

Visiting Archaeological Sites in Saskatchewan: Background Paper and Proposed Guidelines

Prepared by the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society
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Preamble

With the growing incidence of tourist and other visitation to natural and historical sites in Saskatchewan as part of the growing industry of ecotourism, archaeological sites, being part of the land, are becoming of increasing interest to tour operators, tourists and other visitors.

Depending on land ownership, federal and provincial laws and regulations address the management and “use” of archaeological sites and artifacts, just as other laws and regulations govern all citizens’ use of other resources. However, just as poaching of game animals or picking Western Red Lilies happens despite the law, artifacts may be removed or sites or features destroyed by those who either do not know the laws, or refuse to abide by them.

Since it is neither feasible nor desirable to monitor each person’s behaviour and actions when out on the land, the SAS believes that the main technique for achieving conservation of archaeological sites, artifacts and landscapes out on the land of our vast province is education, both general and targeted. We feel that better public knowledge of the rich, 12,000 year old human heritage of the province, including the nature of the resources, their fragility, and the information that can be derived from further study, will in itself dispose people to treasure the heritage and perhaps encourage them to take actions to protect those resources, or at least avoid harming them.

The Society believes, too, that professional tour operators and others involved in ecotourism and cultural tourism (whether tourism professionals or not, such as teachers), once made aware of the often-fragile nature of these resources, will be better able to act as informed stewards/guides and prevent damage that might otherwise be caused by their clients.

This background paper and proposed guidelines has been prepared as our contribution to the work of the Ecotourism Task Force, to help meet our organization’s commitment to protect, conserve and properly use the heritage we have been fortunate to inherit from past Saskatchewan peoples. We do not presume to speak for any community, and are pleased that the Task Force has already consulted with First Nations elders as an important first step in working to protect and enhance these resources.

The Nature of Saskatchewan Archaeological Resources

While Saskatchewan does not possess huge monuments left behind by vanished cultures, there are still numerous, fascinating archaeological resources and places that may be enjoyed and responsibly used.

For the most part, the archaeological resources suitable for tourism use are found on the surface of our land, as described below. As for buried remains, one rule is clear, as embodied in the Saskatchewan Heritage Property Act: no one may dig, or search, for archaeological remains without a permit from the Minister in charge of archaeological heritage. Such a permit is issued only to qualified archaeologists, and its issuance involves stringent reporting requirements. The first rule for visiting sites is, therefore, that ***“No one is to dig, scratch, pry or otherwise probe beneath the rocks or soil in any manner to look for archaeological artifacts.”***

We do possess a rich legacy of archaeological resources (sites, artifacts, and features) spread across the surface of the land of Saskatchewan, which, unlike the buried ones, can be quite visible to the trained eye and accessible to archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike. While what lies below us is as yet unknown, there are many archaeological sites, features and artifacts on the land’s surface which are undiscovered, and many which have been “discovered” but are unrecorded. The process of documenting these surface phenomena is every bit as important as careful scientific excavation of buried archaeological components. Every year amateur and professional archaeologists and others find “new” sites, and our knowledge and site inventory grow apace.

The North

In the north there are three main kinds of surface features which reveal past human activity: the **rock paintings** found on bedrock outcrop surfaces of the Canadian Shield, stone tool-making remains, usually of quartz, left by Aboriginal flintknappers on outcrop camp sites and on portages, and abandoned exploration and **mining operations** and settlements from more recent history.

The mining equipment, burnt-out head frame and mill, assay office, and tailings pond of the late 1930s - early 1940s Box Mine and ruined houses of the associated town of Goldfields on Lake Athabasca form one of the north’s largest industrial archaeology sites, but the workings and equipment of many smaller mining operations

exist. In addition, many of the well-travelled **portages** we use today were trails used by people for thousands of years; if there is a lot of foot traffic a portage will retain an appearance similar to that of generations ago.

Rarely, sizeable **quarry sites** used by precontact stone workers may be found, but most often we find scatters of chips and flakes, remains of their workings, at camp or portage sites.

The activities of the **fur trade** era (1740s to 1870s) have left few standing remains aside from piles of fireplace rubble at a small number of sites in both the north and the south; the existence of the posts and forts is now no more obvious than that of thousands of much earlier, buried precontact sites.

The South

The lands of the southern half of the province, having less dense vegetation, permit us to see surface features somewhat more readily than in the forested north.

The Homestead and Modern Periods:

Even though the process of immigration of non-Aboriginal peoples and rapid and massive alienation of land to non-Aboriginal ownership is scarcely a century old, two things have happened to the material culture of the homestead and later periods. First, many early **settlement developments** such as homes, out buildings, and land breaking are now invisible to the untrained eye. Second, many still-standing early buildings and other architectural structures like bridges are in various states of disrepair or abandonment, advancing toward a state where they are of more interest to the archaeologist than the architect or historian!

The south contains more **industrial sites** than the north. These mainly relate to coal mining (e.g. the abandoned mine building at Pinto) and clay extraction and brick manufacture (most notably the Claybank brick works, now being preserved and developed as a National Historic Site).

Precontact Period:

There exists a wide variety of surface features created by the province's first peoples, which can be summarized only briefly here. Classic, bedrock-based **stone quarries** for stone tool making are few and far between in the glaciated landscape of the south, but there were a small number of localities where suitable stone was concentrated and which were used by First Nations people. These include rich cobble deposits of a siliceous rock called Swan River Chert along the Armit River and possibly other places, and some of the fused shale beds near Estevan. One red and yellow ochre deposit near Lucky Lake may have been used for pigment.

Even today, across the agricultural part of Saskatchewan, acknowledged to be one of the world's most altered landscapes, we can still find numerous examples of what may be collectively termed **stone configurations**. These can be found today, of course, only on unplowed lands. These encompass sites of both known or probable function or purpose, and others which are as yet little understood or unknown. Thousands of **stone circles** of tipi size either large or small, conforming to tipi cover sizes that could be transported either by horses or dogs at different periods, undoubtedly represent ancient camps. These so-called tipi rings may occur singly, or in the tens or hundreds, and probably are the remains of camps. Some **rock cairns** probably cover human burials, but many do not; they could have been used as caches, markers, or even monuments to individuals or events.

The more spectacular **medicine wheels** and **boulder effigies** would seem to be more connected to the spiritual and ceremonial aspects of life. Some dating of such sites has been done, indicating construction at least 2000 years ago. There are probably at least 18 of each of these site types remaining in the province. Theories abound on their functions and significance. Some of the medicine wheels and associated stone features in particular appear to possess alignments related to astronomical phenomena such as the summer solstice sunrise, but most do not.

Some **stone-lined or -edged pits** could have been used as lookout spots for warrior scouts, or as entrenchments during battle, or even as eagle-trapping pits or vision-questing structures where boys or young men would seek visions and spiritual guidance. All these functions are plausible and based on historic and ethnographic facts; one problem of interpretation is the lack of excavation information. As well, sites used for very different original purposes may nevertheless share a similarity in appearance. These sites fall within the category of Sites of Special Nature (SSN) and SSNs are not excavated under provincial policy. Other SSNs include burials, medicine wheels, effigies, rock art, etc.

Drive lanes or lines – long lines of stones used to direct bison into traps or over jumps – are of more certain identification, especially since they are inevitably associated with known **kill sites** or topographic features suitable for this use.

The position and arrangement of features is probably more important than has been recognized or recorded heretofore by archaeologists. For example, boulder effigies or medicine wheels are often observed to have other stone features nearby, such as stone circles or cairns. More research on the associational characteristics of such

large sites will have to include investigation for other sites and features within a wider radius of single features. The usual situation of high prominence of medicine wheels in relation to the surrounding terrain may well mean that the central feature is but one of a number that together give that feature its true context and meaning.

Rock carvings were made both on bedrock surfaces such as at Pinto, Churchill River, Roche Percée and St. Victor, and on individual glacial erratic boulders, such as at Herschel. Some 20 or more such features once dotted the south. Today a few are still in place, others are in museums, and others have been destroyed or lost. These carvings include abstract or unrecognizable figures, human faces, feet and hands, bison and other animals, and, at Swift Current Creek and St. Victor, numerous animal tracks, especially bison.

Earthen excavations still exist from the Battle of Batoche in 1885, when Metis defenders of the village dug rifle pits. Similar rifle pits from the same year, dug by Big Bear's warriors, may be seen at Frenchman's Butte. One very unusual site is a circular feature comprised of 13 pits dug into earth on Stranraer Hill. This may be a vision-questing spot or something entirely different. **Trails** – the remains of wagon wheel passage and animal and human foot traffic – may be seen on numerous pasture lands. How many of these trails predate the 1870s is uncertain, but it is likely that most do not.

Aside from these tangible, physical remains that may be seen and touched, the oral traditions of the Aboriginal cultures reveal a far richer cultural landscape aspect to the surface of the province. Many places in the north and the south, especially unusual topographic features, have myths and stories associated with them. Some of these, such as a sliding hill near the Battlefords, are associated with the actions and exploits of *Wisakicak*, the Cree culture hero/trickster. A cave near La Ronge is said to be one of the places where the *Memekwesiwak* (loosely translated as the "little people") gave medicine in the old days to the People. Many of the largest glacial erratics were regarded as very special. The best known of these was a (now destroyed) 400-ton granitic boulder near Elbow (**Mōstos Awasis Asini** "Buffalo Child Stone"), which was associated with a legend giving its origin as a bison dropped by a giant bird. Archaeological sites are associated with many of the large rocks, indicating long cultural use of these features.

Proposed Guidelines for Visits to Archaeological Sites in Saskatchewan

These guidelines apply to all persons, including individual visitors, tourism operators, and agents and representatives of the operators. If only one rule was expressed, it would be "Take only pictures, leave only footprints". However, even this is not a sufficient guideline for care, since foot traffic can surely damage archaeological sites and features. A better statement that applies to tourism, which claims to follow sustainable and proper cultural or ecotourism principles is, "Take only pictures, and tread as lightly as possible on the landscape".

The chief reason for insisting that every archaeological item - or fragment - remain where it was found is to try to ensure that all such evidences remain to be studied more carefully and unobtrusively in the future.

If every visitor to a northern portage site were to remove just one tiny quartz flake or fragment, for example, the site would be altered irreparably in a very brief period of time, because these sites are generally very small, with few artifacts. Thus it is essential that no visitor remove anything from any archaeological site.

General Guidelines

- 1. Visitors should respect the letter and spirit of laws meant to ensure protection and conservation of both the natural and human heritage of all archaeological sites.**
- 2. Visitors should respect the feelings and beliefs of the many Aboriginal cultures and communities who hold certain places to be historically important and/or sacred, and they should respect the dignity and the remains of the human societies who created the artifacts and features at any particular site.**
- 3. Visitors should respect any particular guidelines for visiting Aboriginal heritage sites established by or in consultation with Aboriginal communities.**
- 4. Visitors should respect the rights of landowners and tenants in the case of leased or owned land, and of all citizens in the case of Crown Lands.**
- 5. No person shall dig, probe, or otherwise seek to discover any archaeological or other objects or soil deposits, either using bare hands or any instruments, without a valid and subsisting permit from the appropriate government agency.**
- 6. If unrecorded artifacts or features are discovered either at a known site or while travelling to or from a site, the appropriate agencies should be notified (Saskatchewan Heritage Resources Branch in Regina).**

Site-and Resource-Specific Guidelines

7. No one shall remove archaeological artifacts exposed on the surface (stone chips, flakes and tools; fire-fractured rock; broken bone; metal; glass; pottery sherds or anything else) from any site unless they have a valid and subsisting permit from the appropriate government agency.

8. The most common surface remains encountered in northern Saskatchewan are flakes and artifacts of quartz and to a lesser extent other materials, Fur Trade artifacts of metal manufacture, and mining structures and equipment found in clearings, portage trails, or on outcrops. No one shall collect or remove any such materials (however small) from any site without a permit.

9. Aboriginal pictographs – paintings on vertical rock surfaces adjacent to the waterways – should not be touched in any way by human hands or instruments. This includes touching them directly with the hands, using chalk, crayon or any substance to “enhance” their appearance for photography; brushing, scraping or otherwise removing lichen or algae growths from the painted rock faces, or splashing or spraying water on the paintings for photography purposes. All such practices are actually or potentially harmful to the preservation of these features.

10. Erratic or field-stone surfaces bearing carved or ground-in figures (rock carvings or “petroglyphs”) made by precontact Aboriginal artists, must not be touched in any way by visitors’ hands or feet, nor should any substances (such as water or chalk) be applied to them to make them clearer for photography purposes. No soil or plant growths affecting such rock carvings shall be removed or otherwise disturbed.

11. In southern Saskatchewan, surface artifacts can be plentiful at many archaeological sites, exposed either by natural wind and water erosion or by human activities such as farming, road or reservoir construction, etc. All such artifacts must be left in place unless a person holding a valid permit is studying them and recording their context.

12. A major type of archaeological feature found on or above the soil surface in southern Saskatchewan is a variety of stone configurations (including stone circles, cairns, medicine wheels and figures of animals and humans, and lines of stone). Since all stone configurations are fragile resources that have the high potential to be disturbed by machinery and even human foot traffic, visitors must ensure that their movements do not in any way dislodge or remove any of the stones in these features. Geological and botanical studies of these constructions depend on maintaining their physical integrity. In addition to not moving stones, visitors should avoid walking on them to avoid altering the growth of the lichens, which grow on their surface.