

Presentation 18: Amanda M. Evans

Submerged Prehistoric Archaeology: Searching for Sites, Identifying Landscapes

Submerged prehistoric site research in the United States started in the 1960s, and in the Gulf of Mexico in the 1970s. On the northwestern outer continental shelf, where a widely-accepted methodology for identifying prehistoric archaeological sites was developed, four decades of Section 106-compliant surveys, ironically, has not positively identified any discrete submerged and buried prehistoric archaeological sites. The methodology commonly applied to submerged prehistoric site investigation consists of multiple steps, the first of which are landscape modeling and contextually-appropriate remote sensing survey. Additional work is required to confirm or refute the results of the modeling and remote sensing, either through diver investigation or physical sampling. While academic-oriented or research-driven investigations will carry out these additional steps, compliance surveys often do not. If high probability landforms are identified, they are designated for avoidance and no further testing is conducted.

Studies funded by BOEM (and formerly MMS) have examined remote sensing survey parameters, such as line-spacing and instrumentation, resulting in recommendations that should increase the effectiveness of reconstructing paleolandscapes on the outer continental shelf. These studies included physical sampling, applying repeatable methods in an attempt to identify discrete sites. Two of the previously funded studies identified possible sites, but more conclusively identified potential archaeological horizons within the paleolandscape. This is not a criticism of the studies but is a reality of attempting to identify discrete archaeological sites within a largely unknown context. This paper will address questions of context and scale, and the ability to identify sites versus landscapes.