A local Mecca for research

by Brett Larson

Picture a dozen people, walking shoulder-to-shoulder through the forest, armed only with leaf rakes. It's early spring, before the vegetation has begun to emerge from the forest floor. The group moves slowly forward, gently brushing aside the leaves, eyes peeled on the ground. Suddenly a voice calls out "Sherd!" Another voice chimes in, and another, until soon the entire group is calling, "Sherd, sherd, sherd!"

Sound like some strange primitive ritual? Try again; it's a group of archaeology students from St. Cloud State University, trying out new archeological techniques at Mille Lacs Kathio State Park.

Mille Lacs Kathio State Park has entered into a research partnership with St. Cloud State University and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. For them, the work being done is of vital interest because it relates to their history as a people and the lives of their ancestors.

Elise Aune is the Cultural Resources Specialist who is working most closely with people of the past, to describe their way of life.

To this end, the band is especially interested in "traditional site sites," where activities like rice and sugar processing occurred, as well as sacred sites — burial mounds and sites of other important ceremonies.

When the research is complete, the book will be used at Nay Ah Shing and other schools. As Aune said, "You can go over this information orally, but sometimes there's a problem with retention. Now we'll have an actual booklet that tells the story."

They may have more than that. Plans are to produce a CD-Rom of the 9000-year history of the park, and they have applied for a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to help with funding. The introduction of the interactive CD gives the viewer a true bird's-eye view of the park, soaring above the settlements and Kathio Field Research. Rothhaus wants his students to have experience with real historical research, and Kathio is the perfect site.

Rothhaus' primary field of study has been Greece and Turkey — an environment very different from that of central Minnesota — but he has expanded his horizons to include a site much closer to home.

Cummings said, "What's particularly exciting about Rothhaus' classes is his interest in the 19th and 20th century history of the site."

Although most people think of archaeology as the study of ancient or prehistoric societies, Cummings says archaeology is far more than that. "In understanding the relationship between humans and the environment," he said, "it's just as important to learn about the 1800s and 1900s as it is to learn about prehistory."

In line with that philoso-
Opjwe to learn more about the Kathio National Historical Landmark, and the partnership’s cutting-edge methods have attracted the attention of archaeologists around the world.

According to park naturalist Jim Cummings, who has been instrumental in creating the partnership and implementing the research, the people at Kathio want to learn more about the park so they know better how to manage it. We’re mandated to manage the landscape for recreation and preservation, and the more we know, the better we can do that,” said Cummings. “If we need to

Cummings and Dr. Richard Rothaus, the St. Cloud State archaeologist in charge of the project, “A project like this can help us to instill more pride in our kids,” said Aune. “Saving our history is like saving our culture.”

With help from David Mather and Bruce White of Lowcums and Associates, Aune is putting together a book about the history of the Mille Lacs Band, using research that has been conducted at Kathio. Instead of focusing on the pots and arrowheads found in the region, this book will attempt to put a face on the Lacs down through Lake Opjwe and the Rum River valley. When the CD is finished, the user will be able to click on various images to learn more about a specific time period or location in the park.

Jim Cummings said, “Elise is a great partner in this endeavor because she is able to teach us about traditional use areas and sacred sites. It’s a perspective we just don’t have.”

Aune praised both Rothaus and Cummings for their dedication to the research and their interest in the culture and history of the Mille Lacs Band.

The park was established in 1957, but its archaeological significance wasn’t fully recognized until the 1960s and 1970s, when Kathio was the site of a long-term research project by the Archaeology Field School of the University of Minnesota. Archaeologist Elden Johnson led the study of the area, uncovering important information about Minnesota history and prehistory. After his death in 1992, however, little archaeological research had happened at the park.

Eraser Dr. Rothaus, who has taught two classes about the Kathio area: Minnesota
Jim Cummings, Kathio park naturalist, and Richard Rothhaus, a St. Cloud State professor, are experimenting with new methods of archaeological research.

The idea came up in May of 1997 when St. Cloud State hosted a global symposium on remote sensing and archaeology. Representatives from NASA were there, and archaeologists from around the world, to discuss study imagery in archaeology.

And naturalist Jim Cummings would take the maps into the Kathio woods, where Cummings would identify the plants and trees found in each area that registered as a unique image. As a result, they can now look at satellite images and tell the vegetation and soil may find that they can increase archaeological knowledge by means other than digging, and with tools far less destructive that shovel and trowel.

"The questions of the '90s are not the same as those of the '60s," he said. "Back then, archaeologists were..."
Identifying artifacts, because that important work has already been done, we are more interested in understanding how the archaeological sites relate to one another and to the landscape. And to do that, we are studying maps and analyzing historical data rather than disturbing more soil.

"Old artifacts are just pieces of trash," said Rothhaus. "Clearly, knowledge is gained when you find artifacts, but when you dig, a price is paid. Digging is destructive. It ruins the site forever. And sadly, digging doesn't lead to greater understanding in many instances. Instead, it simply increases the number of artifacts from a certain site."

Cummings added, "That's not to say digging's not important. State Parks archaeologists recently used standard excavation techniques to find a good location for Kathio's new campground. But now we are exploring new tools and techniques that might, in some cases, make digging unnecessary."

Dr. Rothhaus is excited about his new work at Kathio. "I can go to Greece and discover gold coins, walls and pottery," he said, "but Kathio rivals anywherethe world in terms of its riches of cultural history. It is a rare site."