



The ASBC Pages

EDITORIAL

The Signs of a Push Back Against Heritage Conservation

After decades of strengthening protection of archaeological heritage, there are signs that some of the public and governmental officials are becoming more wary of the cost of conservation and mitigation involved. Recent news events and political actions indicate the signs of a push back against heritage protection. More needs to be done to educate the public about the relevance of cultural resource work to combat those who aim to weaken heritage conservation laws.

On April 20, the CBC published an account of a landowner having to pay \$35,000 out of their own pocket for archaeological expenses. They wanted to build a house on their property near the mouth of the Englishman River on Vancouver Island. The story concerned how landowners were dutifully following the *Heritage Conservation Act* (HCA) and paying for an impact assessment: they had a previously recorded site on their property, with mounds and depressions. The landowners hired an archaeological firm and were expecting a \$4,000 bill for the survey. During archaeological monitoring, it turned out that four individuals were buried, and a pit contained a dog burial; there were also cooking features and numerous artifacts, including a bone pin decorated with zoomorphic designs. While the results were intriguing and the process adhered to the HCA, the landowner was shocked to receive a bill for \$35,000. They went to the press, highlighting \$80 an hour rates along with lodging and meal costs for the crew.

Now, there were some errors in the story (such as a maximum \$2,000 fine, not \$50,000 for individuals violating the HCA) and important perspectives not proffered (such as those of the archaeologists involved or otherwise). Partly for these reasons, the events seemed more egregious than they were. Generally, the public is somewhat used to news reports about controversies over archaeological excavations, as with Kennewick Man or the excavations at Tse-Whit-Zen. With the latter, great costs were incurred in Washington state for the excavation of a Klallam village in a proposed graving dock location (in this issue, see Frances Charles' piece written during the time, and Rich Hutchings' review of two books covering the excavation). However, those costs applied to the public. The new twist of this CBC story was about how it could even happen to a small landowner: 'This could happen to you.' No surprise, fervent replies followed, and other news accounts appeared in local papers in B.C., Washington, both in print and online.

The comments, a sampling of which follows (see pages 5 and 6), are startling and raise many issues ripe for debate, such as: the increasing costs of archaeology; who should pay for archaeological work; and how communication between clients

and contracting archaeologists should work (a comment on this is provided in a letter by Ian Cameron and Geordie Howe, which follows on page 4). Many comments glossed over the fact that these "bones" were from graves (more comments focused on the dog burial), while many instead characterized the site as a "garbage dump." There were views expressed about archaeologists taking advantage of heritage law, simply bilking landowners—one even suspected that the bones were planted there by the archaeologists. Here, I'll focus on such comments that denounce or minimize the conservation of archaeological sites.

Unfortunately, this is an increasing trend. In 2006, a bill was proposed in Utah explicitly to minimize archaeological oversight by the whole Antiquities Section—the Archaeology Branch equivalent—from out of control of the State Archaeologist (whose position would be terminated) and under the jurisdiction of the Public Lands Policy Coordination Office, a department more generally concerned with facilitating development in the state. In fact, proponents of the bill specifically charged that developments were increasingly "slowed by state archaeological reviews," as reported in the Associated Press. In the same account, John Harja reported, "There weren't nearly as many companies [decades ago] doing archaeological or historical work as today. And some of that is starting to strain the structure." As reported in Salt Lake City's *Deseret Morning News* (February 7, 2006), Rep. Bradley T. Johnson stated the bill would "provide balance" concerning protecting archaeological resources, stating

I do believe really strongly that we need to protect the archaeological resources of the state, but there are some out there, be it chippings or whatever it is, that we probably don't need every one of these minor sites.... The archaeological people out there are kind of prone to protect every site, at all cost, And so this agency (public lands office) . . . has the ability to make more of a balanced judgment.

While Johnson maintained that the state archaeologist's office will still have a "big role to play," he said. "They'll keep the information," however, the Antiquities Section will just "not continue to have [control of] the permitting process" (cited in Bauman 2006); this law initially passed the Utah House of Representatives with a vote of 61 to 13, but ultimately did not become law.

In Canada, Harper's government is proposing a bill that "allows the minister to greatly diminish the scope of environmental impact assessments on a personal whim"; these generally include archaeological studies and often traditional use studies, among others (*Ottawa Liberal Examiner*, July 12, 2010); BP Horizon's deep undersea oil drill project was given the greenlight without any

environmental studies done—and hundreds of archaeological sites were affected by the spill, contaminating sites with oil.

Now, these comments posted about the events at the Englishman River site reveal urges to scale back heritage conservation law in the province. Several pushed that preservation should be ignored: “Dig [read ‘destroy’] the site and just pay the fine.” Many others made it plain that they would hide the evidence for any artifacts or bones that appear in any excavation, while some indicated that they had already done so or were aware of cases where developers or landowners did.

Those are the voices concerned about the costs. The more troubling concerns, however, claimed that these excavations are not contributing to overriding value for the public. As one commentator put it, “This will NOT be used for science or the advancement of us as a species, as Canadians or even as historians.” Another wrote that “If they just found a few arrowheads and part of a skull, then what was so important about this land?” Yet another commenter posted that “What does a couple arrow heads, someone’s pet, and a skull of unknown origin add to native heritage? Nothing.” These are worrisome comments, as they basically call into the question the relevance of archaeological heritage protection. As one pointed out, such excavations are just “intellectual hobbies” that shouldn’t be paid for by landowners.

There is a need to educate the public about archaeology. Often, it is emphasized that we need to better explain heritage conservation laws, so that people understand why we need to conduct surveys and mitigative excavations. And, public archaeology is also common, but typically practiced with academic projects. However, we also need to educate the public about the archaeology that results from the increasing number of impact assessments that commonly are conducted throughout the province. If we don’t make the effort, I can see why people would comment that such archaeology is “meaningless” or just a “hobby” that shouldn’t be paid for by those not doing it. As Knute Berger, a Seattle-based journalist, recently stressed, there is a “missing element” to most cultural resources work:

...research findings and new discoveries only rarely get out to the public. Fascinating stuff is buried in the paperwork, reports, assessments, and EIS’s [Environmental Impact Statements]. Digging through the documents is like performing a whole new archaeological dig. Historians, researchers, archaeologists, and tribal elders have come up with great material, but it gets re-buried in paper or pdf’s (Berger 2010).

Berger (2010) further argued that there should be “a more consumer-friendly, more aggressive effort to make findings interesting and public. Stories must be told,” and I couldn’t agree more. There are ways to make this happen, and I’ll just raise a few.

First, as it is now, only major finds make the news. But, there are interesting finds present in all regions and these are of interest to local communities—it doesn’t always have to be a site that is the ‘earliest’ or ‘finest of its kind.’ There has to be a focus on more than these famous findings, so that people have a sense of the history of the sites in their immediate area, rather than something important but rare and distant.

To address this, there should be a public component for projects that produce more than “negative” results. If sites were found and recorded, press releases should be sent to local news

outlets, or even regional papers as befitting the results. Sure, the releases may often be ignored, but at least the attempt is made for public awareness. And, really, I think it may be surprising how often reporters will run with such stories, especially those from smaller, community newspapers. Local heritage and history have long been a popular topic. Plus, those papers report news on development projects in the area and archaeology can serve as a fresh angle for discussing the project.

Secondly, for those projects that produce objects worthy of display—projectile points or decorative bone pins—there should be temporary displays of these materials in the local communities, near where they were found.

Now, thirdly, archaeological analysis is not a quick process, and we can’t always present full results to the public as the projects are happening. But, archaeologists should be publishing more of their results once the analysis is complete. The problem is obvious: such publications are expected to be done by archaeologists “on the side,” or on their own time—as if such endeavors were only a minor concern. However, support should be provided for publishing results. Literally tens of thousands of dollars can be spent producing a “grey-literature,” plastic-comb-bound report that’s physically distributed in a handful of copies. In many cases, with all the work that went into those reports, it is simply a matter of reworking the existing report information into an article format—maybe even a week of office time editing report sections could produce a draft article for submission. Of course, that costs additional monies. But, the publication would reach manifold more people and create a sense of worthiness for the efforts and the funds expended on the project, which is something that a developer could play to their advantage, as a positive outcome of the project.

One of the images that archaeologists need to avoid is one that was raised by Martin (*Seattle Times*, May 1, 2008) about the excavations at Tse-Whit-Zen, which has received a lot of attention, but little about the research generated from it. He wrote that “One of the Pacific Northwest’s most astonishing archaeological finds in a generation has languished for more than a year, lingering on metal shelves in a Seattle warehouse, unseen by the public and unexamined by scientists.” Martin described how the government initially supported public education of the excavations but avoided it once the project became a major controversy. Millions of public dollars were expended on the excavations, yet analysis and public education about the site was not forthcoming:

[F]rustrated local historians evoke the final scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when, after all the adventure and fuss, the Ark of the Covenant is crated and carted into obscurity inside a cavernous government archive (Martin 2008).

The same could be said for the public of the mass of data in the grey literature. It’s not hard to make a case that archaeological heritage needs to be protected. But, as the comments on the Englishman River story indicate, we have been failing to make that argument. If archaeology is mainly seen in media fiascos that cost a lot of public or landowner money with not much to show for it, the push back against heritage conservation will only continue.

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