

Abandoning the Cult of the Artifact

Cultural Landscape Management on the Chilkoot Trail

Situated at the northern end of the Alaska panhandle and straddling the international border, the Chilkoot Trail has been one of the most important routes into the northwestern interior of the continent. A Tlingit trade route, the Trail became internationally famous at the turn of the century, as it witnessed the passage of thousands of gold seekers into the Yukon during the last great North American gold rush.

The Canadian portion of the Trail, 26.5 km long, runs from the Chilkoot Pass, at the Alaskan border, to Lake Bennett in northern British Columbia. The Trail offers immense variety and density in its cultural resources. Scattered along the trail are numerous remains associated with the gold-rush such as tent and structural platforms, refuse middens, boat remains, tram carts, quays and bridge footings—many of which are concentrated at 12 major areas or “historic nodes.” Ten nodes are located in the upper sections of the trail and correspond to favoured stopovers where gold-rush “stampedeers” temporarily cached supplies before relaying them farther along the trail. In addition there were two semi-permanent encampments where stampedeers built boats for the continuation of their journey to the goldfields. The largest of the two sites was Bennett City, on Lake Bennett, at the junction of the Chilkoot and White Pass trails.

The general terrain around Bennett is rolling and rugged. The site's core was constructed on a hillside which slopes down to the water's edge. Unstable sandy soil and thin vegetation have contributed to erosion and the creation of sand dunes. These conditions led the Stampedeers to build terraces supported by retaining walls in order to create or maximize space. Lake Bennett's population, which at its peak contained upwards of 20,000 gold seekers and entrepreneurs had a significant impact on the environment. Evidence of their efforts—scalping out the hill side and extending platforms out over the water for their homes and businesses, and constructing roads, docks, and a bridge—still exists. It is the accumulation of these remains which speak of the frantic days of the gold rush. It requires some imagination to under-

stand this when viewing the terrain and vegetation.

Interest in the Chilkoot Trail, re-kindled in the 1960s, led to a steady growing volume of recreational hikers. The Chilkoot Trail may be the only national historic site in Canada where recreational activities such as backpacking and camping in and around historic features is encouraged.

Most visitors do not intentionally damage the fragile features, but heavy foot traffic and uncontrolled wandering, in concert with natural processes, can cause severe damage. Throughout Bennett townsite, new paths have been cut into steep slopes and banks as people take shortcuts to the historic trails and main road, move from terrace to terrace, or access the lakeshore. Once such paths are created, they gradually widen with use, vegetation dies and erosion begins.

The historic Bennett City townsite at the convergence of the Chilkoot and White Pass trails. Illustration by D. Elrick.



Indiscriminate camping has also been responsible for much damage. Campers securing their tents during windy conditions or building fire rings have often used cobbles from retaining walls and other historic features. This has led to the walls' gradual collapse. As the walls collapse, the terraces slump, destroying the historic landscape.

In response, in 1971 Parks Canada began to provide visitor services and institute visitor safety measures, trail maintenance, and some modest on-site interpretation. As anticipation grew during the 1980s that the Chilkoot would acquire full national historic site status, an inventory of the cultural resources was begun in preparation for site development associated with the 1996 gold rush centennial. However, establishing an artifact inventory for an area the size of the Chilkoot Trail was a monumental task involving the handling, and displacement of a multitude of fragile artifacts, a mountain of paper, and an immense amount of time. It became apparent that for the visitor to experience their cultural heritage through an outdoor museum concept, and to contribute to site

developmental needs, a change in emphasis, away from the artifact, was necessary.

The public continues to perceive archaeology as primarily about site-specific excavation and the recovery of artifacts. This is often spoken about as the unearthing of historic riches. However, the Chilkoot Trail, with most of its remains situated on the surface provides the opportunity to show how or why archaeological features could or should be saved for future generations to enjoy in-situ. Even the most decayed and scarcely traceable of remains may reveal something of the past and of ourselves. The slightest terrain modification, vegetational differences or soil discoloration can tell a story. Archaeology has a special role to play in awakening a sense of wonder for the process of decay, or transformation of a living system. It can contribute broadening awareness of the diversity and cultural depth which exists within our environmental surroundings.

As a result Parks Canada chose to view the Bennett townsite as a landscape feature, a product of the interplay of humans and nature, since present-day recreational use continues the historic interaction between people and the land. The plan was to develop the site as an outdoor museum in a manner that would take into account visitors' needs without unduly compromising the historic site. Observation of the long-term destructive forces at Bennett indicated that guiding the use of the site was necessary to accommodate historic preservation and modern recreational activities.

Site development which focussed on guiding foot traffic, reduced erosive effects. This was accomplished by maintaining the stabilizing vegetation, which helps hold the loose, sandy soil in place. Directing individuals to the historic main road through one access trail reduced some of the problems created by hikers terrace-hopping to reach their preferred camp location. In addition replacing loosened or displaced cobbles in some of the major retaining walls increased overall site stability and protected significant cultural features which would have been impacted by erosion as the retaining walls collapsed.

Bennett City in 1898.



Bennett City in 1991. There is a lack of vegetation in the historic photo compared to the more recent one.



Eroding paths show the destructiveness of uncontrolled foot traffic. Recent construction of a staircase has directed foot traffic on the slope alleviating this problem.



Cobbles loosened from a historic retaining wall because of visitor traffic. A combination of signs, staircase construction, and cobble replacement have contributed to site stabilisation. Photo by K. Lunn.

Areas selected for camping were limited to those areas which could be accessed by a major historic trail and situated in relatively broad flat areas just off the main historic road. It was also recommended that placing both interpretive and directional signs in a manner that would draw people directly down the slope, using the historic trail, and to the historic main road would mitigate path braiding and erosion. It was also suggested that the construction of public facilities and the formalizing of camping at locations immediately adjacent to the historic main road would eliminate much of the terrace hopping. A public shelter constructed on an old building terrace and tucked up against the terrace wall would act as a barricade to pedestrian traffic. The location of the building's entrance and exit would influence people's circulation on the site. Indicating historic water access points would reduce trampling of foundation features near the water's edge. Such steps were means of replicating present site-use patterns to those of historic Bennett. Thus site development



became a tool of cultural resource management by minimizing landscape stress.

The goals are to maintain the overall landscape by using the site development to promote present-day site use to be comparable to traditional historic use. In order to measure the effectiveness of these recommendations, a regular monitoring program was required to record the form which site changes were taking and to measure the effectiveness of the various proposals on maintaining site/people interactions.

The purpose of the monitoring program was to identify areas of site degradation and to measure the effectiveness of the various proposals in stopping or reversing degradation. Observations in 1995 showed that reconstructed retaining walls had assisted in stabilising the hillside. Camping was prohibited on the upper terraces which has reduced the degree to which the edges have crumbled as well as reducing the climbing which had occurred up and down the slopes. Placing staircases at the locations chosen for direct access to the historic main road focussed foot traffic, controlling site circulation and lessening erosion. Paths which were previously used indiscriminately were closed off using vegetation replanting or simply blocked with deadfall. In addition an interpretive program was being developed which was to assist in providing messages to site visitors.

Although shrinking funding has limited a number of proposals such as the warm-up shelter and reduced the level of visitor education, many of the proposals have had a positive effect on the site. The movement away from an artifact focus to a more generalized landscape management approach, and a shift in philosophy spurred by the CRM policy has allowed site managers to work towards maintaining the cultural/natural relationships at the site. No longer was there the perceived need to either salvage or avoid archaeological sites if they were in the way of development, or to reconstruct if they were to be interpreted.

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