

Deborah Morrison

Partners in time

Canada's historic sites could use a helping hand from the tourism sector.

This summer, CBC Radio's *The Current* asked me about a controversy at Upper Canada Village — a heritage park in Eastern Ontario under new management by a former director of Canada's Wonderland.

Local groups were nervous that efforts to revitalize the park might undermine its "authenticity." So I drove there on Canada Day to see for myself.

Sadly, the parking lot was only one-third full — on a brilliantly sunny holiday! Tourists wandered, and period-costumed interpreters provided commentary as they strolled — but it seemed it could be so much more.

Morrisburg, the town nearest Upper Canada Village, is beautiful, and there are many other interesting destinations nearby. Yet the park seems disconnected from the region. It reminded me of an unfortunate comment someone else made on *The Current* — that "people didn't come to Upper Canada Village to have fun, they come to be educated."

As one of the twelve percent of Canadians who visit historic sites annually, I'd never before considered how these spaces present themselves to those who just want a vacation experience.

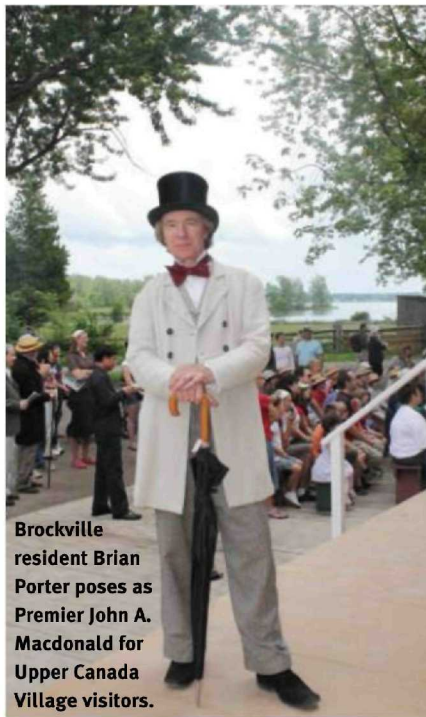
Tourism and conservation will always be a delicate balance, but investment in conservation is likely to increase only if Canadians value and visit historic sites.

Consider Prince of Wales Fort, located some 1,450 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg. With no roads into the nearby town of Churchill, Manitoba, it is a challenge to get there. Yet, the fort itself is fantastic, bringing the story of Canada's fur trade to life in ways even I hadn't imagined.

Unfortunately, few Canadians have ever seen it. Even from Churchill, an ecotourism destination that attracts visitors from around the world, it's hard to get to. The fort is accessible only by boat — and Parks Canada doesn't own a vessel to ferry passengers across.

Churchill's local tour guides — knowledgeable and fiercely proud of the region's historic sites — operate a fleet of boats. These could be used to take visitors to the fort, but discussions that would see this happen came to an impasse. The parties couldn't agree on who will pay, who will profit, and how to protect the site while improving the visitor experience.

And so it sits, lacking visitors and virtually inaccessible. It seems to me that



Brockville resident Brian Porter poses as Premier John A. Macdonald for Upper Canada Village visitors.

with better collaboration between Parks Canada and local guides, the fort could become as popular as the region's polar bears, belugas, and birds.

Even "the crown jewel of the Canadian Parks Service" — Nova Scotia's Fortress of Louisbourg — could use a little help from commercial tourism.

Located on Cape Breton Island, the fortress is a reconstruction of the original seventeenth-century French fortified settlement. Canadian historian

Margaret Conrad, who helped research Louisbourg during the 1960s, calls it one of the best-interpreted historic sites in the world.

"The site itself is full of activities for kids and adults," she said. "[There are] well-trained staff who stay in character, a couple of period restaurants, gardens, shops, ... films, and workshops that focus on such skills as eighteenth-century cooking."

Visitors can also enjoy a host of other tourist attractions in the region, ranging from hiking and whale-watching to spa treatments at world-class resorts. Trouble is, you'd never know that by looking at the Fortress of Louisbourg's website.

Compared to the official website for Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg — a dynamic, engaging site that links to many private tourist attractions nearby — Louisbourg's looks like, well, the government website that it is. What a difference an integrated tourism strategy makes!

Canadian historic sites are renowned for being "more genuine" than some comparable American sites, and I would never suggest anything that might take away from this reputation. However, there's a real benefit to marketing history and making it a part of a fun family vacation!

This year, Parks Canada launched its "Real. Inspiring." marketing campaign. It's a compelling first step toward better domestic marketing. But the real challenge is to deliver on the campaign's promise. One way to do that is to reach out to the private sector. As I see it, it's the best way of getting citizens and communities more invested in the future value of the historic spaces that surround them. 🐿️



Deborah Morrison is the president and CEO of Canada's National History Society, and publisher of *The Beaver*.