20
Protect and Present—Parks Canada and Public Archaeology in Atlantic Canada

Denise Hansen and Jonathan Fowler

20.1. Introduction

Atlantic Canada’s rich and complex history is written everywhere upon its varied landscapes, from the geological wonders of Gros Morne to the Acadian dyke lands of Grand-Pré. The federal Parks Canada Agency is mandated to protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada’s natural and cultural heritage. A diverse family of protected areas, the Parks Canada system encompasses national parks, which represent significant Canadian landscapes, national marine conservation areas, and national historic sites, which commemorate our country’s cultural evolution. Despite its small size relative to the rest of the country, Canada’s Atlantic region (Figure 20.1) contains seven national parks and Parks Canada administers 37 national historic sites. These historic sites and national parks reflect the full range of human activity spanning 11,000 years, each one commemorating a specific aspect of Canada’s national story. Archaeology is a major component of the agency’s operations in the Atlantic region, and often plays a critical role in cultural resource management (CRM) as well as research. In addition to conducting excavations, archaeological staff, who are based at the Atlantic Service Centre in Halifax, the Underwater Archaeology and Material Culture Research Units in Ottawa and at the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site of Canada in Cape Breton, conduct inventories, monitor and protect the integrity of heritage resources, and maintain Atlantic collections. They play an advisory role in site management planning, as well as assisting in the development of and adherence to statements of commemorative intent, which serve essentially as mission statements for the sites. Of particular interest to us here, archaeological staff also help interpret data for exhibit and develop outreach activities for the general public and for students. This article describes the successes and challenges attending Parks Canada’s public archaeology programs in Atlantic Canada and highlights the importance of multidisciplinary partnerships to the success of these programs.

Recognizing the fundamental importance of public interpretation to archaeology generally, and to Parks Canada’s mandate in particular, Parks
Canada archaeology staff are routinely engaged in the interpretive process. By interpretation, we are referring to “a communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage to the public (visitors) through first-hand experiences with objects, artifact, landscapes, or sites” (Interpretation Canada, 1976). Our approach to interpretation is characterized by a high degree of multidisciplinary interaction, with archaeology staff collaborating on teams planning exhibits, publications, and

Figure 20.1. Map of Atlantic Canada locating select national parks and national historic sites of Canada featured in this article (map courtesy of Parks Canada).