

Getting to Know You

Irene Arévalo Nazrala

Q. How did you get into archaeology, and specifically Rapa Nui archaeology? What triggered your interest?

A. It is difficult to give a single reason, but moving to Rapa Nui while I was still in high school was an important change in my life. I have always been passionate about two things: dance and archaeology. Dancing had always been part of my life, but I really got to understand the science of archaeology when I moved to Rapa Nui and I enrolled in the Terevaka.net Archaeological Outreach program at the local museum. At that point it was clear to me what I wanted to do and still want to do. I chose to study conservation rather than archaeology because I thought I could make a bigger impact in the field of conservation and restoration, which is still a relatively small field in Chile.

Q. Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

A. To answer this question I need to distinguish between my experiences and academia. In 2006, I had the opportunity to participate in an archaeological excavation under the direction of archaeologist Olivia Reyes in Segovia, Spain. The remains were from the home of Roman Emperor Theodosius the Great. Witnessing the excavation, the painstaking work, the quantity of goods and information associated with the site and imagining all of the research and conservation that must work together in such a project was an eye-opening experience for me.

In an academic context, I must mention three mentors in particular: Mónica Bahamondez (Lead Conservator, Centro Nacional de Conservación y Restauración), Paula Valenzuela (Conservator, Museo Antropológico Padre Sebastián Englert), and Roxana Seguel (Conservator and Professor) who all helped to teach me not only about physical conservation techniques, but also about conservation as part of the process of archaeological research.

Q. What theory or project of yours turned out differently from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

A. The truth is that I still don't have many years of experience under my belt and I'm sure there will be many surprises to come.



Q. What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

A. A few years ago, I would have responded that I would have studied dance. Now it's difficult to imagine working anywhere outside of the scope of cultural heritage. Even if I weren't privileged enough to participate in fieldwork, there is such a great need in Chile for more professionals in the line of conservation. I don't think I could be complacent, knowing how badly people are needed in the field of conservation, if I weren't directly involved in some way.

Q. What was your best Eureka moment?

A. I think the biggest discovery in my life came the day that Mónica Bahamondez and Paula Valenzuela gave a presentation to my class in the Terevaka.net Archaeological Outreach program about careers in conservation. That day clearly defined who I am now.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish (in archaeology) on Rapa Nui in the future?

A. There's so much to do, and I think that anyone that has a bit of archaeologist inside them always wants to be deep in an excavation discovering little trinkets and taking them to the lab for analysis – having the opportunity to appreciate these treasures before anyone else in the world gets that chance. However, after my personal and professional experiences living on Rapa Nui, what I would

like most is to form an interdisciplinary team to implement a strategy that integrates research, education, and cultural conservation. I think this is what the island needs most, and it would be an honor to participate in such a project.

Q. What is your favorite Rapa Nui site and why?

A. Rano Kau, specifically the conservation area within the crater. I've only been to this fragile and difficult-to-access area a few times. I like this spot best most of all for the vegetation: there's an oral tradition on the island that explains the proliferation of plants on the island and refers to one person in particular who planted seeds and seedlings in the crater's interior. Every time I visit this location, or even imagine it, I think of how spectacular the island must have been. I think about the species that have gone extinct, of how much remains to be saved, and how this location represents the perfect intersection of cultural and natural heritage. It helps me strengthen my conviction in my work.

Q. What myth or misinformation about Rapa Nui would you like to dispel?

A. There are a lot of myths about the island, each more horribly inaccurate than the last, but I think what is more important than dispelling the misinformation is to protect the archaeological sites in a way that maintains and even restores their value through anthropological context.

Q. What's the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Rapa Nui?

A. I think the most important concept for us all to understand is that the island is itself a cultural landscape, formed by thousands of smaller archaeological sites. It's important for us to undertake scientific research that benefits the entire island community, including tourists. We must remember that very few of the island residents travel abroad to conferences to learn about the island's prehistoric culture. The information derived from research must be effectively disseminated within the island community – not only through public talks, but also in a collaborative manner that can help to integrate research findings within local school curriculum.

Q. What advice would you give to a person interested in Rapa Nui archaeology or anthropology (or those fields generally)?

A. Keep an open mind. It's not easy to find work in cultural heritage and when you stumble across opportunities that aren't exactly what you hoped for, it's vital to remember that you can still make an important contribution to cultural conservation.

Q. If you could, what would you change about the fields of archaeology and anthropology?

A. I'd like to see better communication amongst specialists. It seems that both on the island and off there is a lack of dialogue about the best strategies to accomplish our overarching goals. Within conservation, we seem to be missing research focused on technical issues related to degradation of materials over time. We should be generating more data now that could be critical for projects in the future and creating an avenue for the fluid exchange of information.

Q. What are you currently reading?

A. For fun I'm reading a book called "Bad Karma", by David Safier. For work, I have various archaeological, conservation, museology, and philosophy manuscripts that I'm consulting each day.

Q. Credentials?

A. Project Manager – CONAF, Rapa Nui

2011-2012 Surrogate Manager of the Archaeology Unit – CONAF, Rapa Nui

January-March 2011: project design for the documentation and laser-scanning to digitally recreate the Ceremonial Village of 'Orongo in three dimensions.

2012-2011: Design of the interpretive panels in the tourist reception building at the Ceremonial Village of 'Orongo.

September 2011: Presenter: Congreso Internacional de Museología de Rosario, Argentina.

Título profesional: 2008. Conservador y Restaurador de Bienes Culturales.

Grado: Licenciado.

Postgrado: Máster (c)

Publication: López P., I. Cartajena, C. García, J. Vega, and I. Arévalo. 2008. Mastodons and Paleocamelids from Mid-Latitude Chile: Archaeological, Paleontological and Paleoenvironmental Implications from Aguas de Ramón 1 site (Metropolitan Región). *Current Research in the Pleistocene* 25:182-183.

Q. Date and place of birth?

A. Viña del Mar, Chile, July 24, 1985.