

Cultural History in National Parks: The Case of Broom Point, Newfoundland

James E. Candow

Until recently, the Canadian Parks Service maintained a fairly rigid distinction between its natural and cultural resources, commemorating the former at national parks, and the latter at national historic sites. Cultural resources located within national parks fared poorly because the Parks Service's standard approach had been to expropriate the land of people who resided within park boundaries and to remove all vestiges of human occupation, after which

the landscape was allowed to revert gradually to its "natural" state.

Several factors, including protracted legal battles waged by former residents, have given rise to a new era in the Parks system, where it is now recognized that cultural resources can play a valuable interpretive role at national parks. A restored fishing station at Broom Point, Newfoundland, in Gros Morne National Park, presents a compelling example of the advantages of this new approach. It results in the preservation of buildings and artifacts associated with a disappearing lifestyle, enriches the park visitor's experience, and fulfills the department's environmental mandate by raising questions about the interaction between humans and nature.

Broom Point's teeming marine life has made it a prime fishing location for over 2,300 years. Its earliest fishermen were Palaeo-Eskimos of the Groswater and Dorset cultures. From 1713 to 1904, French fishermen enjoyed fishing privileges on all or part of Newfoundland's west coast, a fact reflected in area place names. Broom Point itself is a corruption of the French "Point Brun" (Brown Point). English settlement on the west coast dates from the first decade of the 19th century, when French fishermen were absent because of

the Napoleonic Wars. Broom Point received its first permanent inhabitants, Alex and Sara Short, in 1808.

Settlement remained modest until the 1860s when there was a boom in the herring fishery, caused by the bait requirements of the American, French, and Nova Scotian bank fleets. The decline of the herring fishery after 1875 was more than offset by the emergence of a lobster fishery. Lobster had become commercially important in Nova Scotia and New England in the 1820s, and it was a Nova Scotian who erected the first lobster canning factory on Newfoundland's west coast in 1873. By 1887 the lobster fishery provided employment for 1,000 Newfoundlanders.

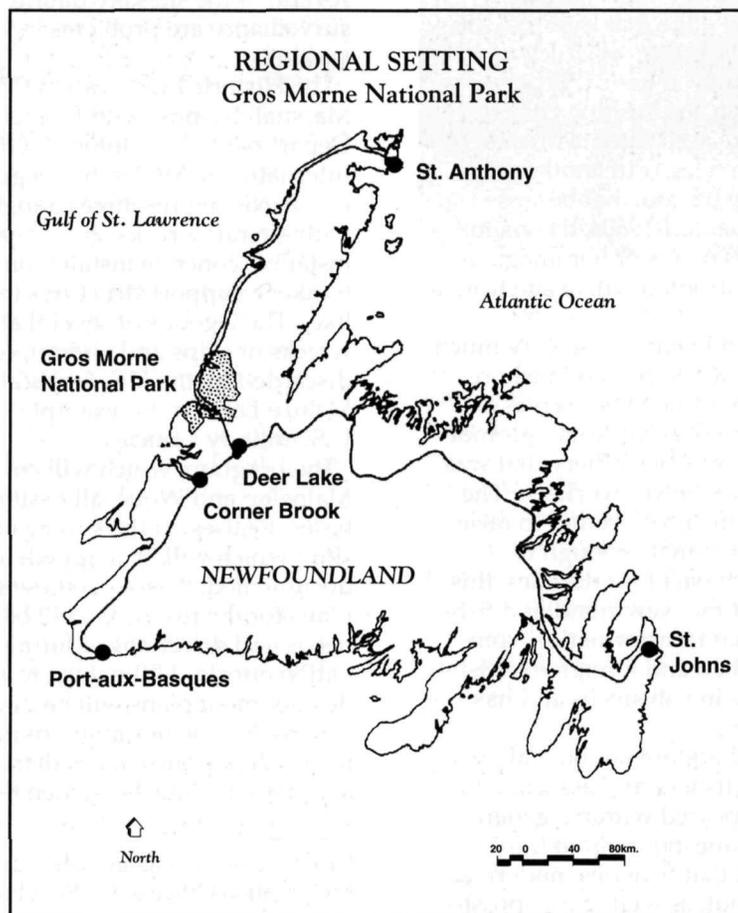
Industrial-scale lobster canning factories soon gave way to small, family-run operations. In a production pattern common to the coast, Broom Point's 10 inhabitants produced 25 48-lb. lobster cases in 1900.

In the early 20th century, permanent habitation at Broom Point gave way to a pattern of seasonal occupation, by which fishermen from other communities migrated to the site at the start of the fishing season and left when it ended.

Brothers Tom, Steve, and Alex Mudge of Norris Point purchased property at Broom Point in 1941. Together with their families, they fished each summer at Broom Point until 1975. Faced with failing health, the brothers sold the property to Parks Canada (now the Canadian Parks Service), so it could be incorporated into Gros Morne National Park (established 1973). The property included a cabin, a fish store, and a "factory," so-called because the Mudges canned lobster and salmon there. The factory blew down in the 1980s, but the other buildings have survived and are now the focus of Canadian Parks Service interpretation at the site.

In 1981, interpretation planning for Gros Morne National Park identified a cultural history theme: "Evolving Lifestyles Focused on the Sea."

Commemoration of the park's human history did not begin until 1989, when a temporary exhibit of late-19th and 20th-century photographs was installed in the Lobster Cove Head Lighthouse. In 1990, this was replaced by the permanent "Evolving Lifestyles" exhibit, which treated the entire history of human habitation in the park. At the same time, Broom Point was opened to



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the public. The Mudges' fish store and cabin were restored and furnished to the mid-1960s period, and the garden which the Mudge ladies tended was re-established.

As historical restorations go, the Broom Point installation is extremely accurate. Although the Mudge brothers have all passed away, other family members, including their widows, are still alive. It was therefore possible, through a series of recorded interviews with family and friends, to gain detailed knowledge of the Mudges' fishing operation and lifestyle at Broom Point. The feeling of trust which developed between the Mudges and Parks staff was reflected in the family's decision to provide many original artifacts for inclusion in the installation. This was fortunate, since it proved more difficult to locate some 1960s artifacts than artifacts from other centuries. The site is staffed by two area fishermen, including one who fished at Broom Point while the Mudges were active there. This provides the visitor with an opportunity for first-hand knowledge that is rare in the Parks system.

Visitors seem almost immediately at ease at Broom Point, probably because it is such a refreshing change from the usual historic buildings associated with elite figures or particular architectural styles. Put another way, the visitor feels at home. It may be, too, that because Broom Point is interpreted to the mid-1960s, the visitor does not face the same demands on his or her imagination and sensibility as when confronted with a site from a previous century.

The Mudges' fishery was a family enterprise very much in the mould of the traditional Newfoundland inshore fishery. In the 1950s that fishery came to be seen as an economic liability, and government accordingly promoted the growth of a modernized offshore fishery that was technology intensive and required fewer workers. The government hoped to improve the product and to raise the standard of living of those fortunate enough to remain in the industry. Over the past four decades, this has entailed a transformation of the Newfoundland fishing industry. Unfortunately, that transformation, combined with the impact of Canadian and foreign overfishing, has caused a drastic decline in fish stocks and has precipitated a crisis in the fishery.

The Broom Point installation therefore not only allows visitors to learn about a type of fishery and associated lifestyle that have almost disappeared within a generation; it also raises fundamental questions about the marine ecology, and the impact that fisheries modernization has had upon it. It points out, as well, the impossibility of divorcing cultural and natural history in a resource economy such as Newfoundland's, and ultimately confirms the wisdom of the decision to include cultural history as an interpretive theme in national parks, where human activity, good or bad, has played a role side by side with nature that cannot be ignored.

James E. Candow is a historian in the Atlantic Regional Office of the Canadian Parks Service.