March 7, 2012

John Fahey
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688

Dear Mr. Fahey:

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) and its more than 11,000 members worldwide join other professional organizations and concerned communities everywhere in urging you to withdraw support or modify the contents of the new reality television show, “Diggers,” which recently premiered on the National Geographic Channel. This program wrongly represents archaeology as a treasure-seeking adventure, in which our collective heritage is dug up and sold for monetary gain.

Founded in 1902, the AAA is the world’s largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in promoting the science of anthropological disciplines. The AAA represents all specialties within anthropology, including archaeology. Archaeology is a scientific discipline involving the systematic examination and careful study of evidence relevant to human lives and lifestyles in the past. It is conducted by highly trained professionals who follow a strict code of ethics in order to preserve and interpret knowledge of the past for the benefit of all peoples.

AAA members are deeply concerned about this television program’s message that it is okay to loot and destroy archaeological sites for monetary gain. The program will undermine critical public support for the protection, preservation, and interpretation of the archaeological record. Archaeological sites and artifacts, like historic monuments and documents, are an integral and irreplaceable part of our cultural heritage.

In the US, the Antiquities Act of 1906, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 each provide protection to archaeological sites on federal property. Many states have stricter laws that apply to private property. Although it is legal to excavate on private land in some states, the removal of indigenous artifacts for sale is highly unethical, and the removal or disturbance of indigenous human remains in the US is forbidden by law. Other countries have even stricter laws protecting their cultural patrimony, even on private land, due to accelerated threats to archaeological sites and remains. We suggest...
you consider the possibility that members of the public, having viewed this program and with respect for the legitimacy that the National Geographic Society has earned, may go out and dig into archaeological sites on federal lands, not knowing this is a felony.

We encourage you to consult with the appropriate archaeologists in the various State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) for advice on the legality and ethics of the exploits shown on this program, and preferably, hire a consultant who is a Registered Professional Archaeologist (RPA), to help you modify the content of this series and avoid the damage it is likely to cause.

The National Geographic Society has long been a supporter of professional, scientific, and ethical archaeology around the world, and has done an admirable job in communicating the knowledge provided by archaeological research to millions of readers through your publications. The AAA urges the Society to continue that long-standing legacy by modifying the contents of this program or substitute a different series -- one that will enlighten the public concerning the value and ethics of professional archaeology and respect for cultural heritage.

Sincerely,

Leith Mullings
President

CC:

Tim Kelly
President
National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688

Terry Garcia
Executive Vice President for Mission Programs
National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688

Maryanne Culpepper
President
National Geographic Television
1145 17th Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688