



Banff National Park of Canada

Archaeology in Banff National Park

For 10,000 years people have been using the valleys, passes and high alpine areas of Banff National Park. They were well adapted to a hunting lifestyle, and knew the plant, animal, and mineral resources that were available. The mountains were not a hostile environment or a barrier to these people.

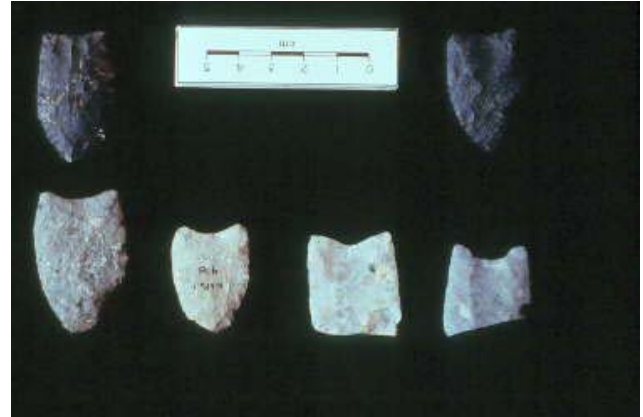
Archaeological Sites in Banff National Park

As of the fall of 2004, 766 archaeological sites have been recorded, including 416 aboriginal sites and 309 historic sites (17 sites have both components). Most of these are in the main river valleys, but traces of prehistoric occupation have been found throughout the park, including the high alpine areas.

A site is a place where past human activity has left physical traces. These traces can be artifacts, such as arrowheads or other tools; traces left by food processing such as butchered animal bones; or they can be features, such as hearths or historic structures.

Examples of historic sites are the remains of the coal mining towns of Anthracite and Bankhead, cabins in the backcountry, and historic dumps. Prehistoric sites are such things as campsites, butchering sites, quarries where Native people found the raw material suitable for making stone tools, depressions left in the ground from construction of pithouses, and places where isolated artifacts such as arrowheads or scrapers are found.

Sites in the Vermilion Wetlands area have been dated to 10,800 years ago. These are among the oldest sites we currently know of in Western Canada. The Bow Valley, in the area near Banff townsite, contains sites with dates ranging from this period to the time that Europeans and Canadians began to arrive and irrevocably change the Native lifestyle.



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Tool Technology Changes Over Time

Cultural changes can be observed in the archaeological record. At about 8000 years ago, the hunting weapons technology changed from spears to atlatl or throwing sticks. At about 1500 years ago, the bow and arrow became common. Each of these weapons were armed with different styles of spear points or arrowheads, and these technical and stylistic changes can be used to date a site.

The types of stone that these points and other stone tools were made from also change over time. Although local siltstone and cherts are the materials most commonly used to make stone tools, fine-grained obsidian and a rainbow of different cherts were brought in from quarries in Montana, the Dakotas, Yellowstone, and central British Columbia. Coarse-grained local stones were used to make heavier chopping and wood-working tools. Two hundred and fifty years ago, historic trade goods made their appearance, in advance of Euro-Canadian traders and settlers.

Site Locations

Site locations are predicted from archaeologists' knowledge of other similar areas. Archaeologists have worked in the Rocky Mountains long enough to know that campsites are concentrated on river terraces and well drained areas on the sunny side of the main valleys. Animal kill sites will often be found near mineral licks or river crossings.

Quarry sites can be found in the high mountain passes. Early historic accounts of travel and interviews with contemporary First Nations people can provide information about traditional use of the Banff area, and the significance of different types of sites.

Salvage Archaeology

Sites are also found through archaeological survey work. Prior to a development or construction project in Banff National Park, the project area is assessed for any conflict with archaeological sites. This is part of Canadian Environmental Assessment (CEAA) Legislation. The ground is examined, and tests are excavated so that any buried cultural remains can be identified. If possible, regional archaeological staff will work with the local Parks staff and project engineers to design the project with as little impact to any site as possible. This is how the Vermilion Lakes site was found, in advance of twinning the Trans-Canada Highway in the early 1980s.

Sometimes it is necessary to conduct a full-scale archaeological excavation, which will systematically dig up and record the artifacts and features that make up the site. We learn most about the past lifeways by studying artifacts in their context, in relation to the other things around them. Human activities leave artifacts behind in certain patterns, which will allow us to interpret what the activity was.

More recent artifacts will be found on top of older ones, and their relative position will allow us to sort out the relative ages of different occupations. Organic material, such as charcoal or wood, can be radiocarbon dated, and the resulting age can then be assigned to the artifacts that were associated with the dated sample. Consequently, it is important that artifacts can be examined in their original location.

We Need Your Help

Because the original context is vital to understanding the importance of an artifact, you should leave it where you found it. Don't disturb the site. Bring it to the attention of a park warden

or other Parks staff, and be prepared to tell them accurately where you found it. It would be helpful if you can take a photo of the item, showing it in relation to the general area, or mark the location on a map. Every piece of information you can provide will add to the knowledge of Banff's archaeology.



Lake Minnewanka site
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Cultural and natural resources are protected in the park, and you must not disturb them. As well, provincial laws protect archaeological resources. Should you find something outside the park, please notify the Archaeological Survey of Alberta at the Provincial Museum of Alberta.

For More Information:

Parks Canada web page on Archaeology :
http://www.pc.gc.ca/progs/pfa-fap/index_E.asp

Provincial Museum of Alberta, Human History and Archaeology web pages:
<http://www.pma.edmonton.ab.ca/human/archaeo/intro.htm>

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