

# Public Archaeology and the Cultural Resource Management Industry in Ontario

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## ABSTRACT

According to John Carman, “We study the contemporary practices of archaeologists in order to understand what doing archaeology does” (2000: 304). The growth of the archaeological consulting industry in Ontario has drastically changed the face of how archaeology is done in this province. This new public context has raised questions about accountability, and it has been suggested that archaeologists have an obligation to public education and outreach. This paper will discuss the public role of consulting archaeologists in Ontario with reference to a recent survey undertaken among archaeological practitioners in the province. It will examine how consultant archaeologists contribute to the general knowledge of the Ontario’s past by non-archaeologists, what limitations and opportunities are created by the consultant’s position between the material resource, legislative structures, clients and a variety of publics, and discuss general attitudes towards public archaeology as a component of consulting and how this is reflected in day-to-day practice.

## RÉSUMÉ

*D’après John Carman, « nous étudions les pratiques contemporaines des archéologues pour comprendre ce qu’apporte la pratique de l’archéologie » (2000, 304, trad.). L’essor du secteur des services-conseils archéologiques en Ontario a transformé le visage de l’archéologie dans la province. Cette nouvelle situation soulève des questions de responsabilité, et certains ont suggéré que les archéologues ont une obligation en matière d’éducation et de sensibilisation du public. La présente communication portera sur le rôle public des archéologues-conseils en Ontario en tenant compte d’un sondage récent mené auprès des intervenants en archéologie dans la province. Nous nous pencherons sur la façon dont les archéologues-conseils contribuent à la connaissance générale de l’histoire de l’Ontario chez les non spécialistes et sur les limitations et les occasions nouvelles qui découlent de la place privilégiée de l’expert-conseil entre la ressource matérielle, les structures législatives, les clients et une diversité de publics. Par ailleurs, nous parlerons d’attitudes générales face à l’archéologie publique comme composante des services de consultation et de la façon dont ces attitudes se traduisent dans la pratique quotidienne.*

The inspiration for this research project came from some time I spent working for an archaeological consulting firm during the summer and fall of 2003. Prior to this period, I was relatively unaware of two things: Ontario’s 11,000-year history of occupation and the fact that archaeology in Ontario was predominantly practiced as a commercial enterprise driven by the needs of the development sector. These realizations led me towards a trajectory of research aimed at understanding the social practice of archaeology in this province and how that practice contributes to the public’s knowledge of the past.

## What is CRM? What is Public Archaeology?

The production and recognition of heritage—and particularly the archaeological heritage—is always a cultural construct (Carman 2000: 304). Currently, the mechanism by which heritage is shaped in Ontario is cultural resource management. For those unfamiliar with CRM, it is a legislated process tied to land-use planning where private consultant archaeologists are contracted by development proponents to conduct archaeological

investigations prior to major alterations to the landscape. When significant archaeological resources are located, the proponent must pay for appropriate mitigative action, which nearly always means excavation. This is how more than ninety-five percent of archaeology is now done in the province each year. It has been said that the goal of CRM programs should be the conservation of cultural values and the maximum effective conservation and utilization of these resources for the public good (McGimsey and Davis 1977: 110). This raises questions about accountability, and it has been suggested that archaeologists have an obligation to provide public education and outreach (Herscher and McManamon 1995). I would argue that the information derived from these processes is ideally supposed to find its way into the public trust. Currently, this public trust is served at the policy level by a system wherein short reports describing archaeological investigations are archived by the Ministry of Culture. There is no further provision for making the information contained in reports accessible or meaningful to the public at large.

In this paper I will be using the term “public archaeology.” While the term “public” may be understood to mean the state and its institutions, those structures that govern the practice of archaeology, I am using it here to indicate the individual members of society, whose reactions form public opinion and those who, in theory, should ultimately benefit from the archaeologist’s research (Merriman 2004: 1-2). In the United States, public archaeology is sometimes used in the former sense, but in Canada it generally corresponds with public outreach and education (Williamson 1986: 85). For this project I adopt an inclusive understanding of public archaeology, in that it may refer to any area of archaeological activity that interacts or has the potential to interact with the public (Schadla-Hall 1999: 4).

### **Benefits of Public Archaeology**

Recent surveys undertaken in Canada and the United States indicate that the public is generally in support of archaeology, believe that archaeology is important and valuable, and are interested in learning about the past (Pokotylo 2002; Ramos and Duganne 2000). The public benefits of archaeology have been said to include education, community cohesion, economic development (Little 2002: 3) and a sense of continuity between past and present (Lipe 1984: 4-6). The benefits of archaeology also include personal heritage values as well as broader historical values (McManamon 2002: 31). Of course, the public benefits of archaeology will vary depending on the subset of the public involved. In addition to the general public, there were six distinct public entities that emerged during the study: these were teachers and students, descendant communities, particularly First Nations but also Euro-Canadians, developers, government personnel and politicians, and avocational archaeologists. All of the participants in my study identified having been involved or are currently involved in activities that engaged one or more of these groups.

## Methods

The material for this study comes from 16 interviews conducted with individuals employed as primary consulting archaeologists in their firms and with Ministry of Culture personnel, located in and between South-western and Eastern Ontario. This is a fairly small sample yet I feel that a broad range of attitudes and activities were expressed and that within this range an acceptable level of theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the general attitude towards public archaeology as a component of consulting practice, how consultant archaeologists contribute to the general knowledge of Ontario's heritage by non-archaeologists and the limitations and opportunities afforded by the consultant's position in public discourses on archaeology. While there were specific questions posed, my objective was to allow the participants the freedom to identify areas that were of particular concern to them, something that could not be achieved by a survey-style study. I believe this approach was very successful, in that the participants identified areas of concern that I had not initially anticipated, but were very important to the matter at hand.

### **How CRM arose so rapidly and why this is a problem with respect to public archaeology.**

Although the legislation enabling the protection of cultural resources has existed since the early 1980s, municipalities only started to have regard for them about a decade later. In the late 1990s, the economy in Southern Ontario began to really take off after the recession of the early 1990s. As a result, the last 10 years have seen unprecedented urban and suburban expansion, and hence a greater need for CRM archaeology, particularly in and around the Greater Toronto Area and in South-western Ontario. This huge increase in consulting activity that Ontario has experienced in the last ten years has taken both the consulting community and the Ministry of Culture by surprise. There were 1200 consulting projects recorded in 2004 and every year for the last 7 years has seen a record number of projects done.

In many ways, the rapid rise of the archaeological consulting industry has impeded the ability of archaeologists to make their work relevant for the public at large. Despite the increase in the volume of projects there is relatively little public archaeology being done. Consultants are simply too busy being consultants. In many ways archaeology in this province is done as a means of generating income like any other consulting business. In the words of one participant in this study, "We are simply exploiting another resource and are no different than those people cutting down trees and pulling the fish out of the sea."

That said, the nature of the consulting field is insecure so that when business is good people do as much work, that is, as many projects, as possible. In this sort of competitive climate there can be an over-emphasis on getting as much fieldwork done as possible in a year. The archaeologists are involved in fieldwork full-time from April to November, often leaving inadequate time left to do report writing in the winter months, let alone research and analysis. All of the consultants indicated that they were constantly busy,

often working through weekends, and one went as far as to say, “Sometimes you hope you don’t find anything.”

There is also a major, industry-wide problem with under-bidding to win contracts, leaving the under-bidding firm or individual inadequate resources to do quality archaeology and reporting, which basically sacrifices any potential benefits to the archaeological record and eliminates the possibility of supplemental research or presentation of the information produced. It would seem that while most consultants are interested in research archaeology, little actual research is being done on CRM data. William Lipe has discussed how the public benefits of archaeology depend on the success of archaeology as a research field. If archaeology does not produce improved understandings of the human past, or if our research loses its scientific or scholarly credibility - its authenticity - the public’s interest in things archaeological will diminish, or at worst, descend into the pseudo-science of “lost tribes and sunken continents” (Lipe 2002: 20).

### **Attitudes towards public archaeology**

All of the people involved in this study acknowledged that communication with the public is important and that some effort should be directed towards it. Some comments included: “There is definitely a place for public archaeology in CRM;” “Education is a constant priority;” “People need to get back to the idea that archaeology does not belong to the archaeologists, it belongs to everyone;” and from more than one participant, “Ultimately what we do is for the public.” There was also a general awareness that there need to be greater efforts put towards public communication and education. Interaction with the public can provide archaeologists with a sense of satisfaction that so often is excluded from consulting – one participant commented that working with people reminded him “why we do this in the first place.”

A significant number of participants immediately identified public archaeology as something involving having the public on site participating in fieldwork. Yet, as the discussions progressed, it became clear that increasing the general awareness about archaeology in Ontario was something that must go beyond participatory programs.

Yet, for many people archaeology is primarily perceived as being about discovery. A hands-on experience participating in an excavation may be the best way to teach people about the basics of archaeology, and increase enthusiasm about the subject. There have been a number of programs in Ontario that have allowed people that experience combined with instruction in dating techniques, mapping, stratigraphy and lab work. These sorts of programs were much more common in the 1980s when there were government grants available for community-based programs. However, there is currently only one program of this nature functioning, the Cataraqui Archaeological Research Foundation in Kingston, which has a specific mandate for public education and funds public programs by undertaking consulting activities. However, consulting work undertaken is kept very much separate from the public education activities, unless the proponent has specifically requested it.

Many of the participants were quick to point out the conflict that would arise with any attempt to do CRM by utilizing volunteer labour under the guise of public archaeology. Contracts are awarded with the understanding that a team of professionals will be doing the work in as expedient a manner as possible. When involving the public, the archaeologists' attention must be directed towards teaching, supervision and ensuring that the resource is not harmed. This is extremely time-consuming. Plus, a lot of CRM archaeology can be somewhat boring and not appropriate for public education. Finally, there is the serious issue of business ethics and concerns about insurance and liability when a consultant is using volunteers as labour on a contract for which they are billing the client.

The most common activity that consultants claimed to have engaged in was giving public talks. Many give talks to classroom groups, at universities, and at Ontario Archaeological Society chapter meetings. One participant claimed to like giving these talks because it gave him the opportunity to really think about the material he was working with. However, some participants shied away from giving talks because, as one put it, "Once you start the demands become exponential, like a black hole," and there is simply not time to meet that demand. Also some people are just simply not fond of public speaking. Despite a few negative comments, overall consultants seem to regard giving public talks as an important part of their role as archaeologists, and give at least a few every year, receiving no income for doing them.

Another important kind of public archaeology that occurs frequently in CRM is what I have termed "incidental." Incidental public archaeology occurs when there is unplanned communication between consultants and the public in the course of their everyday activities. There are crews working in most every municipality in the province every weekday during the field season. This naturally involves interacting with farmers in their fields, eating in restaurants, staying in hotels, and interacting with curious locals and passers-by. Projects in highly public locations, such as the market square in Kingston or at the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, may have a paid interpreter on site simply to handle questions from passers-by. While this is an excellent opportunity to educate the public about what is happening, it can be very distracting for the archaeologist who is trying to do his or her job and field questions from onlookers at the same time. There is also the fear that people will return to the unprotected site at another time and disturb or loot it.

There are other means that consultants can and do devise in order to engage the public interest: publications aimed at a general audience, passive interpretation with signs and markers, collaboration with First Nations communities, involvement with local museums and historical societies, and, of course, the internet. There are already a few excellent websites operated by consultants that provide information about Ontario archaeology, and many participants claimed that the internet was where public interpretation was heading, and that it would be an excellent way to make reports available to the public.

## **Impressions**

With some exceptions, there seems to be a chain of events that leads to the public presentation of archaeological material. First, quality fieldwork needs to be done, then the required report written. This is what the archaeologist actually gets paid for by the proponent. Then, if the archaeologist is personally inclined, there needs to be quality analysis and supplemental research done on a particular site or regional network of sites, and these need to be written up to some sort of professional, if not publishable, standard. Finally, if all of these other steps are taken, the information may be presented to the general public after being translated from the highly technical language archaeologists use amongst themselves into a story about the past that can be understood and appreciated by the general public. This chain of events generally leads to a presentation of archaeological material and knowledge that is secondary to the actual experience of doing archaeology, and, as we heard above, there are significant problems associated with having the public involved in the fieldwork side of CRM archaeology.

Some consultants have made significant attempts to make Ontario archaeology accessible to a wider audience. Many people and firms consciously make an attempt to make their work relevant to the wider world and should be applauded for their efforts. However, the fact remains that the amount of information that actually makes it beyond the reporting stage is extremely small. As Neil Ferris has recently pointed out, “The time has come where we have to ask ourselves if the data collected actually contribute to our knowledge of the archaeological record and does the documentation of these sites justify multi-million dollar expenditures by the development sector each year?” (Ferris 2002:76)

## **Where do we go from here?**

This paper has been primarily concerned with describing how the structure and practice of consulting archaeology in Ontario leaves little opportunity for the public to engage with the knowledge produced. While I have found it relatively easy to identify the problems that arise when trying to link CRM and public archaeology, it is far more difficult to try to make recommendations about how these problems might be resolved. The situation is complex. For example, many archaeologists voiced concern over the lack of adequate repositories for collections. This is an issue that may need to be resolved before researchers can analyse and synthesize the huge amount of CRM data that has accumulated over the past 15 years, and be able to write those stories of the past that the public will be interested in.

Many participants pointed out that it is difficult to find funding for public archaeology initiatives, and it is very difficult for public archaeology programs to become financially self-supporting. One participant stated that he was reluctant to get involved in any under-funded public archaeology activities. It was suggested that there should be a tariff of 1-5% placed on all contracts to pay for interpretation – but who will impose this? And if consultants are so busy being consultants, then who will do the analysis and present the information in an accessible format? Should there be a separate firm or program for this purpose? Consultants also need to be encouraged to get involved in publicly oriented

initiatives. Where will this direction come from? The practitioners themselves? An avocational or professional organization? The Ministry of Culture? What is clear is that if consultants are going to become engaged with the non-archaeological community on a more regular basis, there need to be more organized opportunities, perhaps through a third party, and more incentives if it is going to happen.

There are many questions here that need to be resolved. In the meantime, the bulldozers will keep rolling, and sites will continue to be ripped from the ground. We would do well to convince the people of Ontario that the past is something that is worth saving for the future, while there is still something to be saved. The Ontario Archaeological Society is an excellent forum for professional and amateur archaeologists and the general public to share information and a common love for all things archaeological. I am very appreciative for the chance to present this work here and I would like to thank the organizers and all of you for being here to listen.

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