

Special contribution



An Indigenous perspective: the case of Pimachiowin Aki World Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage, Canada

Sophia Rabliauskas

Poplar River First Nation

My name is Sophia Rabliauskas, I am from Poplar River First Nation. I was involved with Pimachiowin Aki World Heritage Site Project for almost 15 years. I have had different roles during that time, I worked with our communities as a coordinator, I visited communities over the years to translate and to ensure the people were always informed and updated. My other role was a spokesperson for Pimachiowin Aki.

Poplar River is located 400 km north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The land we consider to be our Traditional Territory is approximately 1 million hectares. Each of our Pimachiowin Aki First Nations, Poplar River First Nation, Paungassi First Nation, Little Grand First Nation and Bloodvein First Nation have approximately the same size territories. Our combined population is approximately 6,000. Our combined traditional territories are 33,000 square kilometres consisting of traplines, hunting, fishing and harvesting areas. In Poplar River's case we have archaeological evidence of our people's occupancy on that land for over 6,000 years. We consider ourselves as Anishinaabe and we all speak the same language, our beliefs and values about the land are similar, which has helped our work to be successful in building a strong nomination.

This gathering is about understanding Nature-Culture Linkages in Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage. Our whole existence as a people is the interrelationships between our culture and nature where we have lived for thousand of years. Our people believe that the responsibility of taking care of the land came from the Creator, therefore we feel that this is a very sacred responsibility. Our Traditional Territories have been well cared for by our people who have lived here for generations. The land, water, air, and all its life is healthy and strong, and we still carry the knowledge and teachings of our Elders and our ancestors.

My passion for this work comes from the teaching of the Elders and their concern about the wellbeing of the land. The work to care for this land started by my ancestors long before I was born and has continued to evolve into First Nation's led initiatives such as community land use planning, First Nations Accord and finally the Pimachiowin Aki World Heritage Nomination. The name Pimachiowin Aki means land that gives life. The name was chosen by our Elders, who continue to remind us that we are inseparable from the land that was given to us from the Creator. This land is our home, it is our very existence as a people and it is the worth the protection.

We have always acknowledged and practised the wisdom and teachings of our Elders. The message I carry comes from my father and grandfather and many other Elders. As soon as I was able to talk, my father and grandfather taught me to respect all life. We understood the importance of protecting the environment. They always gave thanks for anything that was taken from the land. They believed the Creator

gave us life from these things and it was our duty to protect and preserve them. They talked about the Circle of Life, where all forms of life, the animals, fish, birds, insects, plants everything, including human beings fit on a circle side by side, no one more important than the next. They were all given responsibilities to continue the life we were given. Our responsibility was to care for and protect what we were given. We knew we needed fresh water and food to survive. The elders experiences and knowledge of their surroundings has been the means of their survival. Our people understood the importance of conservation and preservation by practising the natural laws the Creator gave to us and my father put it much more eloquently when he said “if we do not care for the land, the land will suffer and we will suffer as people”.

We, as Anishinaabe have endured the effects of colonization and assimilation, we are at the brink of losing our language, culture and identity. Many Indigenous Nations in Canada have lost the use of their Traditional Lands. Poplar River and our partners are very fortunate to still have access to their Traditional Territories. The four First Nations communities have made a commitment to protect and preserve our traditional territories for future generations.

We strongly believe that in order to heal, we need to restore the balance within our community. We need to teach our children and grandchildren the importance of understanding the sacred relationship our people have with land and how our life depends on it more than ever. We gain life, wisdom, and knowledge from the land, because we strongly believe that the land is very much alive. Acknowledging the spirituality of the land is to sustain the health of the Anishinaabe people. Our health and survival depends on the land, our belief has always been that we are the land and the land is very much part of us.

Our vision is to protect the Boreal Forest for the benefit of future generations. We continue to revitalized our traditional practices by emphasizing community healing through ceremonies. Our communities have completed a comprehensive Land Management Plan. The plans were developed by our Elders, youth, and members of our communities. For thousand of years, our people have lived in this region, and using their Indigenous knowledge of all forms of life, have practised and lived true sustainability. Our communities used this knowledge as guidance and direction for the Land Use Plans. These plans are based on traditional practices and knowledge, along with scientific knowledge. These plans formed the basis of our World Heritage Nomination.

Our communities started working together to find ways to further protect our lands. In 2002, our communities signed the First Nations Accord which is an agreement to protect our traditional territories. One of the main goals was to seek support and recognition of our network of linked protected areas in the form of UNESCO World Heritage Site listing, combining both natural and cultural. We believed this would give us a unique and internationally significant opportunity to demonstrate the value of First Nations Traditional Knowledge in protecting and caring for the land and also to demonstrate that we can work together with First Nations, Governments, and other countries. Our Elders felt this was important initiative that we would leave a lasting legacy to the world from our people to protect and preserve this area for the benefit of the planet. What we have accomplished by keeping our land undeveloped and intact is extraordinary in todays world, where we witness the destruction of our planet on a daily basis. Our Elders believe that we need to share our knowledge of the land for the good of all people and the planet.

At that time the IUCN had put out a call for proposals for potential World Heritage Sites within the Boreal Forest. Our First Nation partners started to develop a proposal. We had heard that our Manitoba Provincial Government and the Province of Ontario were planning to submit a proposal for their Provincial Parks at the same time. We approached the Provincial Governments and invited them to work with us to submit one proposal. Both parks were partially within our Traditional Territories. We reached an agreement and a joint preliminary proposal for a natural and cultural site was submitted. In 2004 the release of the report for the 2003 IUCN workshop in St. Petersburg, Russia included “The St. Petersburg declaration” which supported the Manitoba and Ontario First Nation led nomination for the World Heritage site. In April of 2004 Canada’s Minister of the Environment endorsed the First Nations nomination for the World Heritage by including it on Canada’s updated Tentative List for the World Heritage.

In 2006, the communities and the 2 Provinces established the Pimachiowin Aki Corporation, whose main purpose was to coordinate and complete the nomination package for inscription for the Pimachiowin

Aki nominated area for the UNSECO World Heritage List. We were fortunate to receive funding from the Province of Manitoba which allowed us to complete the project. The nominated area consisted of traditional territories of 5 First Nations and the 2 Provincial parks. It was nominated as both cultural and natural site. The corporation democratically represents all partners and has charitable status, permitting it to pursue and receive donor funding. The First Nations and the two Provinces each appoint a Director of the Corporation's Board. Each Director is responsible to the constituents he/she represents and is committed to act in the best interests of the Corporation. The Board is co/chaired by one Anishinaabe First Nation representative and one Provincial Government representative selected by the Board of Directors. Elders, Advisors (including Parks Canada staff) and ex-officio parties are invited to participate at meetings of the Board as business requires. The Board structures allows all parties to have equal say. We were advised by Parks Canada to use the following criteria:

- Criterion (ix) Pimachiowin Aki is an outstanding example of a large, healthy multi level and resilient boreal shield ecosystem encompassing a vast boreal forest, biodiversity, free flowing fresh water rivers, myriad lakes and wetlands. Pimachiowin Aki fully represents the significance of the ecological and biological processes in the evolution of the boreal forest shield ecosystem. Its size and ecosystem diversity fully supports wildfire, an essential ecological process in the boreal forest. The rivers, lakes and tributaries provide ecological connectivity across the wide landscape of Pimachiowin Aki. Extensive wetlands and peat bogs store carbon and contribute significantly to biodiversity. Poplar River Traditional Territory stores over 500 million tons of carbon. Healthy predator-prey relationships are sustained among iconic boreal species such as wolf, moose, and woodland caribou.
- Criterion (v) Pimachiowin Aki is an outstanding example of Indigenous traditional land use continuously adapted and evolved for more than 6,000 years to meet the social, cultural, and livelihood needs of the Anishinaabeg in our harsh subarctic boreal shield environment. Anishinaabe oral traditions, traditional knowledge, customary governance and cosmology are integral to sustaining traditional land use practices. Customary harvesting areas, travel routes, livelihood and ceremonial sites and ancient pictographs provide testimony to holistic connectedness with our surroundings. Pimachiowin Aki fully encompasses the tangible and intangible elements of the living Anishinaabe cultural landscape that is resilient but vulnerable to irreversible change.

We considered the area to qualify as a World Heritage living cultural landscape.

There were many language issues and concepts that were very difficult to translate into our language. For example, when I met with the Elders to ask them what were the outstanding Universal Values of their life on the land. They reminded me of our belief, that the land and everything on it was given to us by the creator, therefore everything that was created by the creator is sacred, and therefore has its value and has a unique purpose in life. We have had a difficult time trying to think how we could separate ourselves from the land, in order to try to fit into these criteria. It took us 10 years to complete the nomination following the Operational Guidelines for the World Heritage Convention.

Each of our First Nations have developed our own lands management plans, as well the Provinces have developed plans for each of the Provincial Parks. The provinces will manage these parks in conjunction with the First Nations. This structure ensures that our First Nations will lead this process.

The research and studies that have been completed throughout this project have helped myself and others in our communities to relearn and embrace the rich history of the Anishinaabe people of this region. Ancient stories that are alive to us and continue to guide the people of this land. We have reconnected with the spirits of our land through ceremonies, dances and songs which have been passed down from generation to generation.

Our first nomination package was completed and delivered to the World Heritage Committee in 2012. We hosted a visit of the IUCN and ICOMOS evaluators to our territories and homes. They spent three days in our lands and were welcomed in our ceremonies, and treated with respect, kindness and honesty. Our Elders and community members expressed our hopes and dreams for a World Heritage designation. Some of their questions were confusing to us and difficult to answer. As they flew across our Territories one

of the evaluators expressed surprise and asked us, where is the evidence of your existence on this land. All he could see was pristine wilderness and no developments. He didn't understand how the concept that thousands of people have lived and travelled on this land for thousands of years only leaving minimal traces was a positive thing. We couldn't comprehend his question.

We were surprised and disappointed in early May 2013 when we received their recommendations on our nomination. It was recommended that our nomination be deferred. We could understand if they needed more information. We had no problems with that. What surprised us was the insulting tone of their report. Not only was the report full of errors, there was a complete misunderstanding and misinterpretation of our cultural identity. According to the ICOMOS report: "However in the supplementary information provided by the State Party it was made clear the First Nation did not wish to see their property as "exceptional" as they did not want to make judgements about the relationships of the other First Nations with their lands and thus make comparisons. ICOMOS considers that this view sets up a difficult dilemma and that further discussions are needed".

We have always believed we have no right to say we are better than anyone else, especially other Indigenous groups. This statement is a clear example of an oppressive colonized term, which was unacceptable. The major portion of this report emphasized our weakness and flaws which to them are risks to the success of our nomination. The report states we are vulnerable to irreversible change and our interactions with our environment is fragile and vulnerable to a range of threats and that our goals of recording and relearning our culture is wrong. They say the ability of the First Nation to sustain our culture is threaten by socio-economic and health issues and by acculturation, which includes extremely high unemployment and health problems. They told us our community plans have to address these issues. This is only few of their negative comments. This information is not new to us, as First Nation we are quite aware of the problems we face on daily basis. We felt that a successful World Heritage designation would enhance the work that is already being done in these communities to address many of these issues. We felt that ICOMOS recommendations were saying that we are not capable of sustaining our plans of protecting and preserving the land of our people. We expected mutual respect from the evaluator's report instead it only perpetrated racism and we didn't want to accept it. We felt the report had not respected our Aboriginal rights and that our nomination was a gift to the world and should be recognized.

We received tremendous support from other Indigenous people from around the world at the gathering of the World Indigenous Network Conference in Australia in May 2013. From that gathering we circulated a petition in support of our project which was signed by the Indigenous people. The petition was sent to the World Heritage Committee who were meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. There was great support for the Pimachiowin Aki bid from Indigenous peoples from around the world, and the UNESCO delegates in Cambodia recognized that the process for selecting sites was flawed. They promised to fix the process and revisit the Pimachiowin Aki nomination. In the end the committee upheld the decision of their advisors and our project was deferred.

This was a difficult time for our communities. We did not understand the reasoning behind their decision and we were ready to give up at one point. We held meetings to discuss the future of our nomination. We did not want to subject our communities and Elders to any more negative reports and evaluations. Elders in their wisdom and determination persuaded us to move forward and to continue this process. They are very resilient.

We were grateful for the support we did receive from IUCN and the World Heritage Committee at that time. They suggested that Canada invite a joint ICOMOS and IUCN Advisory Mission in order to address the issues raised during the evaluation. The Committee also requested the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, in conjunction with the Advisory Bodies, to examine options for changes to the criteria and to the Advisory Body evaluation process. They wanted to address the many outstanding concerns resulting from our evaluation process. They also requested that these issues be discussed during the Committee's 38th session in 2014.

The Advisory Mission to Pimachiowin Aki was held in October 2013. They called it an upstream process. The name was appropriate to our communities because we actually had to travel upstream to

attend the meeting. Our Board of directors, advisors and elders met with representatives from ICOMOS/ IUCN. We worked together for five full days to develop the direction our new nomination would take. It was a meaningful uplifting process and very successful. The mission report was completed in November 2013.

A new Pimachiowin Aki nomination was completed between November 2013 and December 2014 and submitted to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in January 2015. Compared with the 2012 nomination, the 2014 nomination document better described and illustrated Anishinaabe relationship with the land- Aki. The Anishinaabe cultural tradition of ji-ganawendamang Kitakiiminan (Keeping the Land) was the central theme of the new nomination.

The nomination included justification for inscription on the basis of two World Heritage cultural criteria (iii) and (iv), and retained the concept of a “mixed” cultural and natural World Heritage Site. The use of an additional cultural criterion in this nomination gives added emphasis to Pimachiowin Aki’s status as an Indigenous cultural landscape. The nomination also included more maps showing cultural attributes such as cabins and campsites, travel routes, traplines and place names. We insisted on a more meaningful involvement by our Elders, recording their stories and extensive knowledge. Their voices became an integral part of the new nomination.

I was fortunate to have attended, as part of a Pimachiowin delegation the 39th Session of the World Heritage Committee in Bonn Germany in July 2015. ICOMOS and IUCN reported on various ways to improve the evaluation of mixed World Heritage nominations. The World Heritage Committee approved changes to its Operational Guidelines that recognize the international rights of Indigenous peoples, whose cultural contributions and connections to the natural world are central to many UNESCO nominations. Indigenous people are now recognized as a distinct group with distinct rights, and the free, prior, and informed consent of the affected Indigenous peoples must be obtained during World Heritage nomination processes.

The second field mission to evaluate our new nomination took place August 23-31, 2015. The mission included visits with our Elders and community people, other experts and government representatives site visits and participation in talking circles, pipe ceremonies and a sweat lodge-aerial inspection of the nominated area.

This evaluation was completely different than the first visit. The evaluators were well prepared and fully engaged in this process. They had actually read the nomination and spent twice as long with our people. They managed to visit each of our communities. The mission went very well. During the last day of the visit which took place in Winnipeg with representatives from all communities and governments including the Premier of Manitoba, we were asked that if our nomination was successful, what steps were in place to ensure that we would continue into the future. Each of our First Nation representatives responded by saying: Pimachiowin Aki is our home, we will care for it, so that our children and grandchildren will have a healthy environment in the future. The evaluators recommended that our nomination become a World Heritage Site. A few months before the next World Heritage Committee meeting one of our partners Pikangikum First Nation from Ontario decided to pull out of our nomination. We spoke to them and went to meet with the community in Pikangikum to try to persuade them to stay with us. We are not exactly sure why they decided to withdraw, and in the end out of respect for them we accepted their decision.

We had no choice but to request for another deferral which was granted. We redid our nomination again taking out Pikangikum Territory and all references to them. We completed the changes and submitted the new nomination. The evaluators again recommended our submission. In July of 2018 at the World Heritage Committee meeting in the Kingdom Bahrain, Pimachiowin Aki was inscribed as a World Heritage site. It was a wonderful moment for especially after so many years. Each of our Communities held celebrations.

We are busy now implementing our lands plans and providing education and awareness for our young people so this area will provide a strong healthy environment into the future.

Thank You.

