

Case Report

Fostering Cultures of Sustainability through Community-Engaged Museums: The History and Re-Emergence of Ecomuseums in Canada and the USA

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Abstract: In recent decades, communities around the world have been reacting to the forces of globalization by re-focusing on the local, leading to the democratization of culture, heritage, and related concepts. By attempting to reconnect locals with their own sense of belonging, to reinvigorate a pride of place, and to foster wellbeing, communities have increasingly and successfully turned to features that make their local history, heritage, and environment unique or distinctive. In turn, democratization processes have led to sustainable forms of economic and community development through ecomuseums and other examples of community-engaged museums. This paper aims to deepen our understanding of relevant community-based culture and heritage initiatives by reflecting on the development of ecomuseums in Canada and the USA. As part of the larger museum community, ecomuseums tend to be accessible entities that are not affiliated with political or other convictions or viewpoints. This makes them uniquely positioned to foster creative change and adaptation aimed at sustainability, yet their evolution in North America has not been examined from this perspective. To address this gap, this paper will highlight the Haute-Beauce Ecomuseum in Québec and the Ak-Chin Him Dak Ecomuseum in Arizona, which have long histories as North American ecomuseums and represent two very different cultural and geographic contexts. We also reflect on the history of ecomuseums in Canada, and their recent emergence in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan.

Keywords: ecomuseum; community engagement; sustainability; Haute-Beauce; Ak-Chin; democratization; heritage; museum; Canada; Saskatchewan

1. Introduction

On social, economic, cultural, and environmental fronts, the world is changing faster than at any other time in human history. As global population trends ever higher, an accompanying increase in per capita waste generation (including carbon emissions) has put planetary ecosystem balances in highly vulnerable positions [1,2]. At the same time, globalization has led to both a massive increase in mobility and migration, along with large leaps in complexity as enhanced global economic systems set off reverberating impacts on economies and societies around the globe [3]. As a crucial reaction to the forces of globalization, communities have been re-focusing on the local, resulting in a profound

democratization of culture and heritage [4,5]. To re-connect locals with their own sense of belonging, to re-invigorate or inculcate a pride of place, and to foster quality of life, communities have increasingly and successfully focused on their living heritage, which includes distinct local histories, environments, contemporary cultures and possible futures [6]. Many of these efforts involve fostering sustainable forms of cultural, social and economic development through local businesses, social engagement and cultural and eco-tourism initiatives [7].

Wellbeing is one sign of a successful human enterprise and a desirable quality of life. Defined as “the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy” (Oxford Living Dictionary), wellbeing is a complex goal because it depends on a variety of interrelated, dynamic environmental factors. These include, but are not limited to, the wellbeing of others and instruments of the modern economy (e.g., corporations, taxation, investments) that affect the daily lives of people, cities, organizations and nations through the generation and distribution of wealth. In an ideal case, these factors are designed in ways that achieve systemic equity, limiting environmental destruction and other negative impacts. Given these multi-layered and interrelated factors, wellbeing can act as a valuable lens for citizens, organizations and institutions that are trying to grapple with the complexities of current or emerging issues through community engagement.

As people pursue wellbeing as individuals and as part of a global collective, almost all of us are living in cultures that are unsustainable. Museums interested in addressing this reality would do well to define for themselves (and the larger culture) what this really means and how it can lead to strategies to engage communities in creating meaningful, systemic change. As trusted cultural institutions, museums use community engagement both to shape public policy [8,9] and for public education [10–12]. There are many ideas about how museums can better engage their publics to enhance wellbeing, and some of these ideas have deep roots in museology, including writings and projects that focus on community engagement and the relevance of heritage work to human lives and global demands [13–18].

Still, many museums struggle to keep the doors open or to keep basic programs alive because of the resources and working hours required for the care of collections and to keep some public programs available [19]. Many have started using social media and new forms of technology to attract new audiences. Others have turned to business models to survive financially, but in so doing may have reduced their public relevance and ethical position [9,20]. What then are the key ideas that can enable a progressive, community-responsive museum? Do they involve the inspiring notion of being an engaged and responsive organization, creating leadership and capacity, finding more effective ways to engage some publics and working collectively with a citizenry towards shared and transformative goals? Further, can this approach to museum work address conditions at issue for that citizenry, be it human rights and equity, living conditions and development, or problems at the global level [19,21]? In fact, questions about how cultural organizations might address both sustainable and human development have yet to be substantially addressed by museum researchers and practitioners.

Taking as its starting point the recent publication of *Newly Forming Ecomuseums: Development Framework* [22], this paper reflects on the development of ecomuseums as a form of community-engaged museum (CEM), with an emphasis on their potential to catalyze sustainable community development in Saskatchewan (For details about this provincial work, see <https://heritagesask.ca> and <http://www.facebook.com/groups/saskecomuseums>). As part of the larger museum community, CEMs tend to be accessible, partly for ethical reasons since they are created and driven by their communities, and not affiliated with political or other convictions or viewpoints. This makes them uniquely positioned to foster creative change and adaptation aimed at sustainability, yet they have not been studied from this perspective and only a fraction of their potential has been tapped [19,20,23]. To address this gap, this paper starts by highlighting two successful examples of ecomuseums from North America: the Haute-Beauce Ecomuseum in Québec and the Ak-Chin Him Dak Ecomuseum in Arizona. These sites were selected because they offer some of the longest histories for North American ecomuseums and they represent two very different cultural and geographic

contexts. The rest of the paper builds on this historical background by describing the history of ecomuseum development in Canada and reflecting on the recent emergence of ecomuseums in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan.

A key assumption in this paper is that culture needs to be recognized as the basis for activities that reflect the breadth and depth of our living heritage [6]. This is in keeping with discussions that define culture as a pervasive and evolving suite of values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours [14,15,24–27], as opposed to equating it with activities that generate economic activity through the cultural sector [28–30]. We also assume that, defined in broad terms, culture can provide an effective perspective for sustainability work, because it is rooted in the values that drive our individual and collective behaviours, and it responds and contributes to the complex systems that govern so much of our increasingly globalized world [24]. At the same time, by exerting considerable pressure on the ways we act in the world, old cultural habits can die hard, resisting change that is required in a rapidly transforming world [15]. It follows that events and opportunities that encourage cultural reflection are needed at both individual and collective levels, if humanity is to remain in sync with the changing world. With this larger purpose in mind, the paper also describes an upcoming CEM project based on tools and methods that researchers in museology, planning, and other fields can use: to identify cultural needs and (or) opportunities, to generate public engagement strategies with cultural outcomes in mind, to assess impacts across a range of scales (individual to global), and to feed the results back into the engagement process.

2. North American Examples

The Haute-Beauce Ecomuseum was located in the Eastern Townships region of southeastern Quebec, some 150 km south of Quebec City and about 250 km east of Montreal, just north of the US border. Comprising 13 rural communities on a territory of about 300 km², it grew out of foundational activities that reflect the sensitizing, creation, and feedback stages of ecomuseum development [31]. These activities started in 1979 with the establishment of a Regional Interpretation Centre and Museum, which acquired a meaningful collection and valuable local items and developed thematic displays to build awareness of local heritage. A year later the territory of the ecomuseum was identified, a users' committee was set up with elected representatives from the 13 villages, the territory was named Haute-Beauce and valorized, each community developing its own development theme, and the first "antenna" site was founded at Saint-Hilaire de Dorset, a parish municipality of about 100 people. This was followed by greater awareness-building, a reaffirmation of the territory as the local representatives became involved in the decision-making structure, and the establishment of the Laboratory for Experimental Training in a Rural Setting, which offered popular museology courses that were taken at the start by some 260 people. The users' committee also produced a pivotal exhibition about women and their first marriage year. Usually called the "baptismal gowns exhibition" it explored the concept of creating and managing a collection in the ecomuseum way. The ecomuseum finally became a reality in 1983 and operated for 10 more years, touching on several points of agreement between new museology and ecomuseology. These points include: the determining role of objects for communicating social subjects; the concept of collective appropriation allowing objects to be left in situ with the owner but also enjoyed by the community; and the integration of human heritage knowledge, memory and consciousness with the larger notion of territorial heritage, which requires an interdisciplinary approach and oral history research methods [32].

The 13 Haute-Beauce communities were fundamentally transformed over the 15 years that the ecomuseum project was laying foundations for widespread community engagement. This transformed functioning still persists today, even though the first "museum" component was wound down as it had ossified over time and possibly was not needed anymore. By transforming the living culture of the area, Haute-Beauce clearly shows the distinction between an institutional and staffed museum and the community ecomuseum as a well-designed framework that supports the muses and fosters

cultural and socioeconomic development. This transformation also suggests that as the desired cultural changes happen, a “successful” ecomuseum can eventually make itself redundant.

While the Haute-Beauce Ecomuseum grew mostly out of settler French-Canadian interests, the Him Dak Ecomuseum is operated by the Ak-Chin Indian Community, a group of 600 people living on 8900 ha in the Sonora desert on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona. Over the last 40 years, the Ak-Chin have used ecomuseum strategies to transform their lives, achieving economic independence and creating a new tool for their continued growth and development. Once impoverished and dependent tenants on their own lands, they have become prosperous farmers, using state-of-the-art methods to compete effectively in world agricultural markets. Before the ecomuseum was in place, traditional Ak-Chin ways of life and modes of subsistence were in jeopardy. The ecomuseum idea was presented as a way to help the community understand and manage every-day life as it changes and to link the Ak-Chin’s cultural and educational needs with the community’s long-term goal to expand internal management capabilities. With funds from the USA Administration for Native Americans, the band council established an ecomuseum project board consisting of Ak-Chin leaders, staff of the temporary museum, and technical and professional experts, with one of us (Rivard) as ecomuseum consultant. Their goals were community identity and development, and their focus on community discovery, good training programs, and sound implementation planning soon gave results.

For the Ak-Chin, the ecomuseum model offered a new role for community museums: that of an instrument of self-knowledge and a place to learn and regularly practice the skills and attitudes needed for community problem solving. Where ecomuseums preserve special or localized skills and knowledge, they offer residents and visitors a chance to learn these things through demonstration sites and hands-on experiences. In this model, the museum functions as a mediator in the transition from control of a community by those who are not members to control by those who are. Today, the Him Dak ecomuseum is an incomparable success and the Ak-Chins have one of the most equitable cultural systems in North America based on their traditional teachings and knowledge of their land. This has made it possible for the Ak-Chin to successfully and sustainably tackle a range of social, cultural, economic, and environmental problems.

3. Ecomuseums in Canada

In his global review of ecomuseum activity, Davis [31] notes that Canada played a pivotal role in the early years of ecomuseum development. Key steps included: a 1978 article by the inventor of the concept, Hugues de Varine, published by Canadian Museums Association (CMA); a key presentation by René Rivard during the 1981 CMA conference in Ottawa; and a 1983 study day that de Varine helped to facilitate in Montreal. The latter event produced the Ecomuseum Declaration of Quebec, which would go on to catalyze ecomuseum development in many other parts of the world. Around the same time, the first Canadian ecomuseum (Haute-Beauce) took root, others were initiated in Quebec with funding from the Canadian Community Development Project, and a Quebec association was set up to support a growing network of sites.

Today, more than 3 decades after the first seeds were planted, ecomuseum development in Canada seems to have slowed down. According to Davis [31], there were 13 ecomuseums in Canada in 2010, including 7 in Quebec, but the current number is likely lower. Of the 6 sites that Davis reviewed, four now appear to be defunct or no longer use the name, and only Fier Monde in Montreal and Kalyna Country in Alberta still promote themselves as ecomuseums. Based on a more recent Google search, other Canadian sites include the Burin Peninsula Ecomuseum in Newfoundland, the Hearst Ecomuseum in Ontario, and the Sainte Anne de Belevue Ecomuseum in Montreal, which is a zoo. Ecomuseums have also operated in Georgian Bay, Ontario, and along the Miramichi River in New Brunswick, but the former no longer exists online and the latter now shows up as “Spirits of the River.” These changes may reflect: a natural transition, as happened with Haute-Beauce; shifts in the priorities or interests of heritage groups and organizations; or the fact that outside Québec, the word

“ecomuseum” is not widely used and therefore less of a brand in North America. Whatever the reason, while there appears to be a slowdown in the Canadian ecomuseum movement, it has not ended.

4. Ecomuseums in Saskatchewan

In 2011 there were no ecomuseums in Saskatchewan. Now there are at least three, and a growing number of communities are applying the model in response to local issues and opportunities. Despite being relatively new, this provincial network is already producing a number of self-reported outcomes, including increased social cohesion, enhanced awareness of cultural and natural heritage, improved environmental monitoring, and enhanced tourism. Saskatchewan locations that are currently discussing or working with the ecomuseum model include: the Village of Val Marie, the Calling Lakes region, the White Butte region, North Central Regina, the City of Regina, and the Town of Saltcoats.

Since 2012, provincial discussions about the ecomuseum model have been guided by a multi-agency partnership that oversees the Saskatchewan Ecomuseums Network (SEN), which until November 2016 was called the Saskatchewan Ecomuseums Initiative. A core project of the Saskatchewan-UNU Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development, the SEN Steering Committee is chaired by the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (RSM) and includes representation from: the Museums Association of Saskatchewan, SaskCulture, Heritage Saskatchewan, Nature Saskatchewan, the Raven Consortium (a group of First Nations consultants), the National Trust for Canada, the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association, and the Saskatchewan History and Folklore Society.

Factors that are having a positive impact on ecomuseum development in Saskatchewan are examined elsewhere [33]. Briefly, the SEN is supported by a suite of organizations that have adopted a broad definition of heritage and are working to “un-silo” heritage-related activities. The SEN has also conducted research that has shed light on: connections between ecomuseums and existing cultural policy; different options for facilitating a provincial program in this area, and contributions that ecomuseums can make to sustainability education. The cultural policy in question, called *Pride of Saskatchewan*, aims to make “culture an important part of government’s priority of improving quality of life, building pride and sustaining economic growth” [34]. The SEN found many links between ecomuseums and the principles and goals of this policy, as well as desired outcomes around knowledge, expertise, resources, and the ability to preserve, enhance and celebrate distinctive character and identity. These connections imply that ecomuseums would help the government deliver on a number of policy fronts, in ways that would complement other community renewal programs.

To assess development options for a provincial ecomuseum program, the SEN used telephone interviews to solicit feedback from local stakeholders, experts in the field, and active ecomuseums in other countries, including Flodden 1513 and Staffin in Scotland, Kalyna Country in Alberta, and Bois-du-Luc in Belgium. The results underscored the potential for ecomuseums to enhance local quality of life and community identity [35]. This study also confirmed the RSM as the most appropriate institution to lead the provincial work and recommended that it continue to play an advisory role by gauging interest, building local capacity, and providing consultations.

Finally, given that ecomuseums are often set up to foster sustainable development [7], the SEN used a museum-related sustainability education framework [36] to assess the work of urban ecomuseums in other parts of the world, namely *l’Écomusée du Fier Monde* in Montreal, Canada and *l’Écomusée du Val de Bievre* in Fresnes, France. Some of the criteria used for this assessment included: knowledge of place and community; appreciation for biological and cultural diversity; clarity about personal and collective values and beliefs about the environment, justice, and prosperity; and a sense of responsibility and empowerment as both a citizen and a consumer. The results suggest that urban ecomuseums can highlight local sustainability issues, but to make the strongest contributions, they need to consider and respond to the needs of local schools, businesses, and other stakeholders through a repeating cycle of analysis, assessment, consultation, and engagement [33].

5. Network Development

Looking forward, the SEN aims to build on this research by staging a series of workshops for Saskatchewan CEMs about sustainability planning tools and helping four sites evaluate and reorient their activities so they truly serve the cultural needs of their communities. The tools to be discussed include Compass, Pyramid, and the Flourishing Enterprise Model (FEM). Developed by Alan AtKisson, Compass and Pyramid have been used around the world by international companies, school districts, United Nations training programs, and many other practitioners, to help groups manage and streamline the complex and challenging demands of sustainability work (see <http://atkisson.com/tools/>). FEM is a tool for designing new organizations, or transforming existing ones, around multiple value propositions. The vision is to create a state of flourishing, both for the organization and for the larger world, which requires a holistic approach to economy, society and the environment [37]. Use of the FEM with museums and other non-profits to date has illustrated that there is much room for improvement in the clarity and specificity with which these organizations approach their goals, and with their approach to measuring social impact [38].

The four CEM sites (ecomuseums around the Calling Lakes, White Butte, and in North Central Regina, and the Humboldt and District Museum) are all: taking an issues-based approach to address concerns relevant to their local communities as well as to larger sustainability challenges and opportunities; encouraging social cohesion and cultural transformation across a range of levels (individual, organizational, across their communities, etc.); and working to integrate the skills and abilities of artists, historians, community facilitators, scientists, story-tellers and other partners to animate public discourse and support the transformation process. At the same time, they each offer important and unique insights into planning, implementation and success measuring.

The Calling Lakes Ecomuseum comprises a series of connected lakes in the Qu'Appelle Valley, a major landscape feature known for its beauty and cultural significance. About 75 km northeast of Regina, the area includes a number of amenities and communities, including 2 provincial parks, small resort villages, and major cottage developments. The region also includes large First Nations and Métis population, significant archeological sites, and the location where Treaty 4 was signed in 1874 (Since 1701, as a way to encourage peaceful relations and establish land rights, the British Crown has been negotiating and signing formal treaties with the First Nations of North America. The Crown currently has treaties with 364 First Nations, and almost all of the land in southern Saskatchewan is covered by Treaties 4 and 6). The lakes are part of a major catchment in a broad and relatively flat watershed, so they receive large amounts of agricultural runoff, along with treated and sometimes untreated effluent from Regina. Prompted by a recent release of raw sewage from Regina and levels of aquatic bacteria that led to beach closures, cottage owners and local residents are using the ecomuseum model "to save the water." As a first step, they agreed to be the subject of student interviews for an undergraduate university course, which uncovered a wealth of local knowledge about the use of the lakes for recreation, fishing, and spiritual practices, and places impacted by pollution and/or shoreline development. The Calling Lakes Ecomuseum was officially launched with a ceremony in 2015 that included traditional First Nations drumming, singing, and dancing.

The White Butte Ecomuseum comprises approximately 130 km² and three small bedroom communities (Pilot Butte, Balgonie, and White City) just east of Regina. Balgonie and White City are both on the TransCanada Highway, and all three towns are being impacted by rapid local growth and large-scale infrastructure developments. In 2015, after a donation of settler heirlooms and old farming equipment and with plans in place for a new multi-purpose facility, White City started using the ecomuseum model as a way to develop a deeper sense of their local cultural and natural heritage, to encourage community participation in local events, and to foster a local sense of identity. Their initial projects included a series of pop-up exhibits and the development of digital stories based on interviews with local residents. Currently, they are exploring options for public interpretation and school programs around the TransCanada Trail and a section of protected pastureland that was recently

donated to the Town. Also, led by the White City Town Council, the benefits of developing a regional ecomuseum are being discussed by the White Butte Regional Planning Committee.

North Central Regina is a 540 hectare urban low-income neighborhood with approximately 10,000 residents, largely of First Nations descent. In 2007, it was singled out as “Canada’s worst neighborhood” because of high poverty and crime rates and other concerns [39]. Partly to counter that label, the North Central Community Association (NCCA) has been offering a range of innovative services aimed at reducing local hardships, including hot meals and mobile grocery stores for low-income or transient people, anti-gang and substance abuse programs, and community gardens. The NCCA recently opened a new facility to act as a hub for these services, and the ecomuseum model has been proposed as a way to enhance and promote them in ways that address a range of social and economic concerns [33]. The North Central ecomuseum is still at a formative stage, but there is a clear desire to apply the model in ways that enhance local quality of life and build on the traditions, stories and other forms of knowledge associated with First Nations cultures.

Located in the City of Humboldt, 220 km north of Regina, the Humboldt and District Museum has been a leading example of community engagement aimed at sustainability for almost a decade. Examples of their early work include energy retrofits to lessen the environmental impact of their facilities and highlighting stories associated with a 32 ha parcel of land that was the site of an important telegraph link and a military staging area during the 1885 Metis Resistance. They have also staged a temporary exhibit called “Old-fashioned Sustainability”, using items from their collection to highlight how early residents of the area dealt with limited resources, mostly out of necessity. More recently, the Museum organized five public workshops to find out what residents value about their local heritage, communicating the results back to the community through town hall meetings and to the local council through strategic development recommendations. All of this activity is supported by city policy and a progressive mandate that calls on the institutions to build municipal capacity in ways that serve the community’s heritage needs [40].

6. Concluding Thoughts

The potential for ecomuseums to catalyze sustainable forms of development is a recurring theme in the literature [7,13,31,33,41,42], for several reasons. First, as places that encourage different types of education, ecomuseums provide a holistic, integrated, and locally-driven frame that can help people grapple with issues that are complex, interwoven, and constantly shifting. Since many ecomuseums encompass both natural and cultural heritage, they can offer head-heart-hand experiences that appeal to a range of learning styles [36]. They put less emphasis on developing collections, except where objects help to shed light on important local stories or desirable skills and practices. Instead, given that everything in an ecomuseum’s territory can be viewed as part of its collection [31] (p. 81), there is enormous potential for in situ interpretation and experiential learning. Second, as organizations that reflect and depend on collective relationships, ecomuseums are ideally positioned to foster cultural transformations that could put society on a more sustainable path. Lastly, with governance structures that tend to be light-weight and flexible, ecomuseums can be more nimble and more adaptable than traditional museums, which tend to be ossified and slow to change.

This reflection on ecomuseum development suggests that a successful ecomuseum can help communities move onto a sustainable path, providing two key circumstances are in place. First, ecomuseums are products of their communities, so they need to be initiated, crafted, and managed by local residents. Instead of having their scope, structure and other features developed or imposed by an outside agency, ecomuseums need to emerge from, and add to, the fabric of a community, with activities and outcomes that reflect the unique features and qualities of a place; Second, in keeping with their role as a museum, ecomuseums need to safeguard and interpret aspects of a region’s living heritage, but they also need to identify and address local issues through regular strategic planning and by providing opportunities for authentic community engagement. These insights are likely to apply wherever ecomuseums are trying to foster sustainable forms of development. Each application of the

model will differ, since ecomuseums are highly situated, but there will likely be commonalities around a broad and integrated perspective on heritage, the community engagement required to develop a shared vision for the territory, and the importance of adapting to feedback as plans are developed and activities take place.

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