

Ancient pictograph vandalism at Bon Echo Provincial Park reveals ongoing disregard for Indigenous history

September 21 2023, by Jackson Pind



Pictographs on the shores of Mazinaw Lake, or Mazinaabikinigan-zaaga'igan, which in Algonquin means "painted-image lake." Credit: Robber Esq

[Vandalism has once again marred the ancient Indigenous pictographs nestled within Bon Echo Provincial Park](#) about two hours west of Ottawa and north of Kingston, Ont.

For the Anishinaabe, these pictographs—[rock paintings](#)—hold profound

cultural significance and meaning. They constitute the largest collection of pictographs in southeastern Ontario, on the shores of Mazinaw Lake, or [Mazinaabikinigan-zaaga'igan, in Algonquin meaning "painted-image lake."](#) The [Algonquin people, a subgroup of the Anishinaabe,](#) share historical and cultural connections, each with distinct languages, traditions and territories within the broader Algonquian language family.

The placement of over [260 pictographs on 65 rock faces](#) is imbued with deep purpose and symbolism.

Grand Council Chief Reg Niganobe of the Anishinabek Nation condemned the vandalism, saying:

["This blatant destruction is a deliberate attempt to further erase our history and deprives us and future generations of rightful access to our spiritual and sacred sites."](#)

As a mixed settler and Anishinaabe historian, I teach about this pictograph site, among three other [major ancient sites across southern Ontario,](#) which [display the deep connection](#) the Anishinaabe have to their lands. Some pictographs were used by the Anishinaabe to represent [clan identities and to sign early treaty documents.](#)

The recent damage inflicted upon the site is heartbreaking [and infuriating.](#) It is also a historic pattern that points to the urgent need to generate solutions to protect this site.

History of vandalism

While the Anishinaabe have known and cherished the land now claimed by Ontario's parks system as part of Bon Echo Park for generations, the arrival of settlers marked a significant turning point.

[Settlers swiftly clear-cut the old-growth timber](#). Land in the current [park](#) eventually was bought by [Weston Price, who transformed it into the Bon Echo Inn](#), catering primarily to the affluent.

Subsequently, the inn was bought by [Flora MacDonald Denison](#), a journalist and notable figure [in women's suffrage](#) and artistic movements, with her husband, Howard. With her influence, the Bon Echo Inn was re-imagined to be a home for artists, including members of the Group of Seven.

Denison was an admirer of American poet Walt Whitman. [In 1920, she had a Whitman](#) quotation carved on [Mazinaw Rock, with the title "Old Walt"](#). I argue that this was the very first form of graffiti—and vandalism—that physically altered this sacred site.

To the [Anishinaabe, rocks are animate and have spirits](#), and this carving beside the pictographs demonstrates a lack of respect for Indigenous history.

Eventually, Denison's son, Merrill Denison, [donated the lands](#) to the Ontario government which then created [Bon Echo Provincial Park in 1965](#).



The ‘Old Walt’ inscription on Mazinaw Rock. Credit: [\(Mariusz S. Cybulski\), CC BY-SA](#)

Unpacking stories

Since stories about the park [continue to memorialize the Old Walt inscription](#) without unpacking its problematic history, it's unsurprising if recent vandals believed there would be no consequences for their actions or these would also go unpunished.

In 2019, representatives [of Parks Canada and Ontario Parks](#) gathered with Pikwakanagan First Nation officials when the Mazinaw pictographs

[were designated as a National Historic Site of Canada.](#)

Yet there is much work to do to [address the proliferation](#) of [stories and metaphors](#) of the land shaped by individualism, anthropocentrism and colonialism.

My recent co-authored research chapter "Toward Indigenous Place-Based Metaphors for Environmental History Education," in [Land as Relation Teaching and Learning through Place, People, and Practices](#) is concerned with land-based education in the watershed regions of Lake Ontario, traditionally shared territory between Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe.

Unless a profound transformation occurs, vandalism etched into the very foundation of Bon Echo Park will continue to persist.

Working together, proper cultural protocol

The Anishinabek Nation said it will be seeking to discuss with parks leadership and the province how to ["work together to properly clean the site with the inclusion of proper cultural protocol and involvement from local community Elders and Knowledge Keepers."](#)

It also recommends "further protection efforts be examined to ensure that this type of vandalism does not happen again."

I offer three suggestions for consideration towards rectifying this situation, which will require further consultations with Indigenous nations:

1. Protective perimeter: Erect a protective barrier that prevents boats from directly approaching the pictographs unless prior permission is granted from the local First Nations.

2. Remove all graffiti: Erase the graffiti, including the defacement bearing Whitman's name, which serves as an invitation for others to follow suit. There have been [previous efforts to remove graffiti and hand carvings that defaced Mazinaw Rock](#).
3. Restore stewardship: By entrusting the stewardship of the park to the local Anishinaabek nations, we [can enhance the preservation of](#) these invaluable heritage sites.

Stewardship models

Many models for restoring Indigenous stewardship in parks now exist:

- [The partnership between Petroglyphs Provincial Park and Curve Lake First Nation](#). The community of Curve Lake are the primary caretakers of the site and members work in the welcome center educating visitors about Kinomagewapkong [or the Teaching Rocks](#).
- The partnership to jointly operate Mississagi Provincial Park between [Serpent River First Nation, Mississauga First Nation and the City of Elliot Lake](#).
- The province made a 2015 agreement with [Beausoleil First Nation to co-manage and operate Springwater Provincial Park](#); Tidewater Provincial Park is operated under agreement [with the Moose Cree First Nation](#); [Lac La Croix First Nation](#) is involved in conservation activities and long-term planning of Quetico Provincial Park.

Such models ensure Indigenous representation is a constant presence. All visitors can then learn about the sacred nature of these places from the descendants of the original stewards. To safeguard Indigenous history, we must invest the necessary resources to protect sacred sites for the benefit of future generations.

I have fond memories of paddling by the pictographs and also hiking to the top of Mazinaw Rock before this recent vandalism. Bon Echo will undoubtedly remain a summer paradise for camping, hiking and canoeing, but its deeper spiritual, cultural and Anishinaabe connections can only endure if we actively commit to their protection.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Ancient pictograph vandalism at Bon Echo Provincial Park reveals ongoing disregard for Indigenous history (2023, September 21) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-09-ancient-pictograph-vandalism-bon-echo.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.