

Review of the Forges du Saint-Maurice National Historic Site Management Plan

Public Consultation Report, July 2020



Introduction

The Forges du Saint-Maurice National Historic Site management plan was presented for review. Parks Canada gave the public the opportunity to participate in developing the site's new management directions for the next decade. To this end, the public consultation on the management plan review for the Forges du Saint-Maurice National Historic Site took place in May, June and July of 2019.

This document presents the consultation process and a summary of opinions expressed by citizens, community stakeholders, Trois-Rivières representatives and elected officials.

Objectives

The consultation had two objectives:

- 1- Communicate the long-term vision, key strategies and objectives.
- 2- Collect public viewpoints and comments so Parks Canada can enhance and adjust the proposed management plan according to those comments.

Consultation process

The national historic site's planning team developed a "public consultation document" that covered the following topics:

- planning process
- the site's historical significance
- the historic site's operations
- key achievements since the implementation of the 2007 management plan
- key issues
- elements of the vision
- proposed key strategies
- objectives supporting these key strategies

This document was published in both English and French on the historic site's webpage and distributed to consultation participants.

Invitations were sent by post and email to elected federal, provincial and municipal officials and to local stakeholders for a consultation meeting set for the morning of May 17, 2019. A public notice was also printed in local media, along with messages posted on social media and posters displayed at the site entrance inviting the public to participate in a consultation on June 17, 2019 during an open house. Following this first phase, several individuals mentioned to Parks Canada that they wanted more time to comment on the management plan's content. It was therefore decided to extend the consultation period by one month and add two public sessions on July 20, 2019.

People unable to attend were given the option to submit their comments by email or mail until July 30, 2019.

A total of 80 individuals attended the consultations, and 17 comments were received by email or mail.

Summary of key points discussed during the consultations

Funding:

- Participants felt the national historic site had insufficient funding for cultural resource conservation, installation maintenance and presentation. They believed more funding should be made available, on the one hand, to upgrade the site, and on the other, to make it more interesting by developing new activities to attract more visitors and ensure sustainable conservation of cultural resources and installations.
- Parks Canada representatives explained that the site has a recurring activity and maintenance budget dependent on special and temporary funding for priority projects. In recent years, nearly \$1.7 million has been secured to fund rehabilitation of the Grande Maison, restoration of the lower forge as well as repairs for some trails and the “Devil’s Fountain” following the floods in 2017. Just over \$225,000 was also used to improve the visitor experience, including the addition of interpretive media. Planning is underway to use the additional funds in the coming years, and the management team will continue working proactively to secure new funding.

Entertainment:

- Several participants felt the site was not entertaining enough. They found the current activity offer insufficient and not promoted adequately. They believe visitors should have more engaging activity opportunities, such as costumed activities. This would help make the site more interesting and welcoming, attracting more visitors.
- Parks Canada representatives explained that several guided activities are already included in the programming, but that they could be better promoted. They also mentioned the possibility of enhancing this programming in coming years. Involvement and collaboration from the cultural tourism industry to bolster site programming would help increase available visitor opportunities. In coming years, Parks Canada wishes to proactively encourage the implementation of activities or events in collaboration with the cultural and tourism industry.

Public reception infrastructure condition (parking, roads, culverts, etc.):

- The consultation participants emphasized the importance for reception infrastructure repair, in particular paving the parking lots and access roads with asphalt. They believe it is obsolete and its condition reflects poorly on the site.
- Parks Canada explained the necessity of prioritizing investments to fund rehabilitation of the most important cultural assets and resources (the Grande Maison, post-flood restoration and protection of the Saint-Maurice river banks, trail and culvert repair, lower forge chimney restorations). For this reason, other assets in a poor or fair state, but still safe, have not benefitted from rehabilitation projects thus far. Over the medium

term, public reception infrastructure will benefit from rehabilitation work. However, its scope must still be determined based on the funding earmarked in future budgets.

Admission fees:

- Participants asked if it would be possible to review fees for the national historic site to facilitate access for Trois-Rivières residents and partnership activity opportunities.
- Parks Canada representatives explained that fees follow Parks Canada pricing, but there is flexibility in renting space or holding special events. Furthermore, as with other historic sites, a municipality may enter into a lump-sum payment agreement to provide passes to all residents. It is to be noted that since 2018, admission is free for youths aged 17 and under.

Location visibility:

- One participant believed the site's lack of ownership could be remedied through a comprehensive approach promoting and marketing Parks Canada's historic sites. Parks Canada representatives confirmed a willingness to work on the positioning of Parks Canada's national historic sites in Quebec. The first phase was completed by producing a tourism brochure listing Parks Canada's national historic sites in Quebec.
- Participants also confirmed that focusing on the site's "natural" side, on top of its "historic" side, should increase the site's visibility by reaching people interested more in nature than culture.
- One participant proposed creating activity packages with other regional tourist attractions.

Community events:

- Several participants believed an event framework should be established by associating the site with existing events or by organizing joint events. Events generate traffic and animate the site, while also infusing it with a sense of life and novelty. They would not be directly related to historical interpretation of the site, which would instead serve as a venue. However, some participants mentioned that they believed Parks Canada's administrative structure is too cumbersome and could hinder organizing activities or events with third parties.
- Parks Canada is open to organizing collaborative activities or events. In fact, this approach is being implemented in other national historic sites. However, activities or events must respect the Agency's mandate. Community involvement is critical to the success of this type of initiative. Organizing one or more joint events would be an interesting way to attract more visitors to the site. In coming years, Parks Canada will work proactively to host events in collaboration with the community and create an administrative context more conducive to this type of collaboration.

Local management:

- Some participants expressed disapproval towards the management team not being locally based and thought this negatively impacted the site's operation, maintenance and regional positioning.
- Parks Canada representatives explained that the site's management is decentralized. Field unit management is based in Shawinigan; the site manager, who oversees numerous historic sites, is based in Montréal; and a team of employees, including the interpretation coordinator, is based in Forges du Saint-Maurice. The site also benefits from expertise provided by other Parks Canada services, such as archaeology, collections management and visitor experience. These services are primarily located in Montréal, Quebec and Gatineau.
- During discussions, participants suggested establishing an advisory committee comprised of public and community representatives. This committee could support Parks Canada in site management and would be a way to give the community a voice. Parks Canada welcomed this idea and is considering implementing a mechanism for collaboration with the community.

Operating season:

- Several participants asked why the site could not stay open in winter.
- The Field Unit Superintendent explained that current site attendance did not justify staying open in winter. To stay open would require demonstrating that the site generates significant winter traffic.
- Participants at the June 17 consultation also suggested opening the site over a longer period to host more school groups. They believe that this would strengthen public attachment to the national historic site.

Public ownership of the site:

- Participants agreed with the need to foster public ownership of the site. In addition to presenting the history of the Forges, the site should be a source of pride and a gathering place to spend time. Many appreciate the opportunity to have picnics and go for strolls, without necessarily seeing the exhibitions. Some participants mentioned how they already organized family outings on the site in the past few years and greatly appreciated this possibility.

Perception of the site's historical roots:

- Several participants mentioned having difficulties experiencing what the site was like in operation. They believe the vestiges do not provide enough immersion into the site's industrial past. The site resembles a large grassy area with a few vestiges, not an industrial site. Some asked if it would be possible to rebuild buildings, somewhat similar to the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site or the Quebec pioneer village of Drummondville. However, other participants mentioned that several other

Quebec locations already reproduce historic villages and a re-enactment at the Forges du Saint-Maurice would not make the site stand out.

- Parks Canada representatives indicated preserving existing cultural resources is the priority. Nevertheless, it may be possible to better publicly communicate the function and appearance of the different vestiges visible on the site in a manner that makes the site's industrial past more believable. A project is being developed to incorporate new technologies to improve aspects of the visit relating to feeling and experience.

Nature and ecological role:

- Several individuals supported the site's willingness to focus more on its natural setting. This strengthens the sense of ownership over the site since many people regularly visit it, outside the hours of operation, just to enjoy nature. However, one participant mentioned difficulties might arise in making the historic site stand out by only focusing on its natural side. In fact, there are plenty of natural spaces nearby, in particular La Mauricie national park.
- Parks Canada representatives explained this is not about creating a new natural park, but rather about turning the national historic site into a local urban park.
- Several participants asked if it would be possible to reopen trails closed in recent years.
- Parks Canada was required to close walkways for safety reasons and is exploring several options to restore public access to certain natural spaces.

New activities proposed by participants:

Several activity ideas were proposed by participants:

Perseid meteor shower viewings, a sports event, antique cars, opening of the site for winter activities, citizenship ceremonies, a volunteer association, a sculpture contest, alternative accommodations, a historic restaurant, evening or night hours, costumed tours, a festival, classical music concerts, an annual open house, a Saturday morning interpretation for children, school partnerships. Panels explaining the names of plant species found on the site, birding lectures, BioBlitz and annual cleanups. Releasing a television series and allowing cycling on the site were also suggested.

Management plan amendments:

Parks Canada considered all comments received during the consultation period. Several amendments will be inserted into the management plan to reflect public concerns, including the following points:

- ✓ Bolster the site's offering, making it more interesting and welcoming. Parks Canada will work closely with the community to foster partner and stakeholder engagement to boost the national historic site's programming.

- ✓ Implement a consultation mechanism with representatives of stakeholders, partners and community members to enhance national historic site programming and better align with interests of the community, public and Parks Canada.
- ✓ Develop a cultural resource prioritization and conservation strategy, in consultation with the community, that corresponds to the national historic site's budget capacity.
- ✓ Enhance and better promote guided tours by increasing opportunities for visitors to participate in an activity program.
- ✓ Set an objective to increase site attendance.
- ✓ Before reopening the nature trail, secure footbridges.

Other actions:

In the short term, the management team will lead other actions alongside developing the management plan, including to:

- ✓ Meet with community stakeholders to attract events or activities that increase site interest, promote its visibility and attract more visitors.
- ✓ Implement new visitor media and activities.
- ✓ Parks Canada will also explore several options to improve the asphalt surfacing on the entrance road and facilitate access to natural areas and the river. Work will be performed based on available budgets.

Conclusion

The consultation exercise was positive and demonstrated the site's importance to the community and public. The consultation will allow Parks Canada to enhance its approach to managing the Forges du Saint-Maurice National Historic Site. The items discussed will be factored into the implementation of the site's new management plan and the site's daily operations.

The management plan will be finalized in spring 2020. The Field Unit Superintendent will have it approved by the Chief Executive Officer of Parks Canada.

In closing, Parks Canada would like to offer its sincere thanks to all those who participated in the consultation exercise for the Forges du Saint-Maurice National Historic Site management plan and shared their ideas, hopes and vision for the future of the historic site.

Nadine Blackburn
Field Unit Superintendent

Mauricie and Western Quebec