Mesa Verde Voices
Episode 3: Moving On

Host, Cally Carswell: *Mesa Verde Voices* is made possible by a grant from Mesa Verde Country, Colorado, where one day just isn't enough. Find out more at MesaVerdeCountry.com.

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INTRO –

Cally Carswell: I'm Cally Carswell, and this is *Mesa Verde Voices*, a podcast about the ancient history of the Four Corners region and why it matters today.

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Carswell: We are confronted on a daily basis with questions about what do to regarding the big issues of our time: food security, climate change, and migration…

It's tempting to assume that these are particularly modern problems with only modern solutions, but we're not the first people to face them.

So sit back, and let's take a trip together into the past. For more than 600 years, Ancestral Puebloan people occupied the Mesa Verde region, which covers southwest Colorado, northwest New Mexico, southeast Utah, and northeast Arizona. We're going to learn some things about them, and also about ourselves.

In this episode we're going to talk about the decision to leave Mesa Verde and go somewhere else. You've probably heard that drought played a role in that decision, and it did, but it was also a lot more complicated than that.

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Donna Glowacki: This morning we're standing right next to a large ancestral pueblo, called Sand Canyon Pueblo.

Carswell: Archaeologist Donna Glowacki have been working in the Mesa Verde region for 25 years.

Glowacki: It's a beautiful morning, wish you were here.

Carswell: And on a warm summer morning, we visited Sand Canyon Pueblo to talk about one of the questions that most fascinates her:

Glowacki: What causes a culture, or a society, to decide that it's better to move on and go someplace else, and to have that happen at such a large scale, what are the dynamics that are really at play?

Carswell: A lot of visitors to the region, maybe even you, head straight to Mesa Verde National Park.

Glowacki: And I don't blame them, it's a really wonderful place.

Carswell: But it's important to remember that the park was really just one part of a much larger society that sprawled across southwestern Colorado and into Utah. And it's the dynamics of that larger society that have lately captured Donna's attention.

Glowacki: What fascinated me was that this is such a huge region, and as you drive around this country, you can obviously see the really great differences in elevation, and the geologies, and the different land formations that structure and anchor what's going on in the landscape.

Carswell: That diversity means that life in the Mesa Verde region wasn't monolithic; the area was inhabited by a variety of cultural groups who organized their villages in different ways, and experience different environmental conditions. And yet, in a relatively short period of time, all of the Ancestral Puebloan people in this big, diverse region made a decision to leave.

Glowacki: So in a recent book that I wrote, called *Living and Leaving*, I decided that I really wanted to try to put together and really grapple with the complexities, especially of the social dynamics of what causes a culture to move on.

Carswell: It's easy to think that the big drought is the reason people left. After all, it did coincide pretty neatly with when people migrated away from Mesa Verde. But while environmental change is an important part of the story, it's not the whole story.

Glowacki: It's a really wonderful example of a culture that really has to directly deal with some really hard conditions that are grounded in environmental difficulties, and harder climates to be a farmer in. And they also had some really hard social things that were happening.

Carswell: You might be wondering, "How can you study the social dynamics of an ancient society, especially one without written records?" Well it isn't easy, and it requires a lot of inference. But one way to do it is to look at what people left behind, including architecture, which can tell us about how their society was organized and the extent to

which they were following old social and religious traditions, or experimenting with new ones. And that's why Donna and I went to Sand Canyon, because the architecture there tells a piece of the larger story.

Glowacki: All right, so right now we're standing right on the western edge of Sand Canyon Pueblo.

Carswell: Sand Canyon Pueblo was built in the mid-1200s, not long before people abandoned the region, and its architecture includes some new forms: public buildings you didn't see in the buildings that came before it.

Glowacki: You can kind of see little evidences of the rocks that are peeking out through the surface.

Carswell: We're looking down at what archaeologists call a D-shaped building; it has two kivas in the middle of it - ro oms that are typically used for ceremonial purposes - and a series of rooms surrounding them in the shape of a "D".

Glowacki: Those are new buildings and what that suggests is, to me at least, is that there are new things that are happening and religious changes that are going on.

Carswell: Also important is what they didn't build here. In the late 1000s, a number of Great Houses were built in the Mesa Verde region, just like those found in New Mexico's Chaco Canyon about 100 miles south. Chaco was a power center in the Pueblo world at the time, and the Great Houses in Mesa Verde reflected the reach of its ideological influence.

Glowacki: It's not clear exactly who was using these buildings when, but they were definitely set apart from the rest of the village, and were important buildings for certain kinds of leaders or maybe important families within the village.

Carswell: Great Houses may have been central to the hierarchical structure of Chaco society which endowed elites with a lot of status and power. But then, in the mid-1100s, about 100 years before people left Mesa Verde, a first big drought walloped the region. It came before drought that coincided with the decision to leave Mesa Verde.

Glowacki: It was the kind of drought that no one had ever seen before, there was no sort of social memory about what it was like to live through a drought like that. And so that is a drought that affected the entire Southwest and a lot of the major changes that you see, and how Chaco starts to become less influential in the Pueblo world, all of that coincides with this major drought period, and there's a huge amount of violence

Carswell: Not long after that, the population in the Mesa Verde region grew, new migrants were settling there, and though some villages in the area still had Great Houses,

many of the larger villages that emerged around that time didn't build them. Instead, new forms like the D-shaped structure start to appear.

Glowacki: The new villages that start to get established look like a lot of them are being formed by groups that are coming together and trying to figure out how they want to organize and relate to each other.

Carswell: So the question is: Why do you have these different styles of villages getting built in the early 1200s?

Glowacki: So one way to think about it is thinking about it in the context of the times and the way things are changing and the landscape is becoming more and more filled up, so you have these larger and larger pueblos, that are closer and closer together. What happens to social dynamics when everyone is living closer and closer together, and you only have so much agricultural land, and then you also have major differences in the kinds of public architecture that you see in these villages that get established in the early 1200s to mid-1200s, so we know that there are major changes that are happening based in religion, and it effects the organization of the village.

Carswell: To Donna it seems to be a story about a time when a lot of different pressures were converging and making life difficult.

Glowacki: What was happening here during the 1200s was also people just learning how to live with different cultural groups that had different backgrounds and maybe different languages.

Carswell: Spruce Tree House, one of the largest cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park, is a really great example.

Glowacki: There are very different households that move in at very different times and what happens in Spruce Tree House changes as a result of those new groups moving in. And that's really important, we can learn a lot from being exposed to new things and new ideas and it does change how we live, so it's very exciting. It's also really stressful, because people have to give and take and there's compromise, and it's risky.

And then to have a drought on top of that, you're much more vulnerable when your social and political structure isn't as stable.

Carswell: When people move south, the architectural forms change again.

Glowacki: Ultimately what emerges are these large pueblos that have central plazas, and the social and cultural institutions that develop for Pueblo people have a lot more to do with emphasizing integration and cohesion, and deemphasize the hierarchical structure.

Carswell: All societies have to make these kinds of decisions, and it's a balancing act.

Glowacki: The decision that gets made is whether or not you want to maintain the hierarchical structure, which today comes down to issues of class and economic differences; or if you want to emphasize the institutions that are going to be for the betterment of all the people that are in your culture and society. But what happens over time in all societies is that you've got periods of time where people who can affect the most change are really emphasizing those hierarchical institutions and differences, versus the more communal institutions.

Carswell: You can think of the shifts that happened in Pueblo society as a progression along a spectrum, with the hierarchical society on one end at Chaco, and a communal one on the other, after the migration away from Mesa Verde.

Glowacki: Now, and for centuries, Pueblo culture has really emphasized these communal tenants, and they have remained very resilient. In their past, at Chaco Canyon, that is a period in time where there were definite class differences.

Carswell: The period at Mesa Verde sat somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, a period of transition.

Glowacki: On the part of the Pueblo, there was definitely a decision to make major change in their life, and that's not easy.

Carswell: One of the things that's really fascinating about Donna's research is how much she believes the issues that Pueblo people were grappling with centuries ago resonate today: environmental change, an erosion of trust in the politic establishment, inequality. In broad brushes at least, the story she tells is similar to the story of the current Syrian conflict.

John Wendle: Hi my name is John Wendle, I'm a freelance journalist. I cover conflict and climate change.

Carswell: I called John because he's written about the links between climate change, drought, conflict, and migration in Syria. Before civil war broke out there, the Fertile Crescent endured its worst drought on record, a drought scientists say was made worse by climate change. And because it was layered on top of government corruption and short-sighted agricultural policies, the drought had a "catalytic effect". That's according to a high profile study published in 2015 that explored the links between the drought and the war.

That same year, John visited camps in Greece full of Syrian refugees, most of whom were farmers, and he heard personal stories that confirmed connections that the study drew. One of the farmers he interviewed was 30-year-old Mustafa Abduhl Hamid.

Wendel: He said the war and the drought there are the same thing. The water table dropped because of the drought, but also because of poor water management practices by the Assad government that was exacerbated by corruption, which allowed farmers who have thirsty crops to continue drilling new wells, deeper wells.

Carswell: Eventually with the drought they couldn't dig any deeper, and without water for their crops –

Wendel: That forced people to move from their land to villages and towns, which added even more societal pressure which eventually was sparked by one match and that led to the civil war.

Carswell: Which forced a lot of farmers to move again, this time out of their country altogether.

Glowacki: Any societies, world over, have these challenging breakdown periods where the political system isn't working very well, and you've got climate issues that are coinciding at the same time, and then that of course results in economic problems.

Carswell: This brings us back to the Pueblo story. Why is it relevant today? Well partly it's because it can teach us about how a society confronted social and environmental disruption and persisted.

Glowacki: They made cultural changes that made them even stronger and more cohesive, and Pueblo people are obviously still here today.

(music begins playing)

Carswell: Donna Glowacki is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame.

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