

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS, HERITAGE & CULTURAL CENTRES IN NUNAVUT, CANADA

Catherine C. Cole, Heritage Consultant, Edmonton, Alberta

Biography

Catherine C. Cole is a heritage consultant based in Edmonton, Alberta. An historian by training, she has thirty years experience as an interpreter, curator, and consultant, working for all levels of government, museums, galleries and related organizations. She is particularly interested in post-colonial issues and spent two years working in the Solomon Islands from 1991–93. For the past two years, she has been working with the Inuit Heritage Trust in Nunavut on the development of a training program for heritage workers in the territory.

Abstract

Museums in Nunavut are concerned not primarily with archaeological, historical or artistic objects but with language retention and cultural preservation. Inuit communities accord more importance to the conservation of cultural and natural landscapes than heritage buildings. Cultural and heritage centres have been developed not for tourists, who visit in small numbers and for a narrow window of time in the summer, but for the communities themselves.

The Inuit Heritage Trust recognizes that training is a key component in increasing the future capacity of Nunavut's heritage sector. For the past two years, Catherine C. Cole and Wendy Molnar have been working for the Inuit Heritage Trust on the development and implementation of a training program for heritage workers in the territory. Phase I, which concluded in June 2007, included the development of the Training Plan and a pilot of the first nine-day institute in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Phase II includes a mentorship program that reinforces the information learned during the first institute; provides participants with ongoing support; and prepares them for the second institute. The second institute will be held in Ottawa, Ontario, in September 2008. The mentorship program includes both group and individual support and helps to solidify the emerging heritage network in the territory.

The presentation will introduce the heritage community in Nunavut and the contributions made by museums (heritage and cultural centres) to development of a healthy and inclusive society. In some ways, museums in Nunavut are more integrated into the community than museums in the south, often physically linked to schools, libraries, and elders' centres. The presentation will touch upon the barriers experienced by museums in the territory (cultural differences, isolation, lack of training opportunities, budget, etc.) and the opportunities they share for promoting respect and understanding between Inuit and non-Inuit, northerners and southerners.

The presentation will feature photographs and audio that document the development and implementation of the plan.

The Training Plan was initiated by the Inuit Heritage Trust with funding provided by the federal Canadian Arts and Heritage Sustainability Program and the territorial Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth.

Consultants Catherine C. Cole and Wendy Molnar have been working since March 2006 on the development of a training program for heritage workers in Nunavut. This project was initiated by the Inuit Heritage Trust, an Inuit organization established under the Nunavut Land Claims

Agreement in 1993. Heritage workers face numerous challenges because the territory is very large and has a small, diverse population. There are twenty-six communities in Nunavut, spread throughout two million square kilometres, and not accessible by road. The population is 85% Inuit and there are four official languages: Inuktitut, Inuinaqtun, English and French.

Created in 1999, Nunavut is Canada's youngest territory and is still establishing necessary infrastructure and institutions, including a proposed territorial heritage centre to be established in Iqaluit, the capital. Facilities serve more than one purpose, whether museums or heritage centres, interpretation or tourism centres. The lines between them are blurred. For example, the Kitikmeot Heritage Centre in Cambridge Bay, the Inuit Heritage Centre in Baker Lake, and the Nunatta Sunakkutaangit Museum in Iqaluit, are all recognized by the government as museums and receive operational funding. Others have a different focus. The Naijuqsivik Community Museum, situated in the high school in Sanikiluaq, provides educational programs for the community.

Tourism centres, such as the Unikkaarvik Visitor Centre in Iqaluit, the Angmarlik Visitor Centre in Pangnirtung, and the Nattinnak Visitor Centre in Pond Inlet, offer a mix of exhibitions and programs and, while they serve to orient visitors, they often play a role for community members as well. Tourism is a growing industry but the extreme climate and great expense keeps numbers relatively low and concentrated in a brief period from June to September. Often business travellers add a day or two to a trip to spend time in the community. A growing number of tourists arrive via cruise ships.

People working in these centres must have a variety of skills and experience. Because the centres are multipurpose, they often include an archives, exhibitions and public programs, and produce virtual exhibitions, CDs and other publications. They may be involved in archaeology, paleontology, toponomy, traditional knowledge and language retention programs. The centres are also often expected to fill multiple roles in the community, to provide social and economic benefits, as well as educational benefits. Heritage workers work in relative isolation and rarely have the opportunity to learn from visits to other museums or to attend professional development. Staff turnover is frequent. Elders often play an important role, either in governance or in an advisory capacity and in providing traditional knowledge.

In order to develop a training program for heritage workers in Nunavut, we conducted research through interviews, a survey, and community visits. We developed a training program that includes eight modules linked by group and individual mentoring. Because of the distance and costs in bringing participants together, we grouped the modules into two institutes. The first was held in Iqaluit in April 2007 and included: Introduction to Heritage Centres, Heritage Centre Management, Heritage Interpretation, and Training Seasonal Workers. The second will be held in Ottawa in September 2008 and will include: Collections Management, Preventive Conservation, Research, and Exhibition Design.

The situation in Nunavut is similar to that in other Commonwealth countries in the post-colonial period, and the lessons learned through this training program may be beneficial to the revisions to the Commonwealth Association of Museums training program as well.