly every group of people to inhabit the state left its mark in Range Creek.



Projectile points and lithic tools recovered from various sites in Range Creek

Artifacts recovered from site 42Em19 during the 2008 field season

Artifacts recovered from site 42Em3298 during the 2009 field season

Artifacts recovered from site 42Em2861 during the 2009 field season

Some of the artifacts recovered from excavations and survey work by University of Utah archaeological field school crew and volunteer staff include bone fragments; beads made from bone, stone and shell; ceramic sherds; stone grinding implements; and various stone tools and flakes.



Prehistoric architecture in Range Creek shows a range of variations of two main forms: Grain storage bins high on cliff faces and circular rock alignments. The remote granaries present an interesting question: Why invest so much energy in storage? Protection from animals? Weather? Enemies? Future research will seek to answer this question.



Archaeology and geography field school students in Range Creek are instructed in a variety of field techniques. From taking bog cores and collecting packrat midden deposits for paleoenvironmental reconstruction to surveying and basic excavation techniques, the skills and knowledge are invaluable for practicing archaeologists.