



Question and Answer Summary

Managing First Nation Heritage Infrastructure Projects: Challenges and Solutions with Bryce Ross and Alyssa Currie

November 25, 2024

Q: This is for both of you. I know this is about cultural heritage, but I am curious how much language was involved. If you're applying for Heritage Grants, you have to focus on the heritage, but how did language play a part in that since you can't really pull apart heritage, culture and language, right?

Bryce: We're going to have two separate structures: a museum and a pit house. In our museum, we're telling the specific story of the *Tlii7sa* story, which is brothers traversing the *timucw*, the land, from roughly Chase to Pavilion Lake. I don't know if you're familiar with interior B.C., but it's a big chunk of land, roughly 100 to 150 kilometers. That story, which has been digitized and animated as well, will be delivered primarily in the language, and then translated to English, and in a phonetic way as well. So, that's where we are going to see the language integrated into this project. And like I said in my presentation, we were going to have a speaker system in the pit house so when you went down, you would hear a family speaking in Secwepemctsin, but unfortunately, our project ballooned, and we had to cut that. Karen [*the webinar host*] hinted at the fact that these projects are living documents, so it doesn't mean that we can't come back to it later and add that piece. We did go through everything through the lens of the language. We had Elders on board to help guide us through, and we try to add that layer because, like you said, we can't separate the two.

Alyssa: For us the language really was incorporated throughout our project, starting with our community consultations and planning. Some of the Elders that we were meeting with felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts in Dane-Źaa, and so we had translation work right from the very beginning.

Some of the stories have values or lessons that they wanted us to carry through our project were in the Dane-Źaa language. In our strategic plan, for example, we

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worked with an organization specializing in Indigenous strategic planning, and our Board felt that it was important to have Dane-Zaa values communicated in our strategic plan and in the language.

One of the values that we identified was *Tsuu Na Yah*, “to be kind.” We felt it was an important guiding principle for us as we were doing this project, particularly as we were running through some of the conflicts. For example, with contractors, we referred to that statement “to be kind” to give people the opportunity to make things right first and foremost before jumping to negative conclusions.

That was something that we came back to again and again, not specifically in the Dome per se, but all across our site. We are incorporating the language in signage and other materials that we're putting out. Our website, for example, makes use of the language in a few spots when you're greeted with *Je aa haanach'e*, which is a Dane-Zaa greeting that translates to “How are you?”

One of the things that we encountered is that often, language is a reflection of revitalization or of colonization. The reason that we use the term *living repository* is part of our greater attempt to decolonize that term “repository.” Repository holds a very specific definition within the B.C. archaeology branch and has a lot of requirements that might be, in some cases, at odds with Indigenous cultural values. We wanted to make sure that our space not only met the temperature, humidity and policy controls but that it was also a culturally inclusive space. For us, having people involved in the actual excavations and incorporating our knowledge holders in that process was part of the *living repository*. It's a term we use to get away from that official designation of an “artifact repository,” which we are as well. I saw in the chat somebody mentioned stolen objects and things like that. We use archaeological ‘artifacts’ or ‘materials’ or ‘objects’ interchangeably, but some communities are uncomfortable with those terms. They have other terms to describe the cultural materials that have been left behind. So being sensitive to that as well may mean having to take a little bit of extra time to explain to a funder, for example, that we would like to use this term to mean this specific

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thing or that we would prefer to use this other term to describe the cultural objects that we are hoping to host at our site.

So even though ours was not explicitly a language project, so many of the Dane-ᑭaa cultural values are embedded in the language. And that's why myself, as a non-Dane-ᑭaa person who is trying to learn to identify myself in Dane-ᑭaa I practice "Alyssa laa uuzhe" ("My name is Alyssa") many times to be able to get that right. That is a huge part of the cultural values and I think for myself, especially as a non-Indigenous person, making the effort to incorporate that language throughout the project was really successful for us connecting with the community.

Q: I'm curious if the community is planning to get back some of the stolen artifacts from museums who are currently holding them? (like baskets, etc.)

Alyssa: As I briefly mentioned in my presentation, Tse'k'wa was first documented by archaeologists in the 70s and all of the materials that were found at the site, the equivalent of 45 banker's boxes worth of cultural objects, were found and subsequently taken from the site. These included things like wᓄlii nachíí (giant animal) bones that had been hunted and cooked at the site. It also included instruments for hide-making, hunting tools, and a bead, for example, which is the oldest evidence of human adornment north of the Yucatan Peninsula. These are hugely important materials that often get lumped in as 'archaeological artifacts', and that's why we try to be careful about how we describe those objects and how we describe how they were taken from Tse'k'wa without permission.

We're very fortunate that SFU, fairly early in the process, was supportive of a repatriation discussion, and that discussion happened way back before 2012 when the Society was officially formulated. So, it was really years and years of advocacy to get us to the place where we were actually proactively planning now how do we actually get the stuff back. We opted to fulfill the requirements of an official artifact repository by the province. The reason that Tse'k'wa chose to do our

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repatriation in that way was that we wanted it to build our capacity to support future repatriation work. So, it was going to take more work upfront but was going to allow us, in the longer term, the ability to return other materials that have been taken from other places in Dane-ᶯaa territory that were often being stored hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away. Up in northeastern B.C., we only have other repository here, and they, like many others, are underfunded and are gracious supporters of what we're doing but need educating on what is important and how to carry out this work. First Peoples Cultural Council (FPCC) provided funding to a number of Indigenous organizations across British Columbia in order to carry out repatriation work, and we were able to secure that funding after our Heritage Infrastructure project was complete to bring home those materials. That also included ancestral remains that had been removed from the site and those had their own special cultural and logistical considerations. FPCC has been supporting some really incredible research into cost analysis and the steps that are involved in repatriation work. We're really excited to see that report coming out within a short time. Tse'k'wa is one of the studies that is going to be reflected in that report and we're happy to share more about what that process looked like for us.

Bringing home that material really felt for us like a massive milestone, and being able to tell an authentic story about the material and about the people that visited here, using the objects that were from here and that were created here, and in some cases, were deliberately left here. So that is, for us, again, the start of a bigger journey. Now that we have the official Tse'k'wa collection home, there are other materials that were taken from Tse'k'wa that we're in the process of bringing home and other materials from other Dane-ᶯaa Nations. That work is incredibly time-consuming as well and can often be very costly, so we're really lucky to have First Peoples Cultural Council advocating for repatriation support, and that research report that's going to be coming out soon is going to be an incredible resource for all of the people in this province and really elsewhere as well.

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Bryce: I think SNRC (Skeetchestn Natural Resource) is really going to do the legwork here in getting the artifacts back to house in our museum. I know that T̓k̓emlúps̓ te Secwépemc have their own museum, which I believe that they were holding some items for us in the meantime. So, we'll end up getting a lot of those artifacts back from there. We have a great working relationship with that community, so I'm not too concerned there. In regard to artifacts that may have gone to other museums or have been stolen, I can't speak to that. I don't have enough working knowledge around that, but I am optimistic that we are going to get back a lot of what hasn't been on the territory for quite some time.

Q: Bryce, you mentioned that you went through floods, fires, landslides. I'm curious how you built in planning for those emergencies that seem to be happening more and more frequently. Do you have an emergency plan now that you have precious things coming back to the community? For example, if there's a fire, who's going to go get the baskets?

Bryce: I'm going to write that down, so we make sure we have that plan in place! Well, we're building the Museum and the Pit House in a strategic location where it's not actually going to be affected by future flooding or forest fires, knock on wood. It's in a grassy knoll area, a flat location away from the major fuel from forest fires, and it's high up, elevated way from the Dead Man Creek, which historically floods.

I joke, but SNRC is really good. They have policies and procedures in place asking, "If this happens, what are we going to do about that?" So, I'd imagine that would be on the shoulders of Skeetchestn Natural Resources to tackle if there was any sort of emergency.

The one thing is the location of this building is now going to be on the highway, so would be exposed to potentially transient people breaking and entering and stealing or damaging the artifacts that we do house there. So that's going to be on our plates, on the back burner, to think of a strategy to minimize that threat.

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Alyssa: I can speak about some of the steps that we've taken at Tse'k'wa. Bryce did such a good job talking about all the natural disasters in his presentation that I decided not to, but we similarly experienced fires impacting our communities and a few things that we've done, first off, regarding fires, is that the Province of B.C. has a Fire Smart Program that is potentially being administered by either your municipality or your regional district.

We've actually taken advantage of the Fire Smart assessment and training for three years now here at Tse'k'wa and implementing all of those measures that Bryce talked about eliminating fuels close to your building. We hosted a training program for some of our local wildfire staff, and this year, when we actually were literally faced with a forest fire coming across the highway towards us, knowing that Fire Smart procedures were in place really gave us peace of mind. We felt that we had proactively done as much as we could to mitigate that specific risk.

If you are becoming an official repository, one of the requirements of the B.C. Archaeology Branch makes you do, which, regardless of whether or not you're taking that, is a good mental exercise, is something called the [10 Agents of Deterioration](#). It's essentially the big 10 risks to any collection, and you're responding to that risk. For example, theft is one of them. We increased our security system to make sure that that was being adequately addressed. We installed a dehumidifier so that if the humidity rose or if there was a flood, that would be really easy to turn that on and start doing things immediately. Also, things like pests. We have less of a concern about that kind of thing since we're not dealing with baskets here. We're often dealing with a lot of lithic material, which is a little bit sturdier on that front.

Thinking about those 10 agents or 10 risks to a collection is a really helpful starting point for anyone who's thinking about mitigating those natural disasters. Frankly, for us, one of the planning things that we've done in terms of scheduling is that we now built in a buffer every summer, knowing that one of our three stakeholder communities has been impacted by a fire every single year for the last three years. So, we now are anticipating that as part of our annual planning, there may be

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delays if one of the communities is impacted by that and leaving enough space in your timelines to be able to pivot if necessary.

Q: I was just curious about your next steps: Alyssa, your priorities for Tse'k'wa, and Bryce, the work that you're doing with the school and heritage revitalization.

Bryce: Well, essentially, we need to finish this project, our Museum and our Pit House project. With our Pit House, we are still doing the final steps. You guys all saw the exoskeleton of the Pit House [*in the presentation slides*]. They still need to put on roughly 500 core logs that will go around it. Then they'll put on plywood and then torch on a waterproof membrane, throw in a skylight and bury it in dirt.

Inside the museum, we still need to do those finer interior design pieces, but we are moving the needle closer to the completion date. I'm cautiously optimistic that we will have a Grand Opening in celebration of this facility, hopefully in the springtime here. So, if everything goes according to plan, those are the next steps for that project.

If you were talking about the school, and I could go on and on and on, so I won't open that can of worms. But I really do look forward to celebrating the completion and opening of this structure. For the community members to be able to celebrate their rich history and for transient people to stop and learn about the rich history of the Secwépemc people to is really exciting.

Alyssa: I'm excited to pay you a visit -that sounds really great! Here at Tse'k'wa, as I mentioned, we recently were able to bring our collection home, and so one of our immediate projects that is going to be carrying us through the next several years is being able to make that material more accessible to our communities, ideally through exhibits and virtual exhibits.

One project that I personally am really excited about, and I know our Board is

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really excited about, is a virtual reality experience. This summer, we worked with a group out of Los Angeles that came and did photogrammetry at the site - so scanning everything in 3D photos. That included some of the artifacts in the cultural objects that were returned, and so hopefully, within the next year or two, we will have a Tse'k'wa virtual experience where you can actually experience the Cave without necessarily needing to come to the site and get to experience some of those cultural objects and learn from community members about why they're important. So that's one step - now that we have the infrastructure in place and the objects and materials back here, it's bringing them back out into the communities and connecting those communities with those objects.

We also now are seeing an exponential increase in the number of people that come to the site. For practical reference, three years ago, we didn't even have public bathrooms for people. So now that we do have all of these infrastructure things in place, we have a lot of people who are really excited to come to the site and to learn. So, we will really be focusing on increasing our organizational infrastructure now and hopefully bringing some additional staff on board to support educational programming, school tours, community tours, and those types of events. We're part of a really exciting program right now with Northern B.C. Tourism implementing a destination experience at Tse'k'wa and having that be something that is available to a wider audience and part of that is planning for capacity for organizations. So that's really what we're focusing on in the immediate future.

In the longer-term future, there is a desperate need for a public building and a public interpretive center at the site. So, the work that we're currently doing on our Building Feasibility Study, which has included some archaeological surveys this summer, is going to help us to plan for that long-term building. I personally feel that Northeastern B.C. has not been adequately represented or funded in the Cultural Heritage scene. I feel that it's really important that Tse'k'wa in Northeastern B.C. and the Dane-Ḷaa people have a physical space and the resources to support a space where people can come and do that learning. Right now, our building is only able to be used for the repository and for staff offices,

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and that's an injustice. So, we need to do some longer-term planning on having a permanent facility that's open to the public beyond our fantastic Archaeology Dome, which we love, and which gets used all the time. We feel that there's a need for a larger space as well.

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