

NCSHPO

National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers

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November 21, 2013

Mr. John Fahey, Chairman of the Board
Mr. Gary Knell, President and CEO
National Geographic
1145 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

RE: "Diggers" Program

Dear Messrs. Fahey and Knell:

I am writing to you on behalf of the *National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO)* to express the concern and disappointment shared by my colleagues across the nation and me regarding the choice of the National Geographic Society and the National Geographic Channel to air the "Diggers" television program—a program that is neither scientific nor educational and that is entirely contrary to the tradition of National Geographic to inspire people to care for our planet and its natural and cultural heritage.

The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO) is the professional association of the state government officials who carry out the national historic preservation program as delegates of the Secretary of the Interior pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended (NHPA) (16 USC 470). As such, NCSHPO represents the highest preservation officials in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and the U.S. territories.

Our members, in every jurisdiction, see firsthand the effects that irresponsible metal-detecting and relic hunting have had on our irreplaceable cultural heritage—whether it is a site in Virginia that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places where both 17th century features and probable Indian graves are now pock-marked with holes dug up by metal detectorists competing for the highest number of artifacts pulled out of the ground, or a little known Anasazi cave ravaged for intact pots on public lands in New Mexico, or the marked increase in looting along the El Camino Real Trail and the Oregon Trail just in the past year. The wanton destruction of America's history is growing and is being stimulated by the rash of recent television programs that directly or indirectly encourage this activity.

National Geographic has long been a leader in the dissemination of scientific, geographic, and cultural information within an ethical framework of conservation and preservation. Yet now, your current program, "Diggers," violates these long-held and fundamental ethics. Documenting metal detectorists destroying evidence of the past through indiscriminate metal detecting in order

to find “valuable relics” while competing in contests based solely on monetary value is unacceptable as either a scientific or conservation practice.

National Geographic has always been seen as a supporter of the preservation of the past. Removing historically significant artifacts from historic context without research design or proper locational controls violates the central ethics of archaeology. Once an artifact has lost its relationship with other artifacts and cultural features, its research value is destroyed. Your program not only does not emphasize either research value or the reconstruction of the past, it is focused solely on monetary value. As the question becomes, “How much is it worth on the open market,” the dollar, not the value of our history, becomes the primary benefit to the public. This anti-scientific message lies in stark contrast with the care you take with similar programs focused on the archaeological treasures of Egypt, Peru, or virtually any other country. Why are you selecting our own history for such disrespectful and anti-scientific treatment?

Your message, as a respected scientific and cultural resource body, encourages members of the public to mimic “TV stars” in buying metal detectors and treasure hunting for relics. Seeing what is portrayed as a harmless hobby, otherwise responsible citizens are descending on irreplaceable archaeological resources on both public and private lands and plundering artifacts. To add insult to injury, organized relic hunts such as the recent “Grand Relic Shoot Out” at the historic Flowerdew Hundred Plantation in Virginia led to almost 9,000 metal artifacts being dug up and carried off, seriously impacting the understanding of Virginia’s history.

We would encourage you to end this misguided television show as it undermines the very core values of *National Geographic* which has been seen as a paragon of information, conservation, and preservation since its inception. There are better ways to engage Americans in their history – and there is no shortage of credible archaeologists and historians around our county who would be willing to help you. To that end, the NCSHPO, and our membership, who confront this problem on a daily basis, stand ready to consult and assist.

Sincerely,



Erik M. Hein
Executive Director