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The Universal Use of Fine Mesh Screen: A Manifesto in Opposition

Abstract

The universal use of fine mesh screen (UUFMS) is becoming standard on archaeological projects throughout the Northwest. UUFMS is not subsampling with 1/8-inch (3.2 mm) hardware cloth, but rather processing all excavated sediment through fine mesh. Fine mesh proponents claim that exclusively using 1/8-inch mesh produces better quality and more rigorous archaeology. This is wrong. In most cases, using only fine mesh decreases recovery of the rarest and most informative data classes such as tools and features, while boosting recovery of common and redundant artifacts, primarily late stage pressure flakes. I examine the negative impacts only using fine mesh has on volume and area excavated, tool and feature diversity, redundancy, and our ethical obligations to the public and native peoples. In the vast majority of cases, 1/4-inch mesh, with a proper subsampling strategy for recovering smaller items, including those smaller than 1/8-inch, will actually increase the information recovered from sites.
