

Best Practices for Avocational and Chapter-based Archaeology Projects on Indigenous Lands

Note: this is a working document which we continue to update. Suggestions for improvement will be gratefully accepted and considered.

Introduction

On November 11th, 2018 the Ontario Archaeological Society held a workshop attended by avocational archaeologists, professional archaeologists, and representatives from various First Nation communities. It encouraged open discussion on the topic of how avocational archaeologists should approach fieldwork on Indigenous lands.

The round table led to some important discussion, valuable insights, and answered questions posed by avocational archaeologists. Having taken notes throughout the workshop, the OAS Board of Directors were able to summarize the major themes of the dialogue in this document.

The importance of engagement

In 2017, the OAS membership voted on a revised Statement of Ethical Principles. This new set of principles were meant to help guide us as a Society towards Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. According to the current Ontario Archaeological Society's Statement of Ethical Principles:

- We recognize that we have special obligations to any Indigenous or Descendant community whose cultural legacy is the subject of our investigation.
- We affirm that Indigenous communities have an inherent right to practice stewardship over their own cultural properties (including but not limited to: archaeological, spiritual, and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies, visual and performing arts, oral traditions and written and oral literature) and that said stewardship includes the right to maintain, control, protect, develop and have access to those properties.
- We acknowledge the profound relationship between Indigenous communities and their cultural properties regardless of legal ownership.
- We will take all reasonable efforts to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of representatives of Indigenous communities or Descendant groups prior to taking any steps in the investigation or management of their cultural properties.
- We will respect the customs and traditions of Indigenous communities regarding the treatment of ancestors.

In order to adhere to these principles, we expect our members—professionals, academics, researchers, and avocational-- to initiate meaningful engagement with relevant Indigenous communities when conducting fieldwork.

If an avocational archaeologist, or an OAS Chapter, hopes to pursue archaeological field work on Indigenous lands, then they should engage the appropriate Indigenous communities before field work even begins. If you choose to carry out field work without engaging with the appropriate communities, it could irreparably damage your relationship with that community, as well as with other stakeholders.

[The importance of avocational archaeology in Ontario](#)

Avocational archaeologists play an important role in Ontario archaeology. Because they conduct fieldwork out of a passion for the discipline and on a volunteer basis, and are often rooted in the community, they are able to accomplish things that professionals cannot.

Avocational archaeologists can take the time to identify sites on lands not being developed. Therefore, they are in a better position to map and register sites in order to protect them.

Avocational archaeologists often conduct archaeology in the same region over years and are in an excellent position to protect sites from collectors. Taking steps towards protecting sites includes collecting evidence of looting and building a rapport with local police.

[Best practices for avocational archaeology projects on Indigenous lands](#)

The first steps towards engagement can feel daunting--who should I contact? How do I make contact? Hopefully the following guidelines can help you take those first steps.

Each community will have different expectations of what appropriate engagement means to them. Therefore, we can guide you with some very general suggestions, but most of what you learn about appropriate engagement will be through participating in the engagement process itself, from the communities you engage with.

[1\) It takes time.](#)

It takes time to develop trusting relationships, and you shouldn't plan to do fieldwork right after the engagement process begins. You should always begin engagement before you commit to any timelines for fieldwork.

It also sometimes takes time to hear back. First Nation's government and administrative offices are very busy, and just because you do not receive a response to your e-mail, you should not assume that the community does not wish to engage. It might mean that different means of communication would be more appropriate (phone call, etc.) or that you are contacting the wrong person.

[2\) Sometimes, it's personal.](#)

Building personal relationships is a great way to build trust and find out more about the goals of the community you are working with. Through building a personal relationship you may learn about how you may be able to share your archaeological knowledge to help fulfil a community goal. Keep in mind that there are many ways that you may be able to do this

that do not involve excavation. For example, communities may want to know about the location of existing archaeological collections taken from sites in their territory and they may see assistance in repatriation.

But sometimes making sure you have a community-wide relationship will allow you to maintain the relationship long-term, as individuals change positions or retire. Relationships are mutual and you may find that as you build trust, people become willing to share local knowledge.

3) Community presentation

“Free, prior, and informed consent” means that the First Nation has a clear and complete idea of what it is you are proposing to do so that they are able to consider it fully. It is strongly recommended that you make a presentation or meet with relevant staff from the First Nation personally so that you can fully explain why you want to undertake archaeological work, what you hope to learn, how the results of your work will be disseminated and where the artefacts will be housed.

4) Territories overlap

Many treaties and territories overlap, and it is vital to engage with all communities who have a stake in your project. As previously mentioned, sometimes you have personal relationships and friendships with certain communities, and it is tempting to continually engage with them. However, it is extremely important not to exclude a community simply because you have not yet formed a relationship with them.

4) Tobacco offerings

Offering tobacco, especially to Chiefs and Elders, can show respect, and that you are sincere in asking for their help. Tobacco is frequently offered when making a request. If you are unfamiliar with protocol around offering tobacco, you are encouraged to seek guidance.

5) The MTCS Standards and Guidelines for Consultant Archaeologists are not enough.

Most communities have goals for the archaeology on their territory that go beyond the Standards and Guidelines. Do not assume adherence to Ministry Standards are sufficient to meet their goals.

6) Answer questions, ask questions.

The engagement process is meant to help you and the community(ies) build the priorities of the project together. While it is important to answer all questions openly and honestly, you should also be willing to ask lots of questions to inform your research plan. Do not assume you are the only one with knowledge and come to the process flexible and open to learn.

7) Use language targeted for your audience.

In discussing your proposed project with different community members, you may find that not everyone has a background in archaeology. It is always important to be respectful in your interactions with community liaisons and representatives and avoid using specialist jargon when it is not appropriate to the situation.

8) Have something to offer.

Communities likely have their own goals when it comes to archaeology in their territory. If you are willing to adjust the scope of your project to incorporate their goals not only will it improve the relationship you are trying to build, but it will likely improve the archaeology as well!

9) Have a plan for the artefacts you recover.

Before you put shovels in the ground, you should always have a plan for any artefacts you may recover. Even if this means you must fundraise, you need to be able to responsibly store your collections in a safe facility. This part of the project should also be discussed with the Indigenous communities with whom you are engaging. Very often, Indigenous communities wish to act as stewards for artefacts found within their territories. If the community does not have a storage facility, seek out a facility that will ensure the community has the right to act in such a capacity (by engaging with them on the appropriate curation of artefacts, by gaining their approval and of any displays, etc.).

10) Discuss dissemination.

It's important to discuss what kind of dissemination of your work is acceptable to the community(ies). **Perhaps** the community does not want you to discuss the archaeological resources with anyone but the Ministry. **Perhaps** photographs of certain artefacts should not be distributed. **Perhaps** the community wants their own written report or presentation of the results of your study. Discussing dissemination before fieldwork starts is always an important exercise!

11) Always accept 'No' as an answer.

At the end of the day, the community you are engaging with may not give their consent to the archaeological survey or excavation of their territory. Part of participating in meaningful engagement is accepting 'No,' as an answer. Sometimes the way forward is not through excavation-- but that does not mean that all archaeological projects are off the table. **Perhaps** you can help the community with a repatriation project they are interested in. **Perhaps** you can help them analyze artefacts in their possession. This goes back to building priorities of the project together and being flexible on your end.

Resources

As a first step, it might be useful to contact the Treaty Office:

<http://www.chiefs-of-ontario.org/about-us/contact/>

The Treaty Office might be able to guide you in who to contact.

Provincial Territorial Organizations may also be of assistance:

Nishnawbe Aski Nation

Anishinabek Nation

The Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians

Grand Council Treaty 3

Find out what Treaty the land you want to investigate is in, and see nearby Indigenous communities:*

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/map-ontario-treaties-and-reserves>

* Some communities are still fighting for recognition by the government, therefore this is not a complete list of all the Indigenous communities in Ontario.

Conclusions

Avocational archaeologists can play an important role in Ontario archaeology by documenting and protecting sites. However, archaeologists can do more harm than good if they do not take the time to engage with all Indigenous communities who have a stake in their work. Conducting any kind of fieldwork without meaningful engagement can cause irreparable damage to your relationship with one or more communities.

On the other hand, healthy and meaningful engagement can lead to mutual respect, and better archaeology!