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National parks robbed of heritage

By Judy Keen, USA TODAY

Looting of fossils and archaeological artifacts from national parks — such as Native American pottery and Civil War relics — is increasing as demand for such items rises on the Internet and the world market, U.S. National Park Service officials say.

Over the past decade, an average of 340 "significant" looting incidents have been reported annually at the 391 national parks, monuments, historic sites and battlefields — probably less than 25% of the actual number of thefts, says park service staff ranger Greg Lawler. "The trends are up," he says.

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It's "a chronic problem that we simply have not even been able to get a grasp on," says Mark Gorman, chief ranger at South Dakota's Badlands National Park.

Park service investigators search websites and the FBI helps track looted items, some of which are sold to collectors in Europe and Asia. Prices are rising for some items, including Native American pottery and garments, says Bonnie Magness-Gardiner, manager of the FBI art theft program.

The most coveted items can cost "in the tens of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars," she says. Thieves caught last year at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park sold a Confederate belt buckle for \$3,300 and buttons for \$200 each.

The park service has 1,500 law enforcement rangers and 400 seasonal law enforcement rangers — one for about every 56,000 acres. "We really don't have enough manpower," Lawler says.

That can make it difficult to catch criminals such as the three men who dug 460 holes at the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania military park in search of artifacts and the man who pleaded guilty to taking 252 relics last year from Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park.

Under the 1979 Archaeological Resources Protection Act, first-time felony offenders can be fined up to \$20,000 and imprisoned for a year.

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Todd Swain, a National Park Service special agent, says the problem is far worse than statistics show. In a report he wrote for the *2007 Yearbook of Cultural Property Law* he concluded, "The true scope of the looting problem is staggering. ... Our shared cultural heritage is disappearing before our eyes."



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