

Boom and Bust Archaeology: Examination of Discourses of Historical Value in the Alberta Historical Resource Value System

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Abstract

This study aims to inspect and critique the production of value in the Alberta Historical Resource Value (HRV) system based on its predisposition towards physical artefacts and lack of recognition of alternative ways of expressing heritage. The system of evaluation for historical value creates what can be described as a presence-absence model of archaeological significance that limits the ability for archaeologists to interpret and subjectively determine the historical value of materials. In addition, current systems often rely on a contractual relationship between archaeologists and industry to produce these reports, and rarely incorporate Indigenous perspectives of significance. With a focus on the assumptions and functional result of Historical Resource Impact assessments, we can examine the repercussions of the contemporary archaeological evaluative model within Alberta. A goal of this nascent assessment is to provide the opportunity for evaluation of a system that largely exists below the surface of public interest but has vast implications for future access to shared historical resources.

Keywords

heritage, history, communicating value, value discourse.

In May 2017, the McDougall Memorial Church burnt down west of Cochrane, Alberta, leaving many grieving the loss (Junker, 2017). The church was a protected historical resource, having been founded at the site of the first pioneer settlement in the Cochrane area, it represented a historical treasure to the local community. As such, plans for rebuilding or repair are immediately mentioned in the news article initially documenting the loss. The article addresses the cultural value of the site, as the location itself, while physical, historical, and diagnostic materials have been destroyed which is purportedly contrary to our current system of determining cultural heritage value. This judgement of value, while ignoring the destruction of physical artifacts in assessing value, runs counter to current heritage management system principles, where heritage sites are judged largely by the presence and number of artifacts deemed diagnostic when referring to pre-contact materials. It seems that the assessment of materiality, and the existence of artefacts as the foundation of heritage value, is not necessarily true for settler-colonial materials, which are found to have inherent historical value even after destruction.

The debate over heritage and historical value continues to be fraught with the imposition of settler colonial values and interpretations. Even four years later, the restoration of McDougall Memorial Church demonstrates a flaw in the way historical value is determined. The question of whether a historical building, space, or place has value and assigning value to heritage artefacts is a long-standing one in Alberta, with over 50 years of heritage management starting with the introduction of heritage management legislation in 1970 serving as a model for many other provinces. The creation of the Historical Resources Act opened the door for preservation of Alberta historical sites, but also provoked a public revolution of the understanding of Alberta history as something that existed and for better or worse required a system to evaluate it.

To preserve and mitigate any threat to the material heritage of Alberta, the Historical Resources Act calls for a Historical Resource Impact Assessment (HRIA) to be conducted (ACT, 2017). Carried out by professional archaeologists often hired as contractors to industrial developers, HRIAs identify historical resources within areas of suspected historical or prehistoric occupation. Commissioned assessments are primarily the responsibility of industrial developers as a requirement for development in areas suspected of occupation as directed in the Historical Resources Act. Professional Archaeologists are then largely contractors of industry paid to determine if sites of development require any additional protection based on the presence of artefacts and their perceived academic significance. This close tie of industrial development to heritage assessment creates three distinct interests within the heritage management system: Government as the body requiring assessment, Professional

Archaeologists as the authority on heritage artifacts, and Industrial development which is the largest driver of assessments. Each plays a key role in the production of assessments and driving the determination of value, but Industrial development sets the pace of assessment based on expansion and development within the province. This means that without industrial development and expansion relatively few new HRIAs would be needed, tying Professional Archaeology and our heritage resource protections implicitly to the expansion of Alberta's industrial development.

Based on the Historical Resource Impact Assessment, each site is ultimately designated a Historical Resource Value (HRV), on a scale from one to four, which indicates the protection level afforded to the site, or classified as an HRV 0 (no designation). The rationale for these decisions, detailed in the HRIA reports, provide a significant source of data to help us understand how historical value is determined and ultimately used to continue colonial erasure and disconnect with Indigenous material pasts through the over representation of physical material in discussions of Indigenous heritage sites which is not equally applied to settler sites.

Examining the Historical Resource Impact Assessment (HRIA) system, this article aims to show research in progress to join current conversations surrounding cultural heritage management systems in the 21st century. Particularly, the question of heritage meaning (Butler, 2016), public engagement and ownership (Benetti et al., 2020; Endere et al., 2018), and most markedly, the nature of heritage and myth (Sterling, 2016). It is this contemporary questioning of the efficacy of heritage inscription as an imposed and limited settler-colonial act prompts further engagement with the government infrastructure which relies archaeological evidence to determine value. This article aims to contribute to these discussions by highlighting current evaluation methods limitations due to a focus on physical artefacts and industrial development to drive protection of shared cultural heritage. Alberta's Heritage Resource system is just one example from Canada; however, the lessons and frictions present in this example are applicable to a wide range of contexts. The purpose of a public archaeological perspective on Alberta's heritage system is to provide commentary on the narrative of history proposed by heritage resource systems and to critique the inequities in representation that these systems continue to create.

While archaeological evidence may be considered impartial to the social and political pressures of the time as a set of practices which determine the presence and interpretation of artefacts, the McDougall fire example illustrates that this may not be equally applied within the current system. The discourses of value evidenced in HRIA reports provide insight into the significant role that a value designation plays in the continued sustainability of archaeological sites in Alberta. This leads to the questions:

how is historical value created through the reporting and presentation of archaeological evidence in the HRIA system? And what effect does this valuation system have on the continued viability of these sites as historical resources? How does the colonial act of evaluation allow for the privileging of settler-colonial histories and the inherent silencing of Indigenous histories?

To answer these questions, I completed a discourse analysis of HRIA reports, focusing specifically on how these documents construct historical “value.” Based on this study, I found that the Alberta government’s historical valuation system currently prioritizes the presence (and quantity) of physical artifacts at sites when making preservation determinations. As a result, sites lacking in material archeological evidence, but possibly rich in cultural significance do not register as having “historical value” in the HRV scale which fails to account for alternative interpretations of heritage. This system reproduces settler-colonial frameworks of historical value through its privileging of material evidence as the primary benchmark of site preservation.

Discourses of Value in Historical Resource Impact Assessments

HRIA reports are indexed on the Government of Alberta’s Online Permitting And Clearance database and full reports are accessible in consultation with Archaeological Information Coordinators. I examined a representative sample of HRIA documents and dashboards from 2014 and 2016 for discourses of value based on Hodes (2018) non-prescriptive approach to analyzing colonial discourses that “justify forms of occupation at the intersection of race, gender and power...” (p. 86) and traditional interpretation of value discourses (Hall, 1999) which interrogates systems of value determination and includes value structures in thematic discussion. The comparison of 2014 and 2016 was chosen to explore the impact of contemporary approaches to heritage management from two of the most recent provincial governments, the Alberta Progressive Conservatives (1971-2015) and their successor, the Alberta New Democratic Party (2015-2019). It is important to note that there was a negligible difference in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism budgets from 2014 (ACT 2015, ACT 2017) to 2016. The differences in 2014 and 2016 value discourses identified in the analysis are therefore not attributable to funding changes stemming from a political regime change.

In total, there were 963 HRIA reports produced in 2014 and 647 in 2016 (Tables 1 and 2, respectively). Due to the scope of the project, I selected 50 samples from each year to create a total sample size of 100 documents. The 50 reports from each year were selected based on a random sampling of every tenth report (as listed in the

HRIA dashboard). In cases where the tenth record was not available (as was the case when reports were not uploaded, for example), the missing record was substituted by the next available report in the list. For the sample set from 2016, only 46 reports were completed and available at the time of collection.

Each data set (for 2014 and 2016) contains a representative number of HRV designations, ranging from an HRV 0 (or “nonexistent” historical value) to HRV 4 (see Tables 1 and 2). Reports with an HRV 5 designation were not included for analysis, as they refer to sites pending evaluation. This data set includes a representative sample of project types, HRVs, and site preservation recommendations. Tables 1 and 2 below provide a description of the data examined in this study broken down into the total number of entries, random samplings based on percentage of total documents and the coding used to differentiate these documents.

Table 1. HRIA Document breakdown from 2014.

Total number of files in sample by value level (963 total entries)	Historical Resource Value	Representative number (percentage of total)	Document coding
345	0's	18	14-1, 14-2, 14-3, 14-4, 14-5, 14-6, 14-7, 14-8, 14-9, 14-10, 14-11, 14-12, 14-13, 14-14, 14-15, 14-16, 14-17, 14-18
4	1's	1	14-19
0	2's	0	
12	3's	1	14-20
601	4's	30	14-21,14-22, 14-23, 14-24, 14-25, 14-26, 14-27, 14-28, 14-29,14-30, 14-31, 14-32, 14-33, 14-34, 14-35, 14-36, 14-37, 14-38, 14-39, 14-40, 14-41, 14-42, 14-43, 14-44, 14-45, 14-46, 14-47, 14-48, 14-49, 14-50
	Total	50	

Table 2. HRIA document breakdown from 2016.

Total number of files in sample by value level (647 total entries)	Historical Resource Value	Representative number (percentage of total)	Document coding
194	0's	15 (14)	16-1, 16-2, 16-3, 16-4, 16-5, 16-6, 16-7, 16-8, 16-9, 16-10, 16-11, 16-12, 16-13, 16-14,
2	1	1	16-15,
0	2's	0	
31	3's	2	16-16,
420	4's	32 (29)	16-17, 16-18, 16-19, 16-20, 16-21, 16-22, 16-23, 16-24, 16-25, 16-26, 16-27, 16-28, 16-29, 16-30, 16-31, 16-32, 16-33, 16-34, 16-35, 16-36, 16-37, 16-38, 16-39, 16-40, 16-41, 16-42, 16-43, 16-44, 16-45, 16-46
	total	46	

Each report included in this study is anonymized (coded as YEAR-##) to ensure the confidentiality of the corporate and government entities who commissioned the reports.

HRIA reports range in length from 20-150 pages. The final data set consists of extracts drawn from specific sections of the 96 reports included for study. These extracted portions include the Executive Summary, Report Results, Summary and Recommendations, Dashboard Notes, and Context of Report—elements that contain reference to sites' "value." Although individual reports varied in format, these sections were relatively consistent across the sample. If a section was not clearly designated based on these categories, the most similar section of the report was substituted. The data set was studied for the pervasive themes and statements pertaining to "value."

Findings

While archaeological evidence may be considered unbiased to the social and political pressures of the time of collection, the recording of materials and assigning of value clearly creates some contradictions in whose values are represented. This contradiction of colonial and precontact materials is apparent throughout the discourses of value created by these collections of archaeological evidence in the HRIA system and the HRV scale (ACT 2016). Archaeological value of heritage sites are

determined by the recommendations that categorize the value of sites into five possible designations,

HRV 1: designated under the Act as a Provincial Historic Resource; HRV 2: designated under the Act as a Municipal or Registered Historic Resource; HRV 3: contains a significant historic resource that will likely require avoidance; HRV 4: contains a historic resource that may require avoidance; HRV 5: believed to contain a historic resource. (ACT, 2016)

The HRV designation that is not described above (HRV 0) is characterized by the completion of an HRIA where the lack of physical evidence, or the destruction of physical evidence indicates there is no reason for avoidance of the site due to no physical evidence being found.

The HRIA reports indicate, however, most of the assessments (946/963 and 614/647 respectively) fall in either HRV 4 or HRV 0 as illustrated in tables 1 and 2. The sheer volume of sites designated as HRV 4 or 0, is concerning when you consider that this system is presented as a continuum. HRV 3, the designation that requires the largest amounts of mitigation or avoidance for development without municipal or provincial significance designation, is present sparingly. A focus on economic interests and academic value forces the evaluation of historical resources within the HRIA process to be based on their contribution to academic understandings of the past and the significance of the materials recovered in an either-or presentation. This means that while other interpretations of value are possible, current evaluation relies on these principles to designate value.

The professional archaeologists conducting HRIAs cannot designate sites as provincial or municipal historical resources, which means that HRV 1 and 2 are not directly designated through an HRIA and require municipal or federal approval to be classified as such. This limitation further restricts the practical utility of the HRV scale as an evaluative tool, since archaeologists are restricted to valuations of HRV 0, 3, or 4. While HRV recommendations by archaeologists in HRIA documents are common, the recommendation of HRVs of 3 with only 43 occurrences across both years is far less common than a 4 or a 0 designation with a collective total of 1,560 incidences. This deficit suggests that there may be a reason for this duality in the functional role those professional archaeologists play in HRIA assessments.

Also, the scale is often thought of as a largely semantic difference HRVs of 3 “...likely require avoidance:” (ACT 2016) and HRVs of 4 “...may require avoidance:” (ACT 2016), but the difference between these rankings has a large effect on the

amount of protection or industrial avoidance a site is afforded. The real difference between HRV 3 and 4 is in the inclusion of “...significant historic resource...” (ACT 2016) in the description of the HRV designation. The designation of significance then, is largely left to individual archaeologists to determine based on their reporting of physical evidence at heritage sites and their perception of significance, without clear parameters for justification. It is here that we begin to see the system as it works in practice as opposed to in theory, as Cultural Resource Management (CRM) companies often manage many HRIAs per year for resource industry companies, they have an economic imperative to designate more sites as HRV 4s, or 0s to support industrial interests, with the difference between the two largely being the inclusion of significance.

Trends quickly appear in these documents, as CRMs reuse similar phrasing to create value and move responsibility from current economic actors. HRV 4s in practice simply designate the presence of a physical artifact that may require avoidance or mitigation but the responsibility for preservation isn't in the present. Language use in these documents demonstrates this further as HRV 4 and 0 designations follow a grouping of phrases that include:

no further historical resource work is warranted (14-21); limited heritage resource significance (14-09); further work will not contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the culture history of the region (14-15); ...is deemed of limited historic resource significance (14-25); Avoidance or further historic resource work is recommended (14-18); avoidance is recommended. If... deemed... impractical then Historical Resource Impact mitigation...is recommended (14-11); No cultural features at (the site) (14-05); no further work is recommended (14-09)

Based on the absence of materials, the limitation of value, and acceptance of industry priority, assessments like these make it clear that there is no value in avoiding these sites whether they never had artifacts, or if artifacts were destroyed, the value of the site is not present. It is interesting to note here, that sites with previous recorded values of 4 were sometimes recommended for a reduction based on lack of physical evidence or previous destruction due to construction. When destructions of sites are mentioned, it justifies industry approval in this instance. There were no recorded reductions from HRV 3 to HRV 0 indicating that the real grey area between value occurs between HRV 0 and 4.

Throughout, all documents discussing consultation with Indigenous groups were limited to HRIAs with HRV of 3 or 4, and only seemed to occur when the project was being run by a governmental organization. It is this representation of value as

subjective, tied to a physical object, and evaluated against what information the artefact or material can provide a settler colonial understanding of Provincial heritage, that makes the valuation described so weak. A focus on the physical disturbance of sites, monitored and funded by industry, has commodified archaeological evidence, staking value to objects and the difficulties associated with their avoidance. Archaeological efforts that utilize this approach to Indigenous consultation still allow physical artefacts to determine archaeological and cultural value, which seems to inevitably supersede Indigenous value perspectives.

The HRIA system as it currently exists creates a system of measurement for archaeological value based on categorization, that lacks clearly defined parameters, and misrepresents itself as a continuum, in a way that endangers archaeological evidence. By comparing reports from two different years, it is evident that the issues of minimization and the dominance of colonial values are not isolated to one year, but systemic. A focus on the physical and diagnostic value of materials that supersedes cultural significance creates a version of Alberta's archaeological history that belies the richness and diversity of Alberta culture and the historical significance of archaeological sites.

Discussion

Discourses of value can be understood with consideration of the structural processes which defend and promote this perception of value (Hodes, 2018). With a focus on the physical, the dichotomy of presence and absence; ephemerality all play into determining value within Alberta's HRV reports. Drawing on approaches to address physicality (Sedgewick, 2003) and the settler-colonial structure of knowledge (Todd, 2016) it is clear that the value of cultural heritage as it is currently structured is based on the following attributes:

- Physicality: the reliance of this system on physical artifacts to support value
- Ephemerality: the inherent loss of this system due to lack of recognition of values other than the physical
- Recognition: value either is or is not present as a function of recognition

Physicality: What you can feel and steal

The focus of these sample HRIAs on the physical artifacts of sites is apparent in the organization of reports and the yearly dashboards themselves. The presence

and amount of cultural material often indicating to the reader, both overtly and implicitly, that a site was valuable. Initially, this seems like a valid way of expressing value as sites with more items likely indicate more prolonged occupation and by extension significance. This does not address the negative opposite of this approach where absence of materials indicates a lack of value. Archaeological sites lacking apparent cultural materials are quickly considered to be of lesser value, and this absence is the justification in these reports for less historical resource protection.

This approach is fraught with interpretive hurdles as one HRIA may assess artifacts as present, and upon return to the site these artifacts may not be relocated or assumed disturbed by human activity. This presents a challenge as sites are reclassified to have no HRV based on the assessment that materials had been removed or destroyed, thus removing the HRV of the site. Through the descriptions of presence and absence value is determined, "due to low artifact density and uncertain stratigraphic provenience of the material at this site, the site's significance is deemed to be low" (2016-07). HRVs are represented in the reports as physically attached to objects and their ability to contribute diagnostically to the archaeological record of Alberta. Which, as we have seen in other examples, does not track uniformly as with the McDougall Memorial Church. Lacking a physical object, value is reduced, or removed from heritage sites, in a way that completely contradicts ideas of historical value. Just as one diamond might be more valuable than five lumps of coal, so too does archaeological evidence measured by quantity misrepresent the value of recording archaeological material.

Professional archaeologists, basing their decisions on archaeological evidence, describe the responsibility to maintain sites based on previous precedent, "These investigations should be conducted in accordance with archaeological survey note 2006-02" (2016-36). Artifacts of a diagnostic nature are often removed from sites for documentation and the value of sites is presumed to be removed with them making the site lack archaeological value. Or in the case of other sites, where artifacts or features cannot be relocated, they are presumed destroyed or of no significance. "It is likely that either the features were destroyed during construction of the original pipeline or that the features previously recorded are not in fact cultural features..." (2014-05). The current HRIA in this case, blames the lack of artifacts on the previous HRIA conducted by another heritage resource company and uses it as justification to change the value of a site. In some cases, this absence of artifacts in previous HRIAs plays heavily into the justification of approval for industrial work. Absence, in the HRIA system, is justification for occupation and just as you know a clean room does not indicate an empty house, neither should absence be the primary justification for lack of HRV.

Ephemerality: The unseen, unheard, and underrepresented

In the discussion of Alberta archaeology, one must inherently address the colonial forces that have shaped our understanding of archaeological resources in the province. Following treaties 6, 7, and 8, Indigenous peoples were removed from their traditional lands and unable to travel freely throughout the province. This displacement created a separation of many indigenous peoples from places and contexts that were familiar. The contemporary discussion of Alberta archaeology in HRIA reports does not address this breach, in connection to place across time. HRV is limited to the archaeological perspective of value that does not address the removal of peoples from their historical context. What materials are useful diagnostically to archaeologists cannot represent the breadth of occupation that took place before treaty removal.

It is this conspicuous lack of Indigenous perspectives that continues to limit the preservation of archaeological artifacts. This is not to say that Indigenous participants are not mentioned “...field component was conducted by (CRM company name) archaeologists and participants from the (name of First Nation) and (name of First Nation)” (2016-24). However, even when these perspectives are included, they are tempered by the CRM in charge to ensure they are not overly utilizing that perspective in their report,

In evaluating the property, (CRM company name) has relied in good faith on information provided by other individuals noted in this report... (CRM company name) takes no responsibility for any deficiency, misstatement or inaccuracy contained in this report as a result of omissions, misinterpretations or fraudulent acts of persons interviewed or contacted. (2016-24)

This caveat indicates an implied mistrust of traditional knowledge in the application of evaluating HRV. Archaeology, as a settler-colonial science, relies on physical artifacts to justify HRVs and when employing perspectives that are not as accurately recorded necessarily qualifies the information as lesser than physical artifacts.

Authority to designate value then relies on professional archaeologists who are beholden to archeological conventions, and corporate purses, and do not include alternative perspectives or methods of inquiry. This union of practices results in the designation of sites lacking physical diagnostic material as accessible for industrial development. Traditional knowledge, because it lacks formal recognition within this evaluation, also lacks value. Ultimately, this results in a loss of Alberta’s archaeological history due to reliance on a western physical and verifiable frame.

Recognition: It's not a continuum

Cultural Resource Management Consultants (CRMs) have a large amount of power in the classification of historical value, if we view it, as it is viewed in practice, as a question of value or lacking value, and this is concerning in that in the current system economic influence may have undue impact on the performance of these CRMs. The presentation of a continuum allows for the perception of a multi-modal system of assessing value that doesn't exist in practice. The current system further obfuscates the role of a value assessment, in the designation and protection of Alberta heritage sites, by asking professional archaeologists to assess the heritage value of a site, without providing a system to clarify the difference between moderate and high heritage value. What motivates an archaeologist to recommend anything other than the HRV 4 that industry needs to be able to continue working, largely unhindered if the result is the same, and sites are provided similar protections?

If we accept that these categories function largely as described, as an either-or of physical artifact value, then we can see why this system does not adequately provide protection for the physical or ephemeral Indigenous heritage of Alberta. Categorizing and recording the value of a site like the MacDougal Memorial Church did not result in its protection from the fire that consumed it, but recording it within a colonial physical frame, did create a perception of value that carries over after the fire. While McDougall Church has been rebuilt the question of whether it should be categorized as a heritage site remains open. Sites that do not receive such recognition are not afforded the same status, and precontact sites with HRVs of 4 are quickly downgraded to 0 after activity —largely industrial—disturb or destroy cultural features (2016-01) (2016-02). There is a clear settler-colonial divide between the historical resources worth saving, and those not worth saving, and a continuum designation does not account for this discrepancy.

A counter argument to this is that resources found in 2014 and 2016 are more likely to be of low historical value as sites of high historical value would have already been studied and classified. This is akin to saying that archaeological history is defined by the order of discovery and not by the historical information they hold. Looking closer at the HRIA system one thing is apparent, the restricted access of this archive works to support the illusion of a continuum. While historical resources are listed publicly, the reports and subsequent dashboards are not public. The façade of report variation is propped up by the public face of HRIAs as supporting a continuum that is based on clearly defined categories for the presence of large amounts of diagnostic material, individual reporting language, and the perception of archaeological significance.

This perspective, however, limits the scope of our understanding of archaeological significance to the knowledge and diagnostic techniques of the time that we are investigating. As mentioned above, archaeological evidence often relies on ~~previ-~~~~ous~~ precedents, and, just as we no longer rely on the interpretations of antiquarians on archaeological evidence, the judgements of this current time may limit or stunt our ability to study historical resources as a means of mapping traditional movements, promote understanding of traditional territories, or the history of Indigenous peoples that has been so extensively expunged from the Alberta landscape. Leaving archaeologists with an either-or choice of protection for denoting archaeological evidence doesn't only create an unfair dichotomy, it also removes the possibility of future interpretive methods to explore Alberta's Historical Resource landscape and imposes a continued colonial history of the province complete with further interpretive holes.

Questions for Future Research

What comparisons can be made between Alberta's system of privatized archaeological assessment and other jurisdictions?

For this, the data collected in this study would be helpful to complete a comparison of the functional differences of vastly different jurisdictions and within the Canadian context. While Alberta's system of HRV was held up by archaeologists in this study as the best system, the functional differences between provinces may also provide an interesting examination of storage and value across Canada. Comparison allows for the breakdown of the siloed nature of archaeological value and allows for more global perspectives to be viewed. In this way, the protection of Alberta historical resources could be based not only on limited comparison with adjacent jurisdictions but with the larger global heritage system.

How can an HRV system be representative of Albertan's values when these values are constantly fluctuating across generations?

This is by far the most pressing issue of any assessment of value as the decisions made today on heritage value have long lasting implications on what can or can't be valued in the future. Current archaeologists often look back on the work of previous archaeologists with scorn over what wasn't done to preserve materials for the future, the opposite is also true, but the important idea is that evaluation requires the ability to make this determination. Without an attempt to include public perspectives of archaeology this assertion is not defensible, as the production of HRV sways with subjective interpretation.

This process of categorization that ties archaeological efforts to industrial development makes the preservation of Alberta's heritage resources tied implicitly to the expansion of development of other resources. In the booms this has meant Alberta has had one of the most robust heritage preservation systems in Canada, but what happens when these industries don't expand? What unintended effects are implied by tying heritage preservation and protection with other more extraction focused resources? Or simply, can we live with boom-and-bust archaeology?

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