

Staging Survival in Nature: An Archaeological and Heritage Analysis of Performative Bushcraft and Its Threats to Caves and Rock Shelters

Nemat Hariri ¹✉

1. Department of Geology, Faculty of Geology, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract: In recent years, the circulation of videos related to bushcraft, survival in nature, shelter construction, and staying in caves and rock shelters has increased on social media platforms. This article examines the phenomenon of “staging survival in nature” as a form of display-oriented intervention; interventions in which the physical manipulation of the environment gains meaning in relation to visual content production, audience attraction, and digital circulation. The main research question is what kinds of interventions are observable in these videos in caves and rock shelters, and what implications these behaviors may have from the perspectives of archaeology, natural-cultural heritage protection, and the management of sensitive spaces. The study is based on the qualitative–quantitative content analysis of 64 publicly available YouTube videos from nine channels. These videos, identified through purposive and chain-based sampling in November–December 2025 and January 2026, correspond to 64 independent places in Iran and were mainly published between 2023 and 2025. Indicators such as digging or levelling the floor, moving stone and sediment, blocking the entrance or part of the space, fire-making, smoke production, overnight occupation, modifying walls or ceilings, hunting, and connections with treasure-hunting narratives or the search for objects were recorded and assessed. Based on the intensity of visible intervention, 38 videos were classified as high risk, 19 as medium risk, and 7 as low risk. The results show that, even without field confirmation of the archaeological status of all locations, these behaviors may threaten sedimentary context, stratigraphic readability, rock surfaces, cultural evidence, and cave ecosystems. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for digital monitoring, public education, avoiding the publication of sensitive location indicators, developing guidelines for responsible behavior, and cooperation among cultural heritage, environmental, natural resources, and caving institutions.

Keywords:

Performative Bushcraft
Staging Survival in Nature
Caves and Rock shelters
Archaeology
Natural-Cultural Heritage
Illicit Digging
Performative Vandalism

Received: February 25, 2026

Accepted: June 01, 2026

Published: June 21, 2026

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an
Open Access article distributed
under [CC BY 4.0](#).

Reuse and distribution are
permitted with proper citation.

Published by Heritage of
Southwest Asia Journal.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/hsaj.2026.583845.1051>

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have increasingly circulated videos related to outdoor recreation, survival in nature, bushcraft, shelter construction, cave camping, hunting, and the exploration of remote or hidden spaces. Bushcraft, in its original sense, refers to a set of practical skills for living, moving, building, and adapting responsibly in non-urban environments. In its media-driven and performative form, however, these practices may generate new risks for natural-cultural heritage. This article uses the term “staging survival in nature” to describe a form of performative bushcraft in which activities such as shelter construction, fire-making, overnight occupation, digging, moving stone and sediment, and modifying natural spaces are staged, filmed, circulated, and consumed as visual content.

The issue becomes particularly significant when such activities move into caves, rock shelters, and similar stone environments. In these contexts, the floor, sediments, walls, ceilings, entrances, traces of fire, soot, ash, stone arrangements, and spatial relationships may all be part of a fragile

archaeological or natural-cultural archive. The main problem addressed in this article is therefore not responsible nature recreation itself, but those forms of display-oriented intervention in which caves and rock shelters are physically modified for performance, filming, shelter construction, or digital visibility. The article asks what kinds of interventions are observable in the selected videos, what risks they may pose for archaeological context and natural-cultural heritage, and how social media may contribute to the normalization and imitation of such behaviors.

2. Caves and Rock shelters as Natural-Cultural Archives

Caves, rock shelters, and related stone environments are not empty natural spaces. In archaeological and geoarchaeological research, they are often understood as layered archives of environmental, biological, cultural, and behavioral information. Their floors, walls, ceilings, entrances, sediments, traces of fire, animal remains, lithic artefacts, charcoal, ash, plant micro-remains, and stratigraphic relationships may all contribute to the reconstruction of past human behavior and environmental conditions. The value of such places is therefore not limited to visible artefacts or monumental remains. Sometimes the most important evidence is preserved in deposits, microstratigraphy, residues, soot, sediment color, or the relationship between different traces.

This is especially significant in Iran, and particularly in the Zagros Mountains, where caves and rock shelters have played a major role in Paleolithic research and in the recovery of evidence related to Neanderthals, lithic technologies, faunal remains, anthropogenic deposits, traces of fire, and human occupation. The inscription of the Prehistoric Sites of the Khorramabad Valley on the UNESCO World Heritage List further demonstrates the global importance of such places in Iran. This property, consisting of five caves and one rock shelter, highlights the significance of these environments for understanding Middle and Upper Paleolithic occupations, Mousterian and Baradostian traditions, stone technologies, symbolic behavior, and possible routes of human movement between Africa and Eurasia. Other examples, such as Bawa Yawan Rockshelter, Qaleh Kurd Cave, and Karaftu Cave, also show that caves and rock shelters in Iran should not be treated as empty, ownerless, or freely modifiable spaces. They may simultaneously contain archaeological, environmental, pictorial, biological, and educational values.

3. Materials and Methods

This study examines performative bushcraft as an emerging heritage-risk phenomenon in the Persian-language and Iran-related online sphere. It is based on the qualitative–quantitative content analysis of 64 publicly available YouTube videos collected from nine channels or pages. The selected videos were related to bushcraft, shelter construction, staying in caves or rock shelters, modifying natural spaces, hunting, and narratives associated with old, hidden, or potentially treasure-bearing places. Data collection was carried out in November–December 2025 and January 2026 through purposive and chain-based sampling. Part of the sample was identified through prior knowledge of active pages in this field, while other videos were found through keyword searches and algorithmic recommendations on YouTube. Search terms included Persian expressions equivalent to “bushcraft,” “camping in nature,” “survival in nature,” “shelter construction in nature,” and “camping in caves.”

Each video was treated as the main unit of observation and analysis. However, based on the control of duplication, visual evidence, titles, descriptions, channel information, and the research database, the final 64 videos were attributed to 64 independent places in Iran. This does not mean that all of these places are confirmed archaeological sites. The archaeological or legal status of each location cannot be determined without field inspection, direct documentation, and expert assessment. For this reason, the analysis focuses on observable behaviors and their potential implications for natural-cultural heritage, rather than on proving the archaeological status of every place shown in the videos.

For each video, descriptive, behavioral, and heritage-related information was recorded in a database. Descriptive variables included year of publication, type of space, claimed or inferred location, number of people, duration, number of views, channel information, and mode of presentation. The main behavioral indicators included digging or levelling the floor, moving stone or sediment, bringing stone or soil into the space, removing soil or stone, blocking the entrance or part of the interior, modifying walls or ceilings, lighting fires inside the cave or near the entrance, smoke or poor ventilation, overnight occupation, hunting, and references to treasure, old objects, signs, hidden spaces, or object searching. Heritage-related indicators included visible stratigraphy, possible cultural materials, signs or claims suggesting that the space was old or ancient, and uncertainty in the identification of such evidence.

The sample does not claim to represent the full scale of the phenomenon on social media. The potential universe of relevant videos and pages is much larger, and access to online material is shaped by search algorithms, platform visibility, internet restrictions, changing availability of content, and the removal or editing of videos. Therefore, the study is designed as an exploratory and warning-oriented analysis based on a documented sample of visible behavior. Due to conservation concerns, channel names, video links, and precise location indicators are not published in the article.

4. Results

The results show repeated forms of direct intervention in caves, rock shelters, and related stone spaces. In terms of space type, 25 videos were recorded in caves, 20 in rock shelters, 13 in spaces combining features of both caves and rock shelters, 5 around boulders or similar stone spaces, and 1 in a small cave. Chronologically, the videos in the sample were published between 2023 and 2025: 3 videos in 2023, 18 in 2024, and 43 in 2025. This distribution cannot be used as definitive evidence for the overall growth of the phenomenon, because the sample is shaped by access, platform visibility, and search limitations. Nevertheless, the concentration of videos in 2025 indicates the strong presence of this kind of content among recently visible online material.

The most frequent physical interventions were bringing stone or soil into the space, recorded in 62 videos; levelling the floor for sleeping or staying, recorded in 61 videos; removing soil or stone, also recorded in 61 videos; blocking the entrance or part of the interior space, recorded in 59 videos; digging the floor, recorded in 54 videos; and overnight occupation, recorded in 52 videos. Smoke or poor ventilation was observed in 51 videos, while fire inside caves or rock shelters and modification of walls or ceilings were each recorded in 49 videos. Fire near the entrance was recorded in 20 videos. These patterns indicate that the issue is not simply the presence of people in natural spaces, but the active rearrangement of caves and rock shelters for sleeping, filming, shelter construction, protection from weather, and visual performance.

Fire-making in closed or semi-closed spaces is one of the most significant patterns observed. Fire and smoke may blacken walls and ceilings and reduce the readability of rock surfaces, pigments, older soot, ash layers, charcoal, or other cultural traces. Newly produced fire residues may also mix with older evidence of human activity and disturb the interpretive value of deposits. This problem is not limited to cultural heritage. Caves are also habitats for sensitive cave-dwelling species, including bats, invertebrates, and other organism's dependent on dark, stable, and low-disturbance environments. Smoke, heat, light, noise, prolonged human presence, blocking entrances, or changes in ventilation may therefore threaten the natural biological heritage of these spaces as well.

The study also recorded indicators related to heritage interpretation and treasure-hunting narratives. In 30 videos, the type of space, sediment condition, visual evidence, or narrative suggested that the place might be old or ancient. In 17 videos, stratigraphy or sedimentary differences were visible, and in 16 videos, possible cultural materials could be observed. However, in many cases, identification remained uncertain: stratigraphy was unclear in 37 videos, and the presence of cultural materials was uncertain in 39 videos. This uncertainty is itself significant.

Social media videos are not produced for scientific documentation, and camera angle, lighting, editing, image quality, and the removal of parts of the recorded process limit interpretation. Therefore, the absence of visible archaeological evidence in a video should not be treated as evidence of absence. Rather, uncertain cases highlight the limitations of remote observation and the need for a preventive approach.

Based on the intensity and extent of visible intervention, the heritage risk level of each video was qualitatively assessed. Of the 64 videos, 38 were classified as high risk, 19 as medium risk, and 7 as low risk. This means that 59.4 percent of the sample was assessed as high risk, 29.7 percent as medium risk, and 10.9 percent as low risk. These categories do not determine the legal or archaeological status of the places shown in the videos. Rather, they indicate that a large proportion of the observed content includes interventions that may be problematic for the spatial, sedimentary, pictorial, biological, or contextual integrity of caves and rock shelters.

The videos also had significant circulation potential. For 63 videos, view counts were recorded. Their total number of views was approximately 6.3 million, with an average of about 100,548 views and a median of 27,700 views. One video had approximately 946,000 views, 15 videos had more than 100,000 views, and 5 videos had more than 500,000 views. These figures show that the analyzed content, despite appearing individual and dispersed, has considerable capacity for circulation and influence in digital space.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The danger of performative bushcraft lies not only in individual acts of disturbance but also in their public display, repetition, and normalization through social media. In some videos, the language of bushcraft, outdoor recreation, or shelter construction overlaps with narratives of treasure, hidden spaces, old objects, or signs. Illicit digging is one of the most serious and destructive threats to cultural heritage in Iran. In some of the videos analyzed here, the same logic of searching, digging, and manipulating space appears under a different label: not as explicit illicit excavation, but as survival performance, nature recreation, or online content production. This shift in language and presentation can make harmful behavior appear ordinary, entertaining, or even educational.

In this sense, destructive staging of survival may be understood as a form of performative vandalism of natural-cultural heritage. This does not mean that all content producers necessarily intend to damage heritage. Rather, the result of the action, regardless of intention, may reduce the readability, authenticity, and integrity of a place. Vandalism in this context is not limited to writing on walls or breaking visible objects. It may also take the form of moving sediment, smoking ceilings, building temporary walls, blocking entrances, digging floors, modifying walls or ceilings, or turning a cave into a stage for digital performance. The distinctive feature of this form of vandalism is its visibility, circulation, and potential imitation.

The article concludes that the protection of caves and rock shelters cannot rely only on traditional forms of heritage control. Many such spaces may have potential value before they are formally registered, excavated, or professionally surveyed. A preventive approach is therefore necessary. This does not mean prohibiting all forms of responsible nature recreation. Rather, it requires a clear distinction between responsible presence and destructive intervention. Practical measures should include digital monitoring of harmful content, public education, avoiding the publication of sensitive location indicators, guidelines for responsible behavior in caves and rock shelters, restrictions on fire-making and construction in cave environments, cooperation among cultural heritage authorities, environmental agencies, natural resources institutions, caving groups, archaeologists, and local communities, and platform-based reporting mechanisms.

Ultimately, the issue is not only the protection of a few caves or rock shelters. It is a broader question of public perception. As long as caves and rock shelters are imagined as empty, mysterious, or freely available spaces for adventure and performance, such interventions will continue. This study shows that even a limited sample of publicly available videos can reveal a repeated and concerning pattern of intervention. Effective protection requires that caves and

rockshelters be understood not as open stages for digital display, but as fragile archives of the natural, biological, and cultural history of the country.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Dr. Mehdi Razani, Editor-in-Chief of the Southwest Asian Heritage Journal, for his continuous support, guidance, and efforts in facilitating the successful completion of this article. The author also extends heartfelt appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for their careful evaluation of the manuscript, insightful comments, and constructive suggestions, all of which substantially enhanced its scholarly quality and structural coherence. In addition, sincere thanks are due to Mr. Mohammad Shakerian for introducing and providing valuable references and online resources concerning conservation guidelines and protective frameworks in the United States.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

Data are available from the authors upon request.

References

- Azandaryani, E. H., Qolami, H., MohammadiFar, Y., & Razmposh, A. (2015). Discovering new rock paintings at Shmsali and Gorgali rock shelters in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province, southern Iran. *Arts*, 4(2), 61–67. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts4020061>
- Council of Ministers. (2009). *Executive bylaw on the management, protection, and utilization of the country's caves*. Approved January 9, 2010 (20 Dey 1388). (In Persian).
- Department of Environment. (2026). *Guideline for the classification and determination of protective buffer zones for the country's caves*. Approved by the Iran Speleology Working Group. (In Persian).
- Farrand, W. R. (2001). Sediments and stratigraphy in rock shelters and caves: A personal perspective on principles and pragmatics. *Geoarchaeology*, 16(5). <https://doi.org/10.1002/gea.1004>
- Fenton, L. (2016). *Bushcraft and indigenous knowledge: Transformations of a concept in the modern world* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kent).
- Gillieson, D. S., Gunn, J., Auler, A., & Bolger, T. (Eds.). (2022). *Guidelines for cave and karst protection* (2nd ed.). International Union of Speleology; International Union for Conservation of Nature.
- Goldberg, P., & Macphail, R. I. (2008). *Practical and theoretical geoarchaeology*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Hariri, N. (2022). *The environmental reconstruction of the west-central Zagros Mountains during MIS 4 to 2 based on geoarchaeological methods in the Bawa Yawan Rock shelter* (Doctoral dissertation, Mohaghegh Ardabili University, Faculty of Social Sciences). (In Persian).
- Hariri, N., Razaloo, R., Javanmardzadeh, A., & Heydari-Gouran, S. (2022). Quantitative research in Pleistocene environmental archaeology: Definitions, applications, and necessities for the Iranian Plateau. *Payam-e Bastanshenas*, 14(2), 123–156. (In Persian).
- Heydari, S. (2007). The impact of geology and geomorphology on cave and rockshelter archaeological site formation, preservation and distribution in the Zagros Mountains of Iran. *Geoarchaeology*, 22(6), 653–669.
- Heydari-Gouran, S., Benazzi, S., Talamo, S., Ghasidian, E., Hariri, N., Oxilia, G., Asiabani, S., Azizi, F., Naderi, R., & Safaierad, R. (2021). The discovery of an in situ Neanderthal remain in the Bawa Yawan Rockshelter, west-central Zagros Mountains, Kermanshah. *PLoS ONE*, 16(8), e0253708. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0253708>
- Hildreth-Werker, V., & Werker, J. C. (n.d.). *Minimum-impact caving*. National Speleological Society. <https://caves.org/conservation/minimum-impact-caving/>
- National Park Service. (2024, January 2). *Caves and karst systems—Legal instruments*. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/caves-and-karst-systems-legal-instruments.htm>
- National Park Service. (2025, February 11). *Chapter 4: Natural resource management. Management Policies*. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/policy/mp-4-natural.htm>

- Styring, A. K., Vaiglova, P., Bogaard, A., Church, M. J., Gröcke, D. R., Larsson, M., Liu, X., Stroud, E., Szpak, P., & Wallace, M. P. (2024). Recommendations for stable isotope analysis of charred archaeological crop remains. *Frontiers in Environmental Archaeology*, 3, 1470375. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fearc.2024.1470375>
- Toffolo, M. B., Regev, L., Mintz, E., Poduska, K. M., Shahack-Gross, R., Berthold, C., Miller, C. E., & Boaretto, E. (2017). Accurate radiocarbon dating of archaeological ash using pyrogenic aragonite. *Radiocarbon*, 59(1), 231–249. <https://doi.org/10.1017/RDC.2017.7>
- Trinkaus, E., & Biglari, F. (2006). Middle Paleolithic human remains from Bisitun Cave, Iran. *Paléorient*, 32(2), 105–111.
- UIS. (2013). *Code of ethics for cave exploration and science in foreign countries*. International Union of Speleology.
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (2017). *Natural-historical complex / Cave of Karaftoo* (Tentative List, Ref. 6193). <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6193/>
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (2025). *Prehistoric sites of the Khorramabad Valley* (World Heritage List, Dossier 1744). <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1744/>
- United States Environmental Protection Agency. (2025, July 25). *Summary of the Noise Control Act*. <https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/summary-noise-control-act>
- US Forest Service. (n.d.). *No trace ethic*. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/lei/no-trace-ethics.php>
- Vahdati Nasab, H., Berillon, G., Hashemi, S.M., Bahain, J.J., Sévêque, N., Jayez, M., Bonilauri, S., Jamet, G., Kharazian, M.A., Nateghi, A., & Abdollahi, A. (2024). Qaleh Kurd Cave (Qazvin, Iran): Oldest evidence of Middle Pleistocene hominin occupations and a human deciduous tooth in the Iranian Central Plateau. *Journal of Paleolithic Archaeology*, 7(1), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41982-024-00180-4>
- Vaiglova, P., Snoeck, C., Nitsch, E., Bogaard, A., & Lee-Thorp, J. (2014). Impact of contamination and pre-treatment on stable carbon and nitrogen isotopic composition of charred plant remains. *Rapid Communications in Mass Spectrometry*, 28, 2497–2510. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rcm.7044>
- Wilderness Act*, Pub. L. No. 88–577, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1131–1136 (1964). <https://wilderness.net/learn-about-wilderness/key-laws/wilderness-act/>
- Zanolli, C., Biglari, F., Mashkour, M., Abdi, K., Monchot, H., Debue, K., Mazurier, A., Bayle, P., Le Luyer, M., & Rougier, H. (2019). A Neanderthal from the central western Zagros, Iran: Structural reassessment of the Wezmeh 1 maxillary premolar. *Journal of Human Evolution*, 135, 102643.

Hariri, N. (2026). Staging Survival in Nature: An Archaeological and Heritage Analysis of Performative Bushcraft and Its Threats to Caves and Rock Shelters. *Heritage of Southwest Asia*, 3(1), ID1. <https://doi.org/10.22034/hsaj.2026.583845.1051>