The Forks – Nipawin Area

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**Introduction**

Since the Forks-Nipawin areas of the province were deglaciated approximately 12,000 years ago, they have been located in the Boreal Transition Ecoregion. The area is a transition zone between grasslands (to the south) and the Boreal Forest (to the north). The landscape has gentle slopes. There are many rivers and river valleys in the area but few lakes. By looking at the map, can you name any rivers that run through this region?

This Ecoregion is mainly composed of a deciduous boreal forest with some open farmland today. Approximately 50% of the area is open, but most of this is cultivated. In addition to agriculture, the land is currently used for a number of activities, including forestry, hunting, fishing, and recreation. In the forested areas, the most common vegetation includes jack pine, black spruce, white spruce, and tamarack. In the less dense areas, aspen, shrubs (including bearberry and saskatoon berry), and grasses are more common. The main grasses are needlegrasses, wheatgrasses, and plains rough fescue.

There are many species of wildlife in this Ecoregion, in large part because of the rich vegetation, numerous rivers and streams, and relatively low human occupation. Some of the mammals present are moose, elk, white-tailed deer, black bear, raccoon, coyote, beaver, and other smaller rodents. Common birds are the gray jay, boreal chickadee, loon, grebes and warblers. Red-sided garter snake, tiger salamander, wood frog and Canadian toad are common as are several fish species. These include northern pike, walleye, yellow perch, lake whitefish, lake trout, white sucker, burbot, and fathead minnow.

**Precontact Period**

In modern times, hydroelectric dam projects have been developed (including the François-Finlay and E.B. Campbell dams) which have resulted in large-scale archaeological research in the area. Many sites have been identified as a result of these studies – sites that are unfortunately now underwater or otherwise impacted by the building of the power plants. Some of these sites include Bushfield West, Bushfield East, Municipal Camp, and Lloyd sites, all of which are Selkirk sites (300 to 600 BP).

These are by no means the earliest sites located in the Forks-Nipawin area, though. Immediately after the glaciers receded, the landscape was covered by one of two immense glacial lakes – Agassiz and Saskatchewan. This has since created the river valleys that we can see today. Human occupations have been found along many of these river banks and terraces dating to a very early time. A well-known example is the Below Forks site. This site is located just east of the “Forks” – where the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers join. This site has been dated to more than 6000 years old. The site has multiple layers, ranging from very recent to the Oxbow and Mummy Cave periods. Why do you think that humans have chosen to return to this site for so many millennia? What needs/resources would this type of environment provide?
Other early sites that have been recorded in the Nipawin area include the Permanent Camp site and the Minnie site, each dating to the Middle Precontact Period (sometime between 7,500 and 5,000 years ago). Both of these sites were found on terraces along the South Saskatchewan River. Another site called the Gravel Pit site, also located on a terrace of the South Saskatchewan River had artefacts dating from the recent past to the Oxbow Period (possibly as old as 5,000 years). The Crown site is another site that dates from the very recent past all the way back to the Middle Precontact Period (at least 4,300 years old). It is located along the terrace of an unnamed river in the Nipawin area. What are similarities between all of the sites mentioned in this paragraph? If you were an archaeologist, where would you be sure to investigate for sites today?

Contact Period

From the retreat of the glaciers to today, the Forks-Nipawin area has continued to be occupied by humans. When European traders first came to what is today called “Saskatchewan” they began to set up fur trading posts. There are dozens of fur trade posts recorded in the Forks-Nipawin area dating from the mid-1700s to the mid-1900s. Some of them include: Fort la Jonquière (~1751) [early French post], François-Finlay (1768-73) [Independent (Ind.)], Thorburn’s House (1789-91) [Northwest Company (NWC)], Pichet’s House (~1790) [Ind.], Grant’s Post (1793-95) [Ind.], Fort Nipawi (~1816) [Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC)], Fort a la Corne I (1850-85) [HBC], and Fort a la Corne II (~1885-1930) [HBC]. Fur trade posts would have been stationed near waterways (i.e. rivers). Why would they choose to set up posts near the river?

After the fur trade began to decline, other activities start to occur in this region. The Neufeld Sawmill is an example of a lumber mill that was built in the 1930s. The Loos Cabin site is a sawmill that was formed in the 1940s. These are both also located on a terrace of the Saskatchewan River.

It is clear from understanding the archaeology of an area that a lot of the activities that were going on in the past (hunting, fishing, forestry, etc.) are still common in the Forks-Nipawin area today. What created the archaeological sites is also creating modern sites. This is just one reason why it is important to look at the entire site to understand whether it is recent or old. If a person removes an artefact from a site and does not record it then the “date” of the site may be removed. It is not always possible to radiocarbon date bone or charcoal or otherwise estimate how old a site is. Do you think that one day the hydroelectric power stations will also become archaeological sites? What do you think will remain to be “rediscovered” at them in the future? What information might archaeologists be able to use to “date” the sites?

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