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ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Unearthing the Secrets of the Past

Jo Anne Van Tilburg M.Ed. '76, Ph.D. '86

By Margaret MacDonald

FOR EACH OF THE PAST 32 YEARS, ARCHAEOLOGIST JO ANNE VAN TILBURG HAS TRAVELED 4,000 MILES TO ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST REMOTE INHABITED ISLANDS IN A QUEST TO UNEARTH THE SECRETS OF THE MAJESTIC STONE STATUES THAT STOOD WATCH OVER ITS PEOPLE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS. HER DESTINATION: RAPA NUI, MORE COMMONLY KNOWN AS EASTER ISLAND, IN THE SOUTHEASTERN PACIFIC OCEAN.



Jo Anne Van Tilburg

Van Tilburg is founder and co-director of the Easter Island Statue Project (EISP), a close collaboration with the Rapa Nui islanders whose ancestors carved the stone giants. She is a research fellow at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, where she has also served as director of the Cotsen Rock Art Archive since 1997.

Her work on the rugged island, she said, has been "precious, rewarding and stimulating" since the moment she set foot there in 1982 as part of a volunteer survey team.

"It felt like a dream," she recalled. "I distinctly remember the blended aromas of salt, soil and wood smoke."

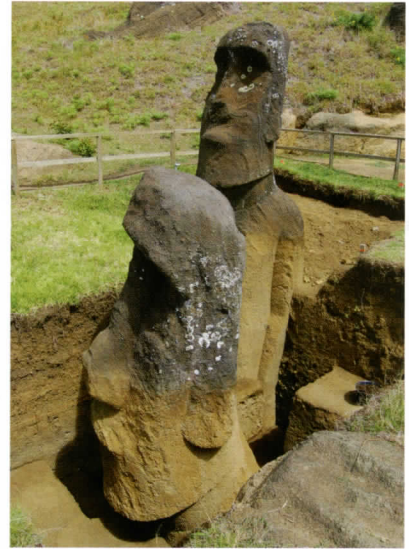
The surveys and excavations conducted by Van Tilburg and her dedicated all-Rapa Nui team continue to reveal important new insights about the statues, or *moai*, including their function and symbolic context within early Rapa Nui society. Nearly 1,000 statues have been documented to date. Roughly half were transported to ceremonial structures called *ahu*. Since some statues were almost 30 feet tall and weighed as much as 80 tons, this feat is considered one of the greatest megalithic achievements of Pacific prehistory.

The team uses state-of-the-art conservation techniques to counteract erosion caused by centuries of exposure to the elements. The massive monoliths have long captured the public's imagination, and Van Tilburg and the EISP have been featured frequently in the media.

In 2002, Van Tilburg co-founded the Mana Gallery on the island, which exhibits the work of local artists and sponsors EISP teaching, excavation and lecture programs. Van Tilburg's architect husband, Johannes, helped design the gallery. She said working with him and with island artists has helped her develop an enriched perspective that enhances her archaeological research.

Charles Stanish, director of the Cotsen Institute, said, "Jo Anne has accomplished something unique and very special on Easter Island. Her work has contributed tremendously to our knowledge of an ancient Polynesian culture. She has cultivated a true partnership with the islanders, and is training them to be stewards of their rich heritage for the benefit of future generations."

Van Tilburg was a teacher before becoming an archaeologist. Originally from Minnesota, she taught middle school students and children with special needs before earning her master's in education from UCLA in 1976. In the early 1980s, she volunteered for a local archaeological survey and was immediately drawn to the "diverse community and welcoming atmosphere" of the fledgling graduate archaeology



An excavation site on Rapa Nui

program (now the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology).

Around that time, she realized that archaeology was what she'd been looking for, and was intrigued by its ability to bring the past into the present.

"It awakened something in me that had been deeply buried," she said.

Van Tilburg fully immersed herself in her newfound passion and subsequently earned her Ph.D. in the archaeology program in 1986.

More than three decades since her first encounter with the statues, Van Tilburg occasionally itches to do something different — perhaps write books about other topics (she is the author of *Among Stone Giants: The Life of Katherine Routledge* about another pioneering Easter Island scholar) — but she suspects the EISP team is close to an exciting discovery: an earlier quarry that could contain yet more artifacts.

"I know there's something else there," she said. "And I'd hate to miss out."

Learn more:

Find out more about the Easter Island Statue Project at <http://www.eisp.org>.

For more information on the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA, please visit <http://www.ioa.ucla.edu>.