

# Connecting with Ontario's Past: The National Historic Sites Alliance for Ontario as an Outreach and Advocacy Organization<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The National Historic Sites Alliance for Ontario was formed to act as a sounding board and place of connection among owners and operators of nationally significant places not administered by Parks Canada. Through a newsletter, e-mail communication and regular small conferences, it brings people together to discuss issues such as maintenance of historic structures, fundraising techniques, interpretation of history and culture on a "shoestring," etc. The alliance has grown and changed and is now a model copied across Canada. In Ontario, two sub-groups have recently been formed, one on Sacred Places and another on Aboriginal history. This paper will examine how Aboriginal peoples' involvement in the NHSAO has led to significant learning opportunities for the entire alliance. Case studies of certain Commemorative Integrity Statements involving sites of importance to Aboriginal history will be included.

## RÉSUMÉ

*La National Historic Sites Alliance for Ontario (NHSAO) a été fondée afin de servir d'organisme de rétroaction et de lieu de rencontre pour les propriétaires et exploitants de lieux historiques d'importance nationale qui ne se trouvent pas sous la tutelle de Parcs Canada. Grâce à un bulletin de nouvelles, à des échanges par courriel et à de petites conférences régulières, cet organisme réunit les gens pour discuter de questions telles que l'entretien de structures historiques, les collectes de fonds, l'interprétation historique et culturelle avec un budget restreint, etc. L'alliance a pris de l'ampleur et évolué et elle sert maintenant de modèle qui est reproduit partout au Canada. En Ontario, deux sous-groupes ont récemment vu le jour, l'un s'intéressant aux lieux sacrés et l'autre à l'histoire autochtone. La présente communication expliquera de quelle façon la participation des peuples autochtones à la NHSAO a offert d'importantes occasions d'apprentissage à toute l'alliance. Nous évoquerons aussi des études de cas sur certains énoncés d'intégrité commémorative concernant des sites considérés importants dans l'histoire autochtone.*

The National Historic Sites Alliance for Ontario (NHSAO) began in 1997 as a loosely defined organization dedicated to supporting nationally significant sites owned and operated, not by Parks Canada, but by others. There are over 250 such sites in Ontario, places as diverse as bustling Union Station in Toronto, the Buxton Settlement which echoes the Underground Railroad experience in SW Ontario, and stately Fulford Place Mansion in Brockville. The NHSAO aims to achieve a collective understanding of the meaning of national historic site designation and commemorative integrity, provides a forum for communication and cooperative action, publishes a regular newsletter called *Site Lines*, and holds an annual meeting to bring site managers together for networking and training.

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This paper was given with thanks to all the Elders present in the room and also with acknowledgement that the meeting took place in the traditional territory of the Algonquin people, who have been stewards of the area for a very, very long time.

Recently the Alliance established two new sub-groups to facilitate networking and communication among certain sites with many features in common. Twenty-four of these places are Aboriginal history sites, such as Mnjikaning Fish Weirs National Historic Site of Canada. Another subset of Ontario's national historic sites are considered to be spiritual in nature and these are 25 in number. The Sacred Places sub-group represents churches, cemeteries and Aboriginal spiritual places. These national historic sites include places like Mazinaw pictographs which is sacred to the Algonquin people. Mound sites like Manitou Mounds and Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung Historical Centre owned and operated by the Rainy River First Nations, and Serpent Mounds administered by the Hiawatha First Nation are two other examples. Some other members of the Sacred Places group are churches such as St. Anne's Anglican in Toronto, whose chancel was decorated by members of the Group of Seven, Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa, a designed landscape, and the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in Amherstburg.

The Sacred Places group has met informally several times over lunch at regular Alliance conferences, but time to discuss issues and common experiences was always rushed. A special one-day workshop was held in September 2005 to allow for a fuller discussion of a few key topics. The meeting was hosted by Hiawatha First Nation and took place at Serpent Mounds Park on Rice Lake. Topics included the conveyance of meaning about sacred places so that visitors understand and appreciate sacred versus historic values, reconciling conflicts between the sacred and the historic; encouraging respect by visitors and whether a code of conduct is needed for such places. We also explored the presentation of stories and values in an emotional context so that the visitor experience would be memorable -- and so on. Participants shared stories and laughter, even some rueful tales of visitor experiences that were less than fulfilling, in a very open exchange. A traditional Aboriginal meal added to the experience. Having members of the Hiawatha First Nation conduct ceremonies for us at the beginning and before the luncheon was an added learning experience. Many participants had never participated in a smudging ceremony before, nor had they listened to a Midewewin song accompanied by hand drum and shakers. We also went out on the land for a tour of the Mounds led by a former park manager who is now a councillor of the Hiawatha First Nation.

The second network started just this past spring, the Aboriginal History group, which attempts to bring together the Aboriginal history sites of national significance in Ontario. We met for a half day at the regular NHTSO conference held in April at Ste. Marie Among the Hurons, itself a nationally significant site. People from First Nations communities, Aboriginal organizations, archaeologists and park managers met to discuss what it means to be nationally significant and how they can share experiences and support each other's protection and development goals. These sites are also diverse. They include the two Mohawk Chapels Royal (at Tyendinaga and Six Nations), Chiefswood Historic Site, archaeological sites such as Whitefish Island at Sault Ste. Marie, the Teaching Rocks at Petroglyphs Provincial Park and sites of the period of European contact such as Ste. Marie II on Christian Island in the territory of the Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation. For some representatives, even finding out they had places of national significance was a revelation. We have some fence-mending to do with councils and organizations who had not been well-informed about the designation

process in the past. Accordingly, Parks Canada has set aside a small amount of money this fiscal year to support the development of a national Aboriginal history sites network and work is proceeding to arrange similar meetings in British Columbia and other parts of Canada.

In addition, there is much for us as “keepers of history” to learn from Aboriginal people. Before I got to know Chief R. Donald Maracle and other members of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte near Belleville, I had a vague idea that there were Loyalist Mohawks who had been granted land in Ontario after the American Revolution. But I had never heard of the Mohawk Anglican churches! Christ Church, Her Majesty's Chapel Royal of the Mohawk, along with St. Paul's Chapel at Six Nations, were recently granted the honorific “Chapel Royal” by Queen Elizabeth II, the first chapels royal to be created in over 500 years. These are places where the monarch may worship at her pleasure. The two churches possess national significance because they embody the *equality* of the relationship between the Mohawk people and the Crown, each willing to come to the aid of the other in time of need. Indeed, members of the Royal Family have made personal donations to the restoration project at Christ Church and the Queen herself sent greetings to the assembled crowd on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005, on the occasion of the unveiling of two Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) plaques honouring the church itself and also Dr. Oronhyatekha, a Mohawk doctor and philanthropist who led the Independent Order of Foresters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Christ Church expresses both ecclesiastic and Aboriginal elements throughout the building. For example, there is a carved wolf's head over the front door, which Chief Don Maracle explained during the preparation of the Commemorative Integrity Statement for the site is emblematic of the Wolf Clan, the spiritual leaders of the people. The gilded wooden triptych inside is written in Old Mohawk and was a gift from King George III. A large Bible on display was given by Queen Victoria, and the present Queen commissioned a new silver Communion Cup for the church on the occasion of the provincial Bicentennial in 1984.

Parks Canada encourages owners and administrators of historic sites to develop a Commemorative Integrity Statement (CIS) for their site. A CIS is a way of formally describing the health or wholeness of a national historic site of Canada. Such a place has commemorative integrity when:

- The resources that symbolize or represent its importance are not impaired or under threat.
- The reasons for the site's national historic significance are effectively communicated to the public.
- The site's heritage values are respected by all whose decisions or actions affect the site.

A Commemorative Integrity Statement specifies:

- What is nationally significant about the site.
- What resources of the site are of national historic significance, what constitutes their value and what their appropriate physical condition should be.
- What resources of the site embody other heritage values, what constitutes their value and under what conditions they can be said to be respected.

- What messages about the site's national historic significance should be communicated to the public, and how the effectiveness of this communication will be evaluated.

Typically, a CIS for an archaeological site is pretty straightforward. It will describe the site's overall character and what constitutes the designated place; i.e., the limits of the site. It will also discuss the nationally significant resources associated with the place, such as the artifact collections and the archaeological resources still known to be in the ground. It will describe the results of the excavations and the messages that can be communicated to visitors coming from the archaeological interpretation of the site and its time periods. But for Aboriginal sacred places that are nationally significant, there are many other values and layers of meaning that can be described.

Although it might be difficult for some people to accept a direct descendant link between the mound builders of 2,000 years ago on Rice Lake with the Hiawatha and Alderville First Nations of today, there is no denying that these communities feel a strong sense of attachment to the land they administer at Serpent Mounds and adjacent East Sugar Island. Their own traditions and culture help us as archaeologists and cultural resource managers to understand the depth of cultural memory they bring forward, and their respect for what the place represents. Let's examine the draft Commemorative Integrity Statement for Serpent Mounds as an example<sup>2</sup>.

Serpent Mounds was designated a national historic site in 1982 for its significant archaeological resources and because it represented the Middle Woodland Point Peninsula culture. There was no consultation about its significance with either Hiawatha or Alderville First Nations at the time – I know, because I was the Parks Canada staff member who wrote the paper for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada! We worked with and talked to the site's managers at the time, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, because the site was then in a provincial park. We also consulted archaeologists Dr. Richard B. Johnston then of Trent University, who had been the principal researcher at the site, Dr. Walter Kenyon of the Royal Ontario Museum where many of the artifacts were stored and Dr. Jim Wright of the Archaeological Survey of Canada.

Based on these discussions and a review of the literature, Serpent Mounds' archaeological resources were summarized in the context of other burial sites of Southern Ontario, and other sites of the Middle Woodland time period. It was designated because it had an exceptionally complete record of life for a period of 350 years ending about A.D. 300, and because the mound shaped like a serpent is the only one of its kind in Canada. The Board approved a plaque text in 2001 that includes the statement, "Mississauga people of this area are now the proud stewards of these ancient sites," and a trilingual plaque in Ojibway, English and French was erected at the site in 2002.

The designated place, that is the place designated by the Minister responsible for Parks Canada on the recommendation of the HSMBC, is the tip of Roach Point which contains

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The statement has yet to be signed off by Chiefs and Councils and to be approved by Parks Canada.

the Serpent Mounds site, along with five other locations containing archaeological resources on East Sugar Island. Altogether 47 hectares of land and shoreline are within the definition of the designated place, and it is noted that some cultural resources exist within the inundated shoreline of the lake.

The beautiful open oak savannah setting of Serpent Mounds with its nine prominent burial mounds gives a sense of sacredness, sanctity and continuity of memory. Today, it appears undisturbed and has sweeping vistas of Rice Lake. The CIS (2004) acknowledges that all the mounds, including the one shaped like a serpent, are sacred resting-places of the ancestors. It also accepts that the site is valued for the archaeological evidence that has presented us with a good picture of what life was like in the time period when the mounds were built.

A CIS also articulates specific objectives for the resources being described. It states how site managers will ensure that resources will be looked after. For Serpent Mounds, the team of people who drafted the CIS (First Nation leaders, traditional Elders, archaeologists, planners and exhibit designers) have agreed that the designated place, landscapes and landscape features, archaeological resources and artifacts will not be impaired or under threat when, among other things:

- The resources and their associated values are respected according to Aboriginal traditions.
- Traditional ceremonies and practices continue under the direction of First Nations' Elders.
- Any interventions to the cultural landscape respect its sacred nature.
- Any future development beyond the designated place but within its view respects the scenic character of the setting.
- The historic values of all the resources are communicated to visitors and stakeholders.

Serpent Mounds' CIS also defines the key messages to be communicated about the site, messages about its reasons for national significance and the context messages that are essential for understanding the reasons for designation. The context messages contain information on the archaeological picture of the time, such as information about mound-building, summer encampments, the natural resources of Rice Lake which provided ample food, the known trade networks of the time period with examples of raw materials and artifacts from all over North America that found their way to the site, and so on. But the section on context also contains specific statements to help visitors understand Aboriginal, especially Anishinaabe, culture. For example, the CIS states:

- Aboriginal communities had and have continuity of memory whereby such traditions as respect for the ancestors are passed on to succeeding generations.
- Traditional knowledge is sacred and forms a large part of the history of Serpent Mounds; it must be communicated orally to retain its meaning.
- The sense of place at Serpent Mounds includes respect for the voices of the ancestors and the spirituality associated with ceremonies that took place there in the past.

- Respect for Serpent Mounds includes respect for the Aboriginal traditions of today including permitting appropriate ceremonies to take place.

In addition to describing the resources, objectives and messages associated with national significance, the CIS for Serpent Mounds also touches on the resources, values and messages not related to the reasons for national significance. These include that the two First Nations have significant roles to play in ensuring the long-term integrity of the sites and their collections, and that they honour the spirit of the place. Other messages are that Serpent Mounds is part of a family of national historic sites, and that there are other sites in the local area such as Peterborough Petroglyphs, the Trent-Severn Waterway and the Peterborough Lift Lock.

Aboriginal world view complements what we know from other traditions of science and history. It integrates respect for the land and all that is contained within it, including what we would consider inanimate objects and how people interact with the land. There are certain ways that people act and move on a sacred landscape such as at Serpent Mounds that can be taught to others from different cultures. For example, I have been taught that fall is the right time to feast the ancestors, when the harvest is gathered in and we give thanks for the bounty of the season. It is at that time that sacred places need to have ceremonies carried out and food and water are given to the ancestors at such places. Bill Allen and I recently participated in such a ceremony at an acknowledged sacred place within Algonquin Park with Elder William Commanda of the Algonquin Nation – an amazing day! This is one way that Aboriginal knowledge can be incorporated into management practices at Aboriginal history sites. Another, of course, is the use of tobacco, sweet grass and other plants regarded as sacred medicines at sacred sites. In my opinion it should at least be standard practice for archaeologists to carry and to know how to use tobacco when visiting archaeological sites and sacred places. It signifies respect for the traditions and culture of Canada's First Peoples.

My own sense is that Aboriginal organizations and communities have brought much more to the National Historic Sites Alliance for Ontario than we have so far contributed to their understanding of historic sites management. Their willingness to share and their teaching of good listening skills have been very helpful. We have learned to show respect for others by slowing down and really concentrating on what is being said, not to interrupt a speaker but through visual cues such as nodding to encourage the speaker to continue, and then to wait till the speaker signifies being finished before responding. Our Anishinaabe participants have shared the Seven Grandfather teachings of their traditions, and the Seven Fires Prophecies of the people along with their migration stories. Those from Tyendinaga and Six Nations have helped us realize who really were the first citizens of what became the province of Ontario, and that they brought with them a proud loyalty to their ally, the British Crown. The Mohawk people at Tyendinaga and the Six Nations people at Ohsweken have a very different perspective on their history and their role in Canadian history than what we might once have been taught in school. We still have much to learn from them and from all First Nations in Canada. We also have much to share. As archaeologists we possess a great wealth of knowledge about the past of Canada's Aboriginal people. We can show that we have learned from our own

experiences by sharing this rich and vibrant past with our Aboriginal partners, friends and neighbours.

**References:**

Parks Canada

2004 Draft Commemorative Integrity Statement, Serpent Mounds National Historic Site of Canada. Ms on file, Peterborough, Ontario