

Working within the Community

The role of the cultural heritage professional working in a community environment often varies considerably from the role in an academic or government situation. In a community there are often quite different expectations of what should be done. It is important for the professional to be sensitive to these requirements to successfully contribute to the community.

In considering how a community uses the past there are three main areas to address. The first is understanding the community's self-identity. Second, the professional must consider how to best present this information to the community's youth and to a broader outside audience. Finally, historical analysis highlights useful social, political, and economic tools the community can use to positively effect change. My work as a Parks Canada historian with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Hän Nation in Canada's Yukon territory has emphasized the importance of understanding how history and heritage can contribute to community health and strength.

There are places, things, memories, and stories that we hold close to our heart. They have meaning for us in ways that go far beyond the pleasure they provide as we remember, visit, or

share them. Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder Percy Henry refers to these things as "our treasure box." These treasures are the heritage and the history of a community. They are the understanding of who they are and how they connect with the larger world.

The treasure box carries heritage. From Latin, *heres* or heir, heritage means anything that is inherited. Heritage is all that is gained from ancestors; it is cultural identity. Cultural identity is made up of many things—language, creation stories, associations with place, and that connection with ancestors made by accepting their gifts to the present. Heritage includes those values that families instill in their children to ensure they will be decent and respectful members of their community.

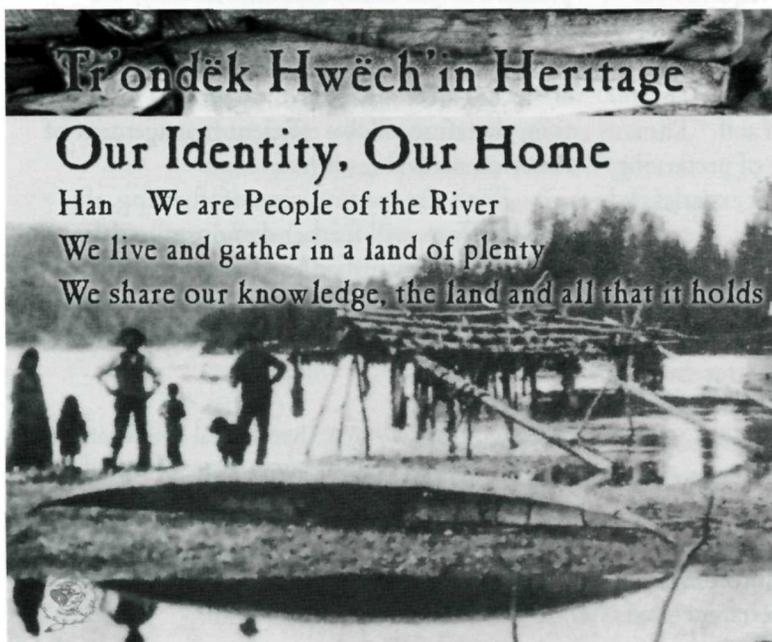
The treasure box also carries history. *Historia*, from the Greek, means finding out, and *histor* means wise man. History is the knowledge of how things happened, it is about relationships, not things. It is the set of skills and abilities learned so that people can make change in the world around them. Knowing history makes communities more effective in their efforts to make a living and to make the world a safe and desirable place for their children.

The treasure box, the carrier of the community's past, has two purposes. The treasure box provides the values and skills needed to envision and shape a future. Heritage tells us who we are and provides us with a set of values. It is the celebration of our identity. History provides the skills to allow us to successfully interact with the larger world around us and to protect those things we hold most dear.

When we identify those things for our treasure box, we have designated them. We have highlighted their importance to our identity and their usefulness to our community. As a community—whether town, First Nation, or country—we recognize leadership, special places and ways of life. These designations give us group identity and help us work together to achieve greater good for ourselves and our children.

Designation comes from *signum*, a Latin word meaning "to mark." The Romans marked respected individuals by appointing them to

Tr'ondëk
Hwëch'in poster,
photo by Sether
in Adney.



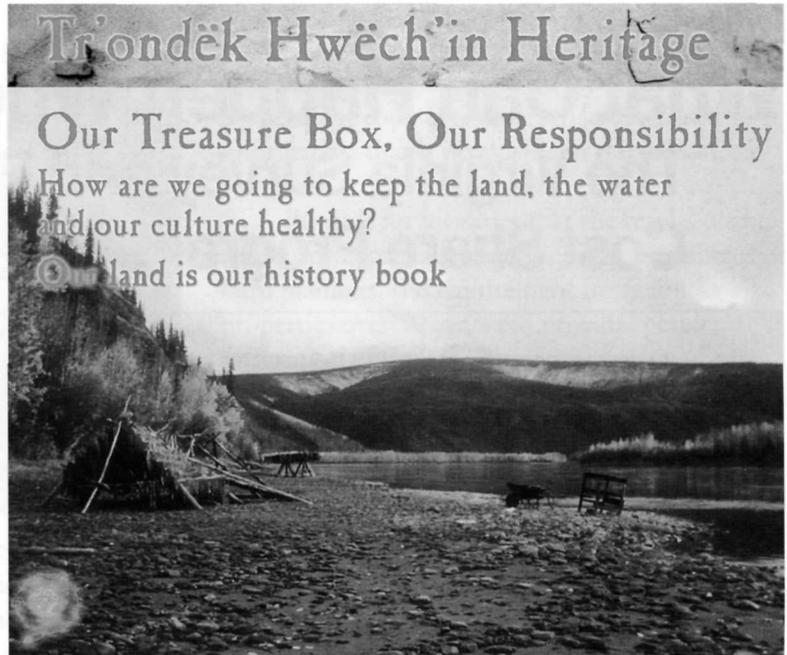
Tr'ondëk
Hwëch'in poster,
photo by the
author.

office. They gave them responsibility for the care of some part of their community. We still designate. Designation is the act of giving a job to a person, place, or thing. When we designate we need to be clear what the job is. This is important so that we can be sure that the job is being done and that it can continue to be done. Designation describes something that symbolizes our place in the world or enables us to control our own destiny. That is, it includes both heritage and history. A designated place is one which provides identity and where we have power. This control over the future is a sign of a healthy and vibrant society. Designation is the act of both protecting and celebrating the treasure box.

Designation is an expression of power. The designation of a place is a statement of ownership and the identification of values associated with that place. It is the assignment of responsibilities to a trusted and respected element of the community.

In the valley of the Klondike River in the central Yukon Territory of Canada, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in designated Tr'o-ju-wech'in, the site of a traditional fish camp, as a heritage site. Tr'o-ju-wech'in is a part of the treasure box of the First Nation. The site was designated by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in when they launched a lawsuit over the

Tr'ondëk
Hwëch'in poster,
photo by G.
McLeod.



unregulated mining of the site in the early 1990s. The site was designated again by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in when they gained ownership of the site through their land claim agreement. And now the community is considering the value of nominating Tr'o-ju-wech'in as a national historic site to be shared with all Canadians. With these many decisions to designate, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in are both celebrating and working to protect their heritage and their history.

My role as a cultural professional working with the community is to identify those values for which the site was designated by the First Nation. That is, to figure out what it is about the place that makes it special and to ensure that measures are in place to protect these things. I also work with First Nation staff to strengthen the community's heritage by articulating the stories that are shared with their children through the schools and other education programs. Finally, in working toward a national designation of the site and broadcasting its history to visitors, the community is seeking to gain outside recognition and respect for the community's culture.

The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in treasure box provides the community with a heritage to be celebrated and includes knowledge of the skills needed to ensure their distinctive culture can be passed onto their children. It is an honour and a privilege for myself as a professional to be able to work with the community in its care.

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