Canadian Conservation Institute at Work in the Field and in the Laboratory

By Tyler C. Cantwell

Figure 1. The bottom of an aluminum boat turned on its side.

Conservation in the field

The water laps at the side of an old aluminum boat. The white paint is faded and worn in some places, restored in others. Its maintenance is clearly a never-ending chore. The paint job is not beautiful, but it is practical. The number of generations this boat will serve depends entirely on how well it is cared for today.

A blue cooler sits at the front of the boat along with a pile of supplies: shovels, a few tents and food. This is one of several trips the boat will make from Akulivik (ᐊᑯᓕᕕᒃ), Quebec, to Smith Island, part of the Qikiqtaaluk (ᖁᑭᖅᑕᓗᒃ) Region of Nunavut (ᓄᓇᕗᑦ). The boat ride is only around 1 km but crosses a provincial/territorial border. Those ferried to the island include Aklulivik high school students, Canadian and international archaeologists, geologists, a cook and a conservator from the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI).

While it is not common for a CCI conservator to provide hands-on archaeological field services such as this, archaeologists may request field conservation services. These services include on-site conservation treatment, assistance in the recovery and packaging of archaeological materials and training in conservation methods.

Once the boat has reached shore, the passengers depart. Before any shovel or trowel touches soil, a dialogue occurs. Despite archaeology and conservation being two integral links in the heritage chain, they sometimes operate at arm's length. The archaeologist is responsible for a number of tasks, including surveying and excavation, along with sieving and archaeological drawing. The conservator advises on how best to handle, clean and store objects for preservation.

The conditions of the dig site are harsh, and the materials are frail. Wood objects may appear to be preserved in ice and water but are easily destroyed if not handled properly. It takes a team of dedicated and specialized individuals to ensure that these heritage objects, once removed, are not lost.

The makeshift field laboratory is far from watertight, leaking during each rainfall and with hordes of mosquitos gathered inside. When it is not raining, the wind is brutal. Yet the conservator notices that the Akulivik high school students are among those least bothered by the weather. The opportunity for young people to participate directly in the preservation and conservation of their heritage is one of the greatest benefits of projects such as these. Similarly, it is an excellent reminder to the conservator, the archaeologist and to all others involved in the work of why heritage management is so important. To fail in our duty of heritage conservation is to deny the future its past.

The excavation concludes for the season with a tour of the site by the local Akulivik community and a presentation by the archaeologist at the local high school. The conservator works diligently to pack the various fragile items, swapping out most of the temporary cushioning of moss for Coroplast support, wrapping pieces in Saran Wrap and aluminum foil, and finally placing the objects in Ziploc bags. Wood artifacts are stored in a cooler with airbags to ensure a snug fit. It is at this point that the bulk of the conservator's job is about to begin, as the objects are taken back to CCI for careful drying and treatment to ensure their preservation.

Across the country

All across the country, CCI has conducted fieldwork similar to the example just presented on 10 such occasions in its 50-year history. For example, at the 2001 Ferryland excavation in Newfoundland and Labrador, the largest archaeology project in Canada, CCI staff members were asked to supervise the field laboratory and guide those working in the field on the best practices for processing artifacts.

In Kitimat, B.C., CCI Conservator Tara Grant worked with the Haisla Nation and Kleanza Consulting when the construction of a pipeline threatened potential sites of archaeological significance. The Haisla had oral histories of fish weirs (an artificial structure to trap fish in intertidal zones) in the area, but none had yet been discovered so far north. If staves (essentially, the posts which made up the

construction of the weir) were found, their condition was expected to be delicate due to the waterlogged conditions. Surprisingly, 100 staves and associated wood features from several fish weirs within Minette Bay were indeed found upon exploration, mapping and excavation.

Not just the laboratory

The work of conservation does not begin and end at the laboratory, just as the impact of conservation is not limited to objects. As noted, conservation techniques must be kept in mind from the very beginning of the archaeological excavation process. Likewise, even after treatment in the laboratory, the work of conservation is still not over, as the proper storage conditions must be maintained through proactive measures, such as the RE-ORG: Canada program. Conservation requires vigilance and dedication; thus, we must remember that it is not just for ourselves that we do this work, but for all those who come after us. The number of generations who will be inspired by our heritage objects depends entirely on how well these objects are cared for today.