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Peace River prior to the Site C Dam.

Photo: Karen Aird



Kânîsostîkwâw

By **Karen Aird**

In the Rocky Mountains Foothills in northeast BC, west of the mighty Peace River, or Saagii Nachii—the Big River, as known by the Dane-zaa, who are the first peoples of this region—rests Kânîsostîkwâw. Kânîsostîkwâw is a Cree phrase that translates as the “Two Mountains That Sit Together,” also known as the Twin Sister Mountains. These magnificent mountains represent a vast and diverse cultural landscape of the past and living histories of the Dane-zaa, Cree, Sauteau, and other Indigenous Peoples.

Cultural records from archaeological studies reveal a density of prehistoric material residue, such as obsidian blades and scrapers, scattered throughout Kânîsostîkwâw. Oral history interviews have verified the locations of unrecorded pictographs, petroglyphs, ceremonial places, teepee rings, and graves near or on the mountains. The cultural treasures and ancestors at Kânîsostîkwâw were not documented in written records, nor did they receive any provincial or federal protection

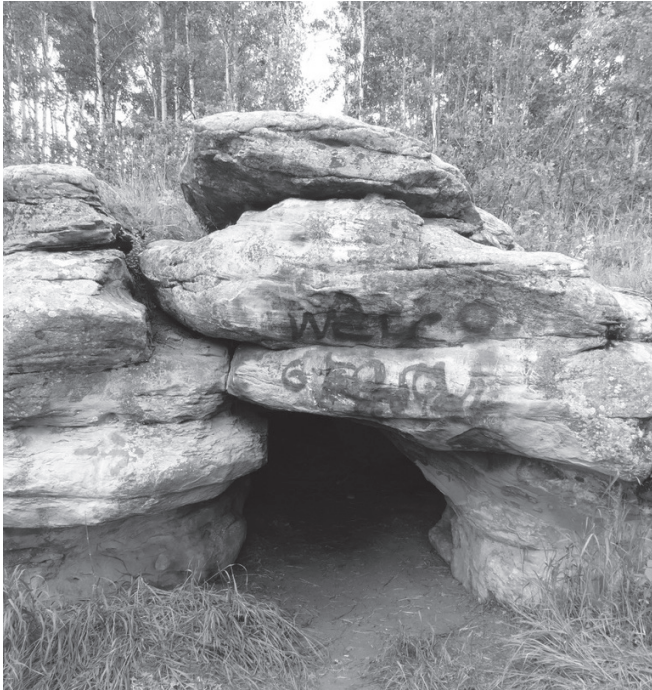
through law or policy, but Indigenous Peoples have always known of their existence and watchfully stewarded them for future generations. Cultural remnants and treasures near Kânîsostîkwâw and the Peace River can be up to 12,000 years old. They demonstrate a sharing of technologies and extensive travel patterns from what is now known as California and Alaska to the Peace River Valley. More recently, paleontologists documented a 1,300 square metre dinosaur trackway at the base of Kânîsostîkwâw, which dates to 100 million years old, from the Early Cretaceous period. Knowledge Keepers have passed on stories about the “Big Animals,” or dinosaurs, and the importance of safeguarding these vulnerable footprints of the past.

In the mid-to-late eighteenth century, the Sauteau, my ancestors, migrated to BC from eastern Canada to escape a devastating famine and incursion by settlers. Their arduous journey to Kânîsostîkwâw began with a vision and prophecy by a medicine man who dreamt of

two mountain formations, resting side by side, which would provide abundant food resources and offer sanctuary in a time of need.

I was fortunate to hike to the top of Kânîsostîkwâw over 15 years ago with a group of Knowledge Keepers and friends. During the trek, the Knowledge Keepers

To find out more about the First Peoples' Cultural Council, visit the website: fpcc.ca.



Tse'K'wa is a cave that lies about nine kilometres northwest of Fort St. John. Carbon dating from the inside of the cave indicates the movement of some of North America's earliest humans. The cave lies in the Dane-zaa Nation's territory.

Photo: Karen Aird



Culture camp, at Peace River. Culture camp was destroyed when the Site C Dam was built.

Photo: Karen Aird

expressed shock to see important creek beds dried up. At the same time, local First Nations shared stories about harvested animals that were racked with disease, fish oozing with toxins, and cultural heritage places nearly destroyed by development activities. Little did we know these warnings were indicators of climate change and the impacts from long-term development activities.

Many years later, Kânîsostîkwâw and the surrounding Peace River Valley resemble a scene from *Apocalypse Now* with industrial pillage of the land far beyond what the eye can see. Site C Dam has entirely altered the lush, rolling terrain, shaving away, flattening the rich soil, and leaving unnatural, large bodies of water. Looters have vandalized the dinosaur trackway, which is experiencing rapid degradation from climate change. These issues are exacerbated by the continued loss of Knowledge Keepers and their oral histories and teachings due to Covid-19. For Indigenous Peoples, when we lose an Elder, a living library has burnt to the ground.

There are many cultural landscapes like Kânîsostîkwâw on Mother Earth, or Askîy. These are places considered so sacred and fragile that their locations, stories, and values are not shared in the hope they will remain concealed and untouched. The continued loss and impacts on Indigenous cultural heritage are profound, and time is of the essence to revitalize and safeguard our cultural places and all that are connected to them. This will require that there is a commitment to target resources, long-term funding, and expertise to support organizations such as the First Peoples' Cultural Council and the efforts of First Nation communities to steward heritage places and resources. 📖



Karen Aird is a member of Saúlteau First Nations in the beautiful Treaty 8 territory of BC, through her mother, Marlene Cameron/Desjarlais. She has worked as an archaeologist and cultural heritage planner across Canada in projects that convey a strong sense of place in Indigenous landscapes, encompassing the stories, legal traditions, and intangible and tangible elements of

Indigenous heritage. Some of the projects include acting as an expert witness for Indigenous Nations during the Site C Dam environmental assessment; project coordinator for the Secwépemc cultural heritage study; project lead for the Tse'K'wa National historic site; co-author of the FPCC Policy Paper *Recognizing and Including Indigenous Cultural Heritage* and a Living Heritage paper with UNESCO Canada and FPCC; lead of three national engagements on Indigenous heritage with Parks Canada; leading several initiatives to decolonize heritage and implement UNDRIP; and much more. Karen has presented to the Standing Senate and been a keynote speaker at national and provincial events. She is the co-founder and president of the national, not-for-profit organization, the Indigenous Heritage Circle, and was formerly on the Parks Canada National Indigenous Advisory and the Royal BC Museum Boards. Currently, Karen is the Manager of Culture and Heritage for First Peoples' Cultural Council, a provincial Indigenous-led crown corporation.