

Welcoming First Nations to the ASBC

Eric McLay

In this era of respect and reconciliation with First Nations in British Columbia, what is the policy of the Archaeological Society of BC in welcoming First Nations to join our society and fostering cooperative relations? As an avocational organization singularly devoted to “further public understanding of a scientific approach to archaeology”, what responsibilities do we have to recognize, let alone reconcile, First Nations’ interests in their ancestral heritage? If important, how should we best go about such acts of public recognition and community outreach, while maintaining the scientific directive of our founding society? [See *Midden* 39(4) Eric McLay, “The ASBC and First Nations: Another Constitutional Question”]

At the 2008 AGM, the ASBC Executive introduced the following amendment to our Constitution to initiate such debate on the issue of respecting First Nations interests in archaeology. Worded to parallel our above stated Constitutional mandate, we proposed the following additional clause:

Purpose 2(c), “To respect and further public understanding of First Nations cultural traditions, values, practices, perceptions and interests in archaeology.

I respectfully argue there are several important reasons for the ASBC to initiate such Constitutional change.

First, this amendment acts as a ‘welcoming statement’ to First Nations by the ASBC. Less than a handful of persons of First Nations ancestry are our members of our ASBC Society. Few First Nation organizations subscribe to *The Midden*. To increase participation by First Nations in our archaeological society, I believe

it is important to extend a welcome and make space for First Nation people to get involved in our society, debate and exchange ideas, and cooperate over common heritage concerns.

Second, this amendment provides a public recognition by the ASBC of First Nations interests in archaeology. Approximately 99% of pre-AD 1846 archaeological sites protected under our provincial heritage legislation are of aboriginal origin. Yet, government and public acknowledgement of First Nations’ interests in their own ancient heritage sites, artifacts and ancestral dead have been the subject of denial for too long. While we may rightfully argue that are universal human interests to preserve and learn from this local archaeological heritage, we must also learn to respect First Nation peoples’ concerns about how they wish their heritage to be preserved and learned about. No one ever dares to suggest that the Egyptians or Greeks shouldn’t manage their own archaeological heritage. Why do we deny First Nations here in BC?

Third, this amendment balances a key gap in the stated purpose of our ASBC Constitution—the furthering of public understanding of archaeology not just for “science,” but an appreciation of “cultural heritage.” Archaeology, at its heart, is about people. The rationale for preserving the past has never just been about furthering science, but about promoting public respect for and appreciation of the past for its human values, meaning, and significance. As “heritage”—literally, something of value to be inherited by future generations—our archaeological heritage is best preserved and cared for under public policy, not systematically destroyed by neglect or lost to market forces. The ASBC has always prescribed to this

humanistic, if unwritten, purpose. Joining the ASBC is as much about meeting and communicating about the goings-on of other archaeologists and other persons and organizations in the heritage community than about disseminating scientific news and discoveries. Few persons would read *The Midden* if it was only filled with pages of scientific jargon, tables and statistics. Rather, the ASBC and *The Midden* are perhaps best known among the public for its passion and creativity and imagination, than any scientific rigor. Most notably, the success of life-long ASBC member Hilary Stewart is due to her talents to breathe humanity into her drawings and works of art making archaeology and ancient First Nation cultures become alive in the public imagination. Furthering public understanding of archaeology to appreciate cultural heritage is not exclusive to First Nation cultures, of course, but perhaps such a more purposeful humanistic approach may be essential to both build cooperative relations with First Nations and rally and inspire renewed public support to continue protecting and preserving our archaeological heritage in British Columbia.

After the introduction of this amendment, AGM Nomination Chair, Kathryn Bernick read out letters received by email from two Past Presidents who offered their comment on the proposed amendment. One letter stated its general apprehension toward to the proposed amendment, but constructively offered that the wording may be clarified so as not to unintentionally appear to “appropriate” the voice of First Nations in publicly furthering their interests in archaeology. The other letter was more blunt. It objected to any “race-based” initiative and expressed opposition to the ASBC Society becoming

a "political platform" for First Nation grievances. In discussion, several other ASBC members stated their general support for the ASBC's attempt to reach out to First Nation communities; however, at least one other ASBC member expressed serious concerns whether there may be any potential "conflict of interest" for the ASBC in approving such an amendment to our Constitution. For instance, how would such a Constitutional amendment "to respect" First Nations interests affect the ASBC's stance on future ethical or political conflicts, such as the purchase and the placing of monetary value on illicit archaeological artifacts by First Nations at public auctions? A final issue of discussion involved procedural concerns about the time allotted for the ASBC membership to be fully consulted about this proposal.

In response, it was unanimously agreed at the AGM that the proposed amendment be tabled for further review and discussion with the ASBC membership.

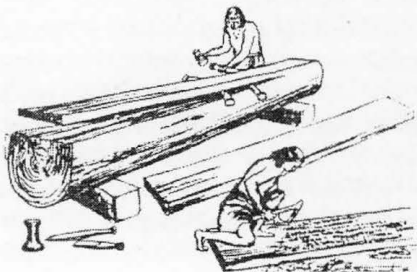
As stated in the editorial from the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, archaeology is important to reconciling our society's relations with First Nations. This has not always been the case. What is unique in BC, however, has been the sincere commitment on the part of archaeologists over the last few decades, both through innovative university partnerships and professional practices, to build positive working relations with First Nations to effect social change, despite government and public indifference.

Admittedly, to my knowledge, no other avocational archaeological society in Canada or the U.S. has recognized or otherwise attempted to formally address issues concerning aboriginal interests in archaeology. Other more academic archaeological organizations in Canada, such as the Canadian Archaeological Association (CAA) have long ago developed a "Statement of Principles for Ethical Conduct Pertaining to Aboriginal Peoples 1994," a policy statement independent of their constitution and bylaws. More locally, the BC Association of Professional Archaeologists (BCAPA) have written into their bylaw's code of conduct a section that prescribes "Responsibilities to Cultural Groups," which is supposed to guide their membership in their dealings with First Nations.

To move forward in the long-term interests of the ASBC, I would argue it is less a question about "why" the ASBC should take the initiative to build cooperative relations with First Nations, than a question about "how" best to proceed. In my opinion, such a welcoming statement and acknowledgement to First Nations needs to be embedded in our ASBC Constitution—the highest level of commitment for our organization to sincerely enact such responsibility.

Eric McLay, M.A. is a professional archaeologist and Past President of the ASBC (2006-2008). Eric lives on Gabriola Island, B.C.

What do you, as ASBC members, think? of McLay's suggestions. The ASBC Executive would appreciate your thoughts on this issue. Please email or write Midden Editor or ASBC President with your opinion and response.



The Speaker for the March lecture will be Daryl Fedje

March 5th, 2009

Topic to be Announced

UBC Anthropology Grad Student Conference

MARCH 7, 2009

CALL FOR PAPERS

Deadline for abstract submission is: February 18, 2009.

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This conference will bring together anthropologists and community members to share and discuss the virtues and lessons of the collaborative learning process. We welcome students, scholars, and community members to contribute 15 minute papers, poster presentations, or videos. Presenters are encouraged to describe their research and its impact and relevance to contemporary communities. Topics on other or related issues are also welcome. Each thematic session will have a friendly atmosphere led by a faculty discussant and allow time for questions and follow up.

The conference will conclude with a banquet and a keynote address by Professor Larry Zimmerman from Indiana University who will be speaking about his innovative and pioneering research into the archaeology of homelessness.

Please send a 200 word abstract along with a working title and five keywords to: ubc.anth.2009@gmail.com

Conference registration fee is \$10. Banquet tickets are \$15.

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