



The ASBC Pages

EDITORIAL: *The B.C. Archaeology Forum*

Over the last several years, *The Midden* has usually featured a review of the B.C. Archaeology Forum. This year, however, I'd like to do something a little different.

I have been attending the Forum since 2005 and, every year, the lineup of presentations has varied. In part, who presents at any one forum depends on the timing, location and organizing body for the event, as well as who can get funding and time off to travel. However, there are a few overall trends that I have noticed in my short time as a Forum attendee, which I feel may not bode well for the future of the Forum.

1. CRM vs. Academia

At the first Forum I attended, reports from cultural resource management (CRM) firms were most numerous, with only nominal and brief updates from the various universities. Since then, academic research has become more prominent on the roster and presentations on the various field schools are particularly common. This year's forum, generously hosted by Squamish Nation, featured several graduate students presenting on their own research, reports that accounted for about half of the day's presentations.

This is not in itself a problem. However, given that the vast majority of archaeology undertaken in British Columbia is CRM archaeology, it does seem strange that reports from the CRM companies account for fewer and fewer of the Forum's presentations. For example, this year, representatives from only two CRM firms presented. Some have suggested that it is the timing of the event in November, when roads become treacherous and field work is still in full force, that is to blame; however, the recent Forum was very well attended by the consulting community, although few of the more senior consultants were present.

Also conspicuous by their absence are representatives from the Archaeology Branch. Rumour has it that this is due to both a lack of funding as well as a reluctance to defend against an onslaught of discontents. Nonetheless, the absence of the sole governing body of archaeology in British Columbia at the annual B.C. Archaeology Forum is disconcerting.

Whatever the reasons for these trends, the result is that the Forum seems now to be less about what is happening in archaeology in British Columbia and more about what a few companies and students are doing in these particular regions.

2. What is the mandate of the Forum?

I posed this question to several long-time B.C. archaeologists, and their responses were similar: the Forum has no "mandate" per se but, rather, is an organic, anarchic event that becomes what people want or need it to be as it happens each year.

However, I also had several conversations with people in between this year's Forum presentations—over coffee, at lunch,

dinner, and later at the pub—about the purpose of the Forum. Some suggested that its purpose is to share knowledge about current archaeology; others felt it was one of the few opportunities to (re)connect with the archaeological community. But there was one suggestion in particular that I heard several people utter, which I had also understood to be "the purpose" of the Forum, and that was, to bring together archaeologists, and particularly CRM consultants, with First Nations in order to build respectful relationships based on open and honest communication about archaeology happening in the province.

If there is no official mandate, where did this idea come from? Perhaps it is a result of many of us being educated and trained in archaeology during a time of increasing accountability by its practitioners to descendant communities. Perhaps it is a notion only a few of us had that has simply spread through conversations. But if the Forum becomes what people want or need it to be, then it is significant that some people have adopted "communication with First Nations" as its central role.

3. Indigenous Attendance and Participation

Happily, I can attest to the fact that the attendance and participation of First Nations at the Forum has remained steady over the last six years. Unhappily, I must also report that there are, at best, a few Aboriginal people in the audience and only a handful of presentations given by Aboriginal people over the years, collectively. This, despite that the Forum is typically hosted or co-hosted by a First Nation and is often held in a community hall on the local Reserve.

As in archaeology more generally, the lack of First Nations' participation has been identified as "a problem" and many are seeking ways to provide more opportunities for Aboriginal people to become involved at various stages of the archaeological process, in CRM and academia alike. Yet I rarely hear people asking what is, for me, the more fundamental question—why aren't First Nations people all that keen on archaeology?

Given the colonial history of archaeology, the answer may be obvious, but it is more distressing that not much has changed in this regard despite a lot of talk about "collaboration" and "working together." But, perhaps even more critically, this question raises another concerning the structure of the forum as a "forum"—a public meeting place for open discussion.

4. An Open and Honest Discussion?

I have often heard it said that the real conversations in archaeology happen at the pub, and I can certainly testify personally that there is, indeed, some truth in this statement. When it comes to the Forum, however, I am increasingly dismayed by the stark contrast between what is discussed—or, more aptly, *not* discussed—in

the presentations and following Q&A (when or *if* it happens), and what is said “off the record” between friends and colleagues during the breaks and, inevitably, later at the pub.

By way of example: presentations on behalf of consulting firms typically review the number of permits held, showcase a few key projects, highlight significant (i.e., “pretty” or rare) artifacts, and often include a photo or two of a particularly muddy expedition or otherwise embarrassing field moment for the crew. Student and academic presentations follow a relatively formalized sequence relating research goals, methods, and results to date—likewise including the flashier or more ‘exotic’ finds—and end with the promise of research plans for the following year.

Such presentations do fulfill a “what’s happening in B.C. archaeology” mandate; however, what is *presented* and what *actually happened* may be quite different, and the more critical issues are rarely approached. These include questions about how many sites are actually being destroyed, in part or entirety; the impact of non-disclosure agreements on archaeological practice; the paradox of using the *Heritage Conservation Act* to destroy sites (see Eric Mclay’s article on pgs. 3-7); conflicts of interest resulting from an allegiance by archaeologists to firms that are hired by developers; inadequate communication with, or publishing for, a public lay audience; the use of archaeological reports in court and how gear research towards this; challenges facing consultants including unexpected travel, long periods away from family, lack of medical coverage and other labour rights issues; ongoing tensions between archaeologists and descendant communities; the causal link between environmentally destructive development and archaeological opportunities; long-term cultural impacts of heritage loss on its survivors; and, among many other issues, perhaps most importantly—the still-pervasive lack of control by First Nations over their own heritage and its use or abuse through archaeology.

At this year’s Forum, the latter issue was raised by a First Nations man in the audience who asked one of the presenting consultants how decisions are made about what information is included in presentations such as hers, whether the First Nations are consulted about what is and is not culturally appropriate knowledge to share in a public forum, and what recourses are available for First Nations faced with archaeology as the unwelcome herald of pending development/destruction. These are critical issues and this was the perfect place to discuss them, amongst a group with decades of experience doing archaeology, working in CRM, contending with the *HCA*, and dealing with the many parties whose interests are often at odds. Instead, a fairly short but sympathetic response was offered, with the suggestion that he later contact the BCAPA with his questions.

To be fair, there was a full schedule and time was short; such a conversation could easily take up the whole day. But, returning to the question of why so few Aboriginal people attend the Forum: if this is the reception and response offered when the pressing issues for First Nations and archaeologists alike are raised for discussion, I can’t help wondering, why on Earth would they *want* to attend?

The Two-Faces of Archaeology

At the end of the day, I agree with the suggestion several people made, that conversations during coffee breaks are worthwhile

and can lead to ongoing and productive dialogue. At least, I hope this is true. But, I also feel that, with such opportunities for meaningful discussion passed over, the Forum presents merely a polished “public” face of archaeology, ranging from a superficial show-and-tell to presentations that verge on corporate advertising. Meanwhile, the more problematic and less “pretty” issues are reserved for private conversations behind closed doors.

Is this a bad thing? Actually, yes, I think it is. At this year’s Forum, the audience was largely comprised of students and young consultants. When the difficult issues are reserved for off-the-record conversations, the message these young archaeologists receive is that the Forum is not a place for meaningful dialogue. The result is a two-faced archaeology, lacking in transparency and accountability either to each other or to those whose heritage we deal with. Such values trickle down through all facets of archaeological practice until what is produced is ultimately a culture of silence. Whatever your view of the Forum’s mandate, surely it isn’t this?

Wait, I have an idea...

If the Forum is intended to facilitate open discussion, then this needs to be communicated publicly—both by the organizers who need to schedule time for it and, even more critically, by the attendees who must come prepared to talk about even the tough issues. Such dialogue is only possible if everyone is prepared to contribute, openly and honestly, to the conversation.

At the end of the Forum, I sat at the Howe Sound Brewery, listening to a group of students and young consultants who were frustrated by the lack of critical discussion that had taken place on that day, and concerned that the *real* conversations were only happening in quiet corners rather than on the public podium. Sipping my pint, I heard one of them proclaim:

“What we need to do is organize an event where we bring together the people who have long years of experience in B.C. archaeology, the consultants and the academics and students working here—”

“—and the government officials, too, don’t forget them,” another interjected.

“Right, and the First Nations whose heritage is being destroyed, after all,” said another. “We need to bring all these people together and *really talk about what is actually going on* in archaeology, what is happening to these sites and places.”

“We need an *open and honest* conversation,” another remarked, staring deep into his half-empty pint glass.

“You mean, like a forum?” I suggested.

They just looked at me, and sighed.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues for our conversations about these issues both at the Forum and over the years, and I am especially grateful to those who contributed their thoughts concerning the “mandate” of the Forum for this piece.

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