

## REINFORCING THE AUTHENTICITY AND SPIRIT OF PLACE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES TO PROMOTE CULTURAL TOURISM AT WORLD HERITAGE SITES AS A DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

### *Learning from the Canadian Experience*

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**Abstract.** Historically, most state institutions that deal with World Heritage (WH) rarely involve Indigenous people who have lived, worked and interpreted the sites for generations. In the development and management of these WH sites, particularly for touristic purposes, raising the question: Does the manner in which this heritage is presented correspond to the notions that indigenous societies have of themselves and of their history?

The global exchange and information economy results in greater visibility of minority peoples and cultures, including indigenous cultures. The creation of cultural heritage tourism from indigenous sites, monuments and artefacts alike, however, incite concerns on how culture is transmitted as a form of "globalisation of indigeness".

This increased visibility translates into three connected phenomena: 1) mass "cultural" tourism, 2) the "glocalisation" of indigenous groups' interventions, on the global scale and on the local scale for defence and promotion of their interests, and 3) the public movements sympathetic to the indigenous cause, which are initiated or taken over by political support networks.

Government authorities around the world that manage or oversee WH sites, recognizing these cultural imbalances, are looking at ways to better convey spirit of place and the cultural/natural evolution of a site, as interpreted by the indigenous people who live in and around them. The desire is to identify tangible ways to work with indigenous communities that retain this important cultural/natural heritage fabric that has sustained local people, while ensuring that the representation of a WH site's character and integrity retains its authentic representation.

The objectives of this paper are to:

- Define "spirit of place" (tangible and intangible) as identified and represented by individual indigenous peoples living in and around WH sites in Canada;
- Discern the drivers and barriers to the development of cultural tourism within indigenous communities; and
- Present approaches as to how the application of indigenous spirit of place and authenticity can be better incorporated into the tourism planning process and management of international WH sites as a development instrument.

#### **Aboriginal Tourism Background**

Considering the diversity of indigenous peoples, an official definition of "indigenous" has not been adopted by any UN-system body, which instead has developed a modern understanding of this term based on the following:

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.

- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- Distinct social, economic or political systems
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs
- Form non-dominant groups of society
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and

communities. (United Nation Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues)

In this context, aboriginal tourism refers to “tourism activities in which indigenous people are directly

involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction.” (Butler and Hinch)

**Aboriginal Tourism Defined  
Indigenous Control**

Indigenous Theme	Low	High
Present	Culture Dispossessed	Culture Controlled
Absent	Non-indigenous Tourism	Diversified Indigenous

Source: Butler and Hinch

The principal components of aboriginal tourism for development purposes are considered to be:

- Tourism connected with indigenous culture, values and traditions;
- Tourism products owned and operated by indigenous people;
- Tourism based on indigenous land and cultural identity, controlled from within by indigenous groups;
- Tourism which includes the indigenous 4Hs: “habitat, heritage, history and handicrafts”;
- Typically involves small business owned by tribes or families; and
- Tourism focused on indigenous knowledge of culture and nature.

Debates about aboriginal tourism have flourished, including those as fundamental as to whether aboriginal tourism represents an opportunity for aboriginal people to gain economic independence and cultural rejuvenation, or whether it represents a threat of hegemonic subjugation and cultural degradation. The ever-changing world environment characterized by powerful forces for the integration of aboriginal peoples into a global culture on one hand, while encouraging indigenous communities to protect and enhance local advantages that may give them a competitive advantage in this global economy on the other (Notzke).

### World Heritage Sites in Canada

There are presently fifteen WH sites in Canada. From west to east, these are:

- *SGaang Gwaii* (Anthony Island)(British Columbia)
- Kluane National Park/Wrangell - St.Elias/Glacier Bay/Tatshenshini-Alsek (Yukon and British Columbia)
- Nahanni National Park Reserve (Northwest Territories)
- Wood Buffalo National Park (Alberta and Northwest Territories)
- Rocky Mountain Parks (Alberta and British Columbia)
- Dinosaur Provincial Park (Alberta)
- Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (Alberta)
- Waterton Glacier International Peace Park (Alberta)
- Rideau Canal (Ontario)
- Historic District of Québec (Québec)
- Miguasha Park (Québec)
- Joggins Fossil Cliffs (Nova Scotia)
- Old Town Lunenburg (Nova Scotia)
- Gros Morne National Park (Newfoundland and Labrador)
- L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site (Newfoundland and Labrador)



The Parks Canada Agency (henceforward Parks Canada or the Agency) acts as Canada's State representative to the World Heritage Convention. Unlike other countries such as Australia or the United Kingdom, however, WH sites in Canada are not required to be administered or operated by the federal government. Hence, granting this status to a significant cultural or natural site does not require the transfer of lands to a central authority or the creation of new administrative arrangements. Before 1990, the inscription process was viewed as the work of experts through organizations such as the International Committee for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) for cultural sites and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for natural sites.

It was originally considered sufficient to enlist the support of the relevant provincial government when a site was considered eligible for WH status. Since 1990, however, nominations have engaged the public to a much greater extent. In some cases, the nomination process has been initiated by provincial or local authorities. Nominations have been prepared by them and/or in collaboration with them. In all cases, support for the nomination from local communities and appropriate Aboriginal groups is required, based on an understanding of the implications of inscription before a nomination is put forward.

With this in mind, Parks Canada has nine tentative WH Heritage sites remaining from a list generated in 2004:

- The Klondike (Yukon Territory)
- Gwaii Haanas (British Columbia)
- Áísínai'pi (Writing-On-Stone) (Alberta)
- Ivvavik/Vuntut/Herschel Island (*Qikiqtaruk*) (Nunavut Territory)
- Quttinirpaaq (Nunavut)
- Atikaki/Woodland Caribou/Accord First Nations (*Pimachiowin Aki*) (Manitoba)
- Grand-Pré (Nova Scotia)
- Mistaken Point (Newfoundland and Labrador)
- Red Bay (Newfoundland and Labrador)

A review of the present and tentative lists of WH sites in Canada would indicate a substantial number of them having connection to the history, culture and local environments of aboriginal peoples. Where this may be less obvious, such as the in the case of the Rideau Canal, the aboriginal territory that was crossed by the constructed waterway has invoked the inclusion of the local Algonquin bands throughout the Parks Canada consultations, as these lands are considered ancestral.

#### Parks Canada partnerships with Aboriginal groups

In 2002, Canadian aboriginal tourism generated CAN\$300 million a year in revenues. By 2010, that amount was expected to skyrocket to CAN\$2.7 billion (Aboriginal Tourism Canada).

Parks Canada created its Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat in 1999 to provide national leadership and support within the Agency. Its mandate is to:

- provide the Agency's Executive Board with an annual environmental scan of opportunities and priorities for advancement of Parks Canada's relationships with Aboriginal peoples;
- work with Aboriginal communities to access other federal government programs to develop mutually beneficial initiatives;
- provide leadership within Parks Canada on economic development opportunities, including procurement;
- provide information throughout Parks Canada on program priorities, successes and best practices, and prepare toolkits and related supporting material; and
- stimulate dialogue with Aboriginal organizations and foster mechanisms for building trust and resolving issues.

During a Parks Canada national round table convened in 2001, a recommendation encouraging the advancement of partnerships supported the establishment of an advisory structure to help advance areas of mutual interests. This was the impetus to set up Parks Canada's Aboriginal Consultative Committee (ACC). Aboriginal communities and Parks Canada have since established cooperative arrangements concerning the creation and delivery of a range of Aboriginal tourism experiences – many of which deal with interpretative and touring services. This is resonated through Parks Canada's 2010-11 Corporate Plan which lists as a visitor experience priority: "continue to promote authentic Aboriginal cultural experiences for visitors and foster economic and tourism opportunities in its heritage places" (Parks Canada, 2011).

Some negative issues, however, have been outlined by aboriginal groups regarding the establishment of tourism operations in and around WH sites who find it difficult to deal with Parks Canada and provincial parks agencies. These include:

- It is difficult to obtaining permits/business licenses in parks and protected areas, with significantly fewer Natives than non-Natives are given permits in many parks;
- License application and consultation processes can be a major roadblock to prospective tourism entrepreneurs or outfitters – it can be complex and

can be a lengthy process, sometimes exceeding one year (as in Northwest Territories).

- Operators and Parks need to work together to find a balance of access and environmental protection that benefits both parties (PWC Consulting).

### Case Studies - *SGang Gwaay* and *Áísínai'pi*

Using the two Canadian examples of a tentative and an existing aboriginal WH site, the intent is to compare the way in which their tangible and intangible aspects have been promoted so as to point out their Spirit of Place as the focal touristic attraction. In doing so, the purpose is to shed some light on how the application of aboriginal spirit of the place and authenticity can be better incorporated into the tourism planning process and management of international WH sites as a development instrument.

#### *SGang Gwaay*

*Gwaii Haanas*, British Columbia

The Haida Nation designated the "Haida Heritage Site" in 1985, encompassing roughly the southern third of the archipelago, including both terrestrial and marine areas. In 1993 the Government of Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation signed the *Gwaii Haanas* Agreement, which changed the name of the national park reserve to a native name, *Gwaii Haanas* National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. *SGang Gwaay Llnaagay* (or *Ninstints* - on Anthony Island) is located in the southernmost part of *Gwaii Haanas*.

#### UNESCO Statement of Significance

*SGang Gwaay Llnaagay* was declared a UNESCO WH site in 1981. To broaden the scope of recognition of the area's cultural importance, the entire *Gwaii Haanas* national park reserve was added to Parks Canada's Tentative List of potential future WH sites in 2004.

This WH site is promoted and conserved based on the fact that it represents the living Haida Culture. It has importance to the people who are the descendants of the Haida ancestors. The fact that this site is a WH designation reinforces its importance, but is not the most significant reason for the conservation, promotion and preservation.

At the village of *SGang Gwaay Llnaagay* the remains of large cedar long houses, together with a number of carved mortuary and memorial poles, illustrate the art and way of life of the Haida. The site commemorates the living culture of the Haida, based on fishing and hunting, their relationship with the land and sea, and offers a visual key to their oral traditions. The village





Figure 1 - Site map of Gwaii Hanaas that incorporates the SGang Gwaay WH site (Credit: Parks Canada)

was occupied until shortly after 1880. What survives is unique in the world, a 19th century Haida village where the ruins of houses and memorial or mortuary poles illustrate the power and artistry of Haida society. The UNESCO WH Criteria associated with the site includes:

- Criterion (iii) *SGang Gwaay Ilnagaay* (Ninstints), located on *SGang Gwaay* (Anthony Island) in an archipelago off the west coast of British Columbia, bears unique testimony to the culture of the Haida. The art represented by the carved poles at *SGang*

*Gwaay Ilnagaay* (Ninstints) is recognized to be among the finest examples of its type in the world.

#### Site Management Authority

The Canada National Parks Act gives the Agency authority to enter into an agreement with the Haida Nation for the management of Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve (GHNPR) and Haida Heritage Site (HHS). *SGang Gwaay* is located within *Gwaii Haanas* and is managed under the authority of the *Gwaii Haanas* Agreement (1993). The Archipelago Management

Board (AMB), consists of 2 representatives each from Parks Canada and the Haida Nation. The AMB provides direction for the management of the natural and cultural heritage values of *Gwaii Haanas*, including *SGang Gwaay*.

This unique partnership between Parks Canada and the Haida Nation has enabled a high cultural integrity, with local residents being very involved in park management, displaying a real stewardship ethic. As part of this process, archaeological and historic artefacts are left to their natural erosion and degradation as per Haida tradition, which surprises visitors who expect 'preservation'.

### Site Visitation

*SGang Gwaay* had an annual average visitation of 1,610 (ranging from 1,204 to 2,035) from 1993 through 2002, and has since risen to 3,000 yearly visitors (Parks Canada, 2004 and 2011)

The cultural resources at the site are very fragile. They cannot withstand any degree of human disturbance. Unsupervised visitors may inadvertently damage artefacts by touching them or walking on them. Supported by visitor entry fees, the Watchmen program was established to protect these sensitive sites, which is accomplished by educating visitors about the natural and cultural heritage of *Gwaii Haanas*. Comprising men and women, elders and youth, they also provide information about safety and the latest marine forecasts that come in by radio.



Figure 2 - Chiefs gathering near Totem Poles for consultation  
(Credit: Barbara Wilson)

A tourism/visitor management plan created in 2003 by the Haida and Parks Canada, the *Gwaii Haanas* Backcountry Management Plan. It recommended the following improvements to visitor management at *SGang Gwaay* :

- Provide orientation to all independent visitors, tour clients.
- Require complete orientation if it is longer than 3 years since last orientation.
- Restrict the size of parties landing on shore at any one time to 12.

The Haida Nation and Parks Canada have acted on these recommendations to minimize visitor impacts by:

- Limiting the number of visitors in the village at any one time to 12 and they must be supervised by Watchmen staff at all times;
- Encouraging large passenger vessels to go elsewhere, as the village environment is fragile and cannot stand large constant impact. Marking formal paths used each season, to minimize visitor impact to cultural and ecological features, a boardwalk has

been built, and the southern terraced area of the village is closed to visitors, to protect the remains of the poles in this area.

- Refusing boaters permission to land in the village, with the new entrance to the island is located in the north bay.

### Experiencing *SGang Gwaay's* 'Spirit of the Place'

The *SGang Gwaay* site includes several totem poles covered with carved designs, as well as a few decorated houses with painted façades typical of the artistry

of the Haida people. Trails radiate from the heart of the ancestral village, one of which leads to a cabin occupied by the Haida watchmen during the touristic season. There are no other services or infrastructure but a few solar composting toilets placed outside the village that remain out of sight when the visitors are walking on site.

When a visitor comes to *SGang Gwaay*, he or she might be surprised not to find a museum or interpretation centre, nor information panels, models, or any means of protection (e.g. gates, fences, barriers). There is no



Figure 3 - Haida Nation members 'feeding the ancestors' near *Sgang Gwaay* (Credit: Barbara Wilson)

UNESCO commemorative plaque either that would otherwise mention: "Here is a World Heritage Site". What one can see, however, are a few totem poles still standing upright, held in place by a wooden beam, and the architectural remains of clan houses.

To help navigate the village, visitors receive a guidebook provided on their arrival to the island. This book includes a map on which one can find the exact location of all of the houses and all the totem poles that had been originally erected. Indeed, this document can contribute to give a better idea of how the original village and its environment occupied, and comparing the remains still in place can facilitate the understanding of its "urban fabric".

Besides these didactic tools, tour guides and Parks

Canada wardens are also present, whose mandate is to also provide site interpretation when needed by the visitors. Through various but limited interpretative means, including the ancestral stories told by Haida representatives living there during the touristic season, the visitor is then able to better understand the Haida way of life as they used to be when the village was occupied, their worldview, their ritual practices, and other cultural traits.

The intangible dimension of the place, along with the material vestiges still visible, can therefore be used to give a better insight into the spirit of the place of *SGang Gwaay*. The visitor experience, although somehow isolated as it can be when facing the impressive calmness and barrenness of the site, incorporates



some specific aspects of the remains in place, including the decaying totem poles that were always originally erected, surmounted by a coffin, evoking then the solemn idea of the Haida past burial contexts.

It almost leads the visitor to experience some tremendous mystical emotion in relation to this not so distant past when there was still a vibrant life in the village, more than a century ago. The visitor can be in awe when confronted with the history of a community which has been dramatically replaced by the slow decay of the wood carvings and vernacular architecture still present on that location, altogether accompanied by the eloquent silence of this unique WH site.

This direct experience in the Haida village can accordingly be transformed into the unique living experience of the spirit of the place specific to *SGang Gwaay*, the spirit that still blows over the village in front of its silent witnesses, the houses' facades and, moreover, the totem poles used for mortuary rituals.

**Áísínai'pi (Writing on Stone Provincial Park)** Milk River, Alberta

Writing-on-Stone (now also known as *Áísínai'pi*) became an Alberta provincial park in January 1957. The park's archaeological preserve was established in 1977 to ensure protection of the largest concentration

of rock art on the North American Plains.

### UNESCO Statement of Significance

*Áísínai'pi* was nominated by Parks Canada in 2004 as one of the eleven sites on Canada's Tentative List that have the best potential over the next decade of being inscribed on the WH List as sites of outstanding universal value.

*Áísínai'pi* contains more than 50 petroglyph and pictograph rock art sites in a sacred site lying within the traditional territory of the *Niitsítapi* (or Blackfoot). The landscape figures prominently in the sacred geography of the *Niitsítapi*. It includes dozens of ornate walls, either painted or engraved, depicting either rich and complex figurative scenes or intricate networks of geometric motifs. This is actually the largest concentration of rock art sites in the Canadian Prairies, with 96 separate sites covering more than two thousand years of history.

Spirit powers are associated with the rock formations and with the view towards the nearby hills, known as *Kátoyissiksi*. The rock art, from both pre-and post-Contact periods, is an expression of this meeting of the spirit world and the physical world. Elders consult the rock art to commune with the spirits, to receive power and direction in life, and to learn of their future. This connection continues to exist today among the *Niitsítapi*.



Figure 4 - Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park location



The proposed UNESCO WH Criteria associated with the site include:

- Criterion(i) *Áísínai'pi* is a masterpiece of artistic expression of the *Niitsítapi* people;
- Criterion(iii) It is an exceptional testimony, through petroglyphs, pictographs, landscape features, archaeological sites, and oral traditions to continuing and changing life of the *Niitsítapi* on the Great Plains;
- Criterion(iv) It is an outstanding example of a landscape associated with Aboriginal spirituality.

#### Site Management Authority

As part of *Alberta's Plan for Parks*, developed by Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation in 2009, one of the key recommended initiatives was to build relationships with Aboriginal communities to identify, inventory and protect significant cultural and traditional-use sites within parks, and to collaborate on park initiatives of

mutual interest.

The Government of Alberta recognizes the constitutionally protected rights of First Nations and Métis peoples, and the unique relationship that Aboriginal communities have with the land. While the Government of Alberta has the constitutional mandate to manage Alberta's provincial parks, it also has a duty to consult with Aboriginal communities where decisions may adversely impact their constitutionally protected Treaty rights and Aboriginal rights.

The goal is to reach a meaningful balance that respects the rights of Aboriginal communities and the interests of all Albertans. In addition to respecting their constitutional rights, Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation values the unique perspective that Aboriginal communities offer. Aboriginal communities are encouraged to participate in the development of regional parks planning.



Figure 5 - Petroglyphs at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park  
(Credit: Tourism Alberta)

### Site Visitation

Annual tourism visitation to *Áísínai'pi* is estimated at 45,000 – 50,000 (Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation, 2009).

Modern vandals have damaged much of the rock art. The area is now a closed archaeological preserve and visitors are permitted only as part of guided tours. Damage to rock art or fossils risks fines of up to \$50,000.

To further manage access to the site and inform visitors of the area's heritage, a visitor interpretive centre was opened in 2006, planned in consultation with the Mookaakin Cultural and Heritage Society, a non profit organization dedicated to public education about the Blackfoot society. The Centre's unique architectural design is intended to emulate the First Nations' view of the world and the significance of the

circle in their understanding of the cosmos and that time itself moves in cycles. This symbolic shape is seen in medicine wheels throughout the prairies.

The Centre's site perspective enables visitors to view the Sweetgrass Hills to the south, from a vantage point overlooking the Milk River Valley. On-site programming is intended to engage visitors and stimulate awareness the history of local First Nations, ranching, and Northwest Mounted Police outpost life.

In September 2011, the boundaries of *Áísínai'pi* were expanded with a 1,000 hectare land acquisition by the province near the Milk River, to now give the site a total protected area of 2,700 hectares. Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation staff commented that: "We have recognized Writing-on-Stone provincially and nationally because of the significance of its rock art and to this day, Aboriginal Elders consult the rock art to commune with the spirits, receive power and direction in life, and learn of their future (Duncan)."



Figure 6 - Opening of the Writing-on-Stone Interpretive Centre in 2006  
(Credit: Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation)

### Experiencing *Áísínai'pi*'s 'Spirit of the Place'

Local aboriginal groups, such as the *Niitsitapi* and other indigenous tribes of the Plains have frequented this area for thousands of years due in part to its unique geological landscape, that of the hoodoos which are rock formations sculpted by the passage of time and the scouring of rainfalls and frequent strong winds.

Contrary to what is offered at *SGang Gwaay*, *Áísínai'pi* is more accessible and user-friendly to visitors, as it provides real infrastructure and hosting services which are best suited for visitation. One can find at the park's entrance a camping site, parking, bathrooms and a convenience store. Several interpretive boards provide relevant information about the cultural history of the area, the rock art produced there, and information on the about the flora and fauna present in this region.

While trekking in the park or in the interpretive centre, visitors are invited to reconstruct the history of the site and the lives of the aboriginal peoples who used to spend a part of their seasonal activities there.

The information given is rich and instructive, dealing with the rituals as they were practiced in the past, in particular to the vision quests of the local aboriginal peoples, or the traditional costumes worn during ceremonies. As well, hunting activities (buffalo hunting in particular), the tool-making process and other daily life activities are reflected upon. This also delves into the long-term history related to the wars between rival groups or the bravery of some great protagonists.

All this information about the ancient cultures, history, worldviews and ways of life are supported by oral traditions of the *Niitsítapi*, which are provided by interpretative means such as the interpretive centre, signs, or the tour-guides, and they contribute altogether in the reconstruction of the spirit of the place.

The rock art imagery can be viewed in situ, and with the help of interpreters who come to describe its content, becomes an unparalleled source of information which allows the visitor to bridge the gap between the tangible and the intangible, further strengthening the spirit of the place they want to highlight.

But this approach cannot be fruitful without the active and constant support and involvement of the First Nations groups living around this potential future WH site who can best provide the insights into the past, and its continuing link to the present, bringing to life *Áísínai'pi*'s own spirit of the place.

### Conclusions

Many of these aboriginal sites in Canada have and international importance worthy of commemoration as World Heritage sites, and it is the responsibility of the authorities in charge of their management, be they Parks Canada, provincial parks agencies or communities to bring forward elements that speak to this rich ancestral or spiritual dimension, to present the *spirit of the place*.

This approach, however, is not always easy and obliges those responsible to assess the different values, ideas and attitudes that are in play, whether they be social, religious, political, scientific, historic or otherwise, so as to bring out the spirit of place without diminishing it, and to more favorably match the expectations and interests of the indigenous groups who are connected

by history, tradition or covenant.

The following steps have been taken to address concerns at both the management (government) and site (community) levels in the ongoing operations of these WH sites. These include:

- **Establishing regular communications with involved parties** – Parks Canada is able to resolve issues by meeting and communicating with the aboriginal bands living in and around WH sites, not always successfully, but ensuring that there are opportunities for self-determination.
- **Placing rigid controls on access to individual sections of a site** – Visitor and sensitive area access limitations can help reduce both the human activity stressors and environmental impacts on a site.
- **Maintaining traditional usage of a site** – These types of restrictions to outsiders may be either temporal, such as allowing time and space for traditional ceremonies, or cultural, as in maintaining the health and well-being of communities through the continuous practice of traditional rites.
- **Developing a site interpretation process that is appropriate for the both the culture of the local aboriginal band, as well as the type of visitation taking place** – The level of interpretation and infrastructure should be appropriate to the level of expected and desired visitation, as well as the traditional ways and methods of providing information (i.e., oral history).

In so doing, such an approach aims at discussing and reassessing the current protocols so as to allow the general public to have better insights into the ancestral and cultural values linked to those heritage sites, giving visitors a chance to better perceive what is the spirit of the place of those sites.

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