The Quill Lakes

Introduction

The Quill Lakes area comprises an extensive area of east central Saskatchewan. Named after the three saline lakes (Big, Little and Middle Quill), it is framed by the Touchwood Hills to the south and the northern boreal forest. The area has not been subject to much excavation in part due to the lack of cultural resource management projects in the area.

The region is best known for the three Quill Lakes, named for the bird quills collected and shipped to England for use as writing pens. All the lakes are saline and vary in depth. Their shores are alkaline flats. The adjacent marshy wetlands and the shore are used for a wide array of migrating birds. A survey in 1993 counted 197,155 shorebirds. It is an important stopping area for the rare and endangered piping plover. Local communities have now posted bird watching sites along the lakes. The Touchwood Hills are also a product of glaciation and are described as “hummocky moraine”. Sloughs, small lakes and creeks lead either into the Quill Lakes or the Assiniboine River. The Carlton Trail extends through part of this area so that Fort Pelly, Fishing Lake and the Touchwood Hills Fort could be accessed.

Precontact Period

In order to better understand the Quill Lakes area, Novecosky for his M.A. thesis (2001) undertook a study of 15 collections gathered primarily by local farmers and the Wynyard Museum. Studying over 35,000 artefacts, he was able to locate a provenience/site location for about 1290. The general area around the Quill Lakes had 27 known sites before his thesis. Part of his study then expanded to locate another 74 sites and assign a typical Borden number so they would become part of the archaeological record of the province.

The lithics collected by farmers primarily in cultivated fields show that the occupation of First Nations groups in this area existed from earliest times. Novecosky not only thanked the group for sharing their finds, he has summarized totals and arranged them graphically over time. Can you use his charts to better understand how the shape and composition of points allows us to date a site? (see figures below) This survey combined with radiocarbon dating illustrates that aboriginal peoples in this area were here at least 13,000 years B.P. (Before Present) and were still using stone points up to at least 500 years B.P.

About 50 to 60 km north of the Quill Lakes lies the southern edge of the boreal forest. This area was not part of Novecosky’s study. Look at the SAPA map and suggest why this area had not been studied to any great extent.

Contact Period

Within the general area are several Hudson Bay Company (HBC) forts. They were connected to the Carlton Trail which extends 700 km from Fort Carlton, SK to Fort Garry (Winnipeg, MB). The trail continued west for another 980 km from Fort Carlton to Fort Pitt and
Fort Edmonton. Fishing Lake Post directly east of the Quill Lakes was built approximately 1805. To the north we have remains of several small trading installations; the Egg Lake Guard House (built 1853), the Nut Lake Northwest Company (NWC) post (c. 1808) and close by the Nut Lake HBC post (1881-1916). Last Mountain House (#14 on SAPA map) was an HBC post reconstructed in 1869. Also see Touchwood Hills post (#12 on SAPA Map) constructed in 1879. Fort Pelly on the Assiniboine River (Black #14) was built in 1824 and then moved and rebuilt close by in 1856. That area merits a different study since it includes both NWC and HBC posts.
References:

Environment Canada Website

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