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## Conservation Opportunities at Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* Territorial Park

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### **Abstract**

Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* is situated just off the coast of the Yukon Territory in the Beaufort Sea. Used by the Inuvialuit for hundreds of years, it was also the site of heavy whaling in the late 1800s. In 1984, the Inuvialuit Final Agreement set aside the Island for designation as a Territorial Park and detailed a management regime that divided the Park into two discrete conservation zones: a wilderness zone and a historic zone. The paper identifies some of the conceptual and practical challenges facing the conservation of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* - namely, climate change, competing values as both an Inuvialuit and settler site, and the legislated framework of a two-zone management system. The paper proposes that conceiving of the Park as a cultural landscape, encouraging and facilitating traditional activities, and promoting new reasons and opportunities for the Inuvialuit and other local stakeholders to participate in the management, study and presentation of the Park frames the challenges as opportunities and works toward the creation of a contemporary layer of meaning through the reactivation of the bond between nature and culture.

### **Keywords**

Arctic, heritage, culture, nature

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## **Conservation Opportunities at Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* Territorial Park**

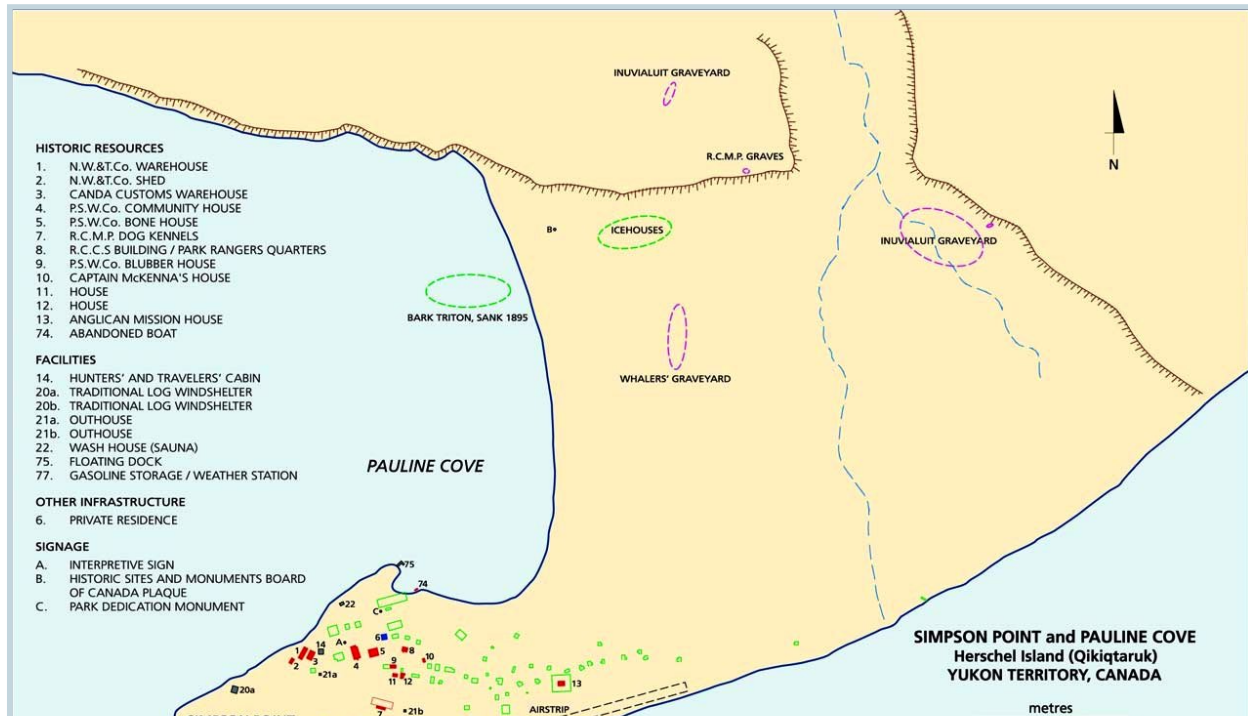
### **Introduction**

Herschel Island – *Qikiqtaruk* is a Territorial Park located just north of mainland Yukon in the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of Canada’s Western Arctic. The Island is home to many species of flora and fauna endemic to the Arctic coast and tundra and has a long history of Indigenous inhabitation and over 150 years of non-Indigenous presence. Together, with nearby Ivvavik National Park and Vuntut National Park, it is included in Canada’s recently renewed tentative list for World Heritage nomination. The Island is very rich in both natural and cultural heritage, but since it began to be managed as a Territorial Park, these two spheres have been understood as largely separate domains with different conservation objectives. This article offers an introduction to this exceptionally compelling heritage site and discusses the challenges and opportunities that arise from the interplay of culture and nature on the Island.

### **Description of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk***

Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* is located in the Beaufort Sea five kilometres north of Ivvavik National Park in the Yukon Territory. It is the westernmost island in the Canadian Arctic, situated just 60 kilometres east of Alaska. It has an area of approximately 116 km<sup>2</sup>. Characterized entirely by permafrost, Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* is comprised of low-lying tundra (Burn 2012). Its 60 kms of coastline is made up of high steep bluffs, incised cliffs, and low bluffs with sandy beaches and driftwood. Sand and gravel spits and a series of small deltas characterize the remaining coastline (Pollard et al 2012). It has an Arctic climate with average daily temperatures ranging from 5°C to -25°C. Summers are short and access to the Island is only possible by boat between July and September, when the sea is clear of ice. The remainder of the year, access to the Island is limited to snow machine, helicopter or plane. In the winter, northwesterly winds bring storms and drifting snow to the north and west sides of the Island. Alternatively, on the southeast side of the Island, Pauline Cove is sheltered from these winds, thereby providing suitable habitat for a number of fish species, bowhead whales, and ringed seals as well as more comfortable conditions for human settlement (Burn 2012). The only buildings on the Island are

concentrated at Pauline Cove where a dozen historic buildings, many of which are still in use today, stand. Other structural elements including dog runs, ice houses and archaeological sites are also present here. A short distance away from the settlement area are three separate clusters of grave sites and markers: one each for the whalers and North-West Mounted Police constabularies and another for the Inuvialuit.



**Figure 1.** Simpson Point and Pauline Cove, Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk*. Map courtesy of Wildlife Management Advisory Council - North Slope 2018.

## History of Use and Settlement on Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk*

The wealth and concentration of marine life in the waters surrounding Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* has provided the necessary natural resources to support the Inuvialuit and their ancestors for hundreds (possibly thousands) of years (Burn 2012; Friesen 2012). The first settlers on Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* were the Thule people (ancestors of the Inuvialuit) dating from approximately 1200AD to 1600AD (Friesen 2012). Over the next three hundred and fifty years, up to the middle of the 20th century, there would be a continuously inhabited Inuvialuit settlement at Pauline Cove. Sheltered from the wind and close to marine life rich waters,

artefacts from the settlement at Pauline Cove show it was the main fishing and trading site, as well as the site of gatherings, feasts and celebrations (Friesen 2012).

The 19th century brought a significant amount of change to Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk*. Sir John Franklin landed on the Island in 1826 marking first contact between the Inuvialuit and Europeans. However, despite this initial meeting, it was not until 1889, when American whalers from San Francisco discovered the abundant bowhead whale stocks off the coast of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* that there was sustained contact between the two (Nagy 2012). The arrival and settlement of whalers at Pauline Cove throughout the 1890s had a profound impact both on the Inuvialuit, many of whom succumbed to influenza and small pox as a result, and on the Island itself (Nagy 2012). Many of the built structures still present today at Pauline Cove are from the whaling era. In addition to warehouses and accommodations for the whalers, a permanent mission was established in 1896 by the Anglican Church and a North-West Mounted Police post, one of the first in the Arctic, was established in 1904 to assert Canadian sovereignty (Olynyk 2012; Neufeld 2012).



**Figure 2.**  
Ice house  
formerly  
used by  
whalers.  
*Photograph  
by Lisa  
Prosper.*

The number of whalers and the intensity of the hunt quickly decimated the whale population around Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* and by 1912, both the stocks and the industry had collapsed completely (Bockstoece 2012). Other resources were also depleted by the need to sustain the whalers over the long winter months. The whaler's need for provisions and the difficulty in securing them had a profound impact on the traditional subsistence patterns of the Inuvialuit, who were semi-nomadic, travelling between nodes along the coast and further inland in the Mackenzie River Delta. Responding to the demand created by whalers and others, the Inuvialuit began to trade caribou and moose meat, as well as firewood, with the new arrivals, thereby transitioning from a subsistence lifestyle to the wage economy. For a relatively brief, but significant period, trading with the whalers, and later fur trading with the Hudson Bay Company, which had established a store, dwelling house and warehouse on the island in 1915, became the primary livelihood of the Inuvialuit (Nagy 2012).



**Figure 3.** Inuvialuit schooners at Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk*, 1930.

*Photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada / PA-100697.*

By 1930, the fur market had dropped off and over the next forty years, Hershel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* would undergo another period of significant change. The Anglican mission and school moved to Aklavik, the Hudson's Bay Company closed its post and moved its operation to Tuktoyaktuk, and the economic activity of the region shifted to the Mackenzie Delta (Nagy 2012). The second half of the 20th century saw the decline of Pauline Cove as it transitioned from a year-round settlement - with the last Inuvialuit family leaving in the late 1970s - into a seasonal harvesting place for Inuvialuit now permanently based in the Mackenzie Delta. In 1972, Hershel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* was designated a National Historic Event by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, which recognized its national significance in three ways: first, as one of the earliest locations where Canadian sovereignty was asserted in the Western Arctic; second, as a place of inter-cultural contact; and third, for its role as a base for the whaling industry in the Western Arctic. In 1984, the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) led to the establishment of Hershel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* Territorial Park, which was officially created in 1987.

### **Current Context**

Today, Hershel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* Territorial Park supports many activities by a multiplicity of users. It continues to serve as a stopping point for Inuvialuit travelling between Alaska and the MacKenzie Delta, as well as a harvesting place, most notably in spring for polar bear, but for other species as well. For many Inuvialuit it is a meaningful part of their ancestral and traditional territory that is referred to with fondness. The Island has become one of the most important sites for climate change research and hosts a number of research teams each summer for extended field seasons. It also receives an increasing number of visitors in summer, most notably from cruise ships travelling along the North West Passage. Additionally, the island receives regular traffic from government agencies working in the area such as the Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans and Parks Canada. From April to September, there are two Inuvialuit park rangers stationed on the island at any given time to maintain infrastructure, contribute to ecological monitoring, receive visitors and host research teams. Some of the

buildings at Pauline Cove support park operations by providing accommodation and helping to meet storage needs, but many are too dilapidated to serve any functional purpose.

## **Challenges**

Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* Territorial Park was established as a nature preserve under the Government of Yukon's *Parks Act* in 1987. This act was later replaced by the Yukon Parks and Land Certainty Act (PLCA), under which Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* was designated a natural environment park in 2002 (WMAC-NS 2018). When setting out the terms for the Park's establishment, the IFA stipulated that the Park be cooperatively managed by the Yukon Territorial government and the Wildlife Management Advisory Council - North Slope (WMAC-NS), which is comprised of an equal number of Inuvialuit and government members and an independent chair. It also stipulated that the Park be divided into two discrete conservation zones: 1) a wilderness zone for the conservation of wildlife and habitat as well as the continued traditional use (namely harvesting) by Indigenous people; and, 2) a historic zone for the conservation of the built heritage and other artefacts found at Pauline Cove. This concept of two distinct zones with separate identities and management objectives has been carried forward in Park management plans and activities since establishment (WMAC-NS 2018).

As a result of the above, the fundamental distinction drawn between culture and nature in the approach to conservation presents a serious management challenge. In the wilderness zone, conservation is equated to maintaining ecological integrity, while in the historic zone conservation implies appropriate documentation and maintenance of historic structures using relevant standards and guidelines. The distinction between zones and the strong focus on maintaining historic structures in Pauline Cove can also be attributed in part to the lack of a commemorative integrity statement, or equivalent, for the whole site that identifies the range of tangible and intangible heritage resources, their interconnection and associated values and the standard to which they need to be maintained. This was never developed in a formal sense because although Pauline Cove is identified as a historic zone within a territorial park, it is not designated or protected as a heritage site under territorial legislation. The designation of Herschel



Island - *Qikiqtaruk* as a national historic event is commemorative only and does not bring legal protection. Arguably, commemorating and conserving the full heritage significance of the site would benefit from dismantling the conceptual barriers between culture and nature to consider how the interrelationship of the two contribute to the creation of a layered landscape with intersecting meanings.

An associated challenge lies in the multiplicity of past and present inhabitants, which has produced a landscape characterized by often contrasting stakeholders and heritage values. At the heart of this tension is the colonial history of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* and its enduring legacy in the region. The arrival of whalers, traders, missionaries, police and anthropologists in the north Yukon caused wholesale changes to the Inuvialuit way of life. While some benefited from the new economic opportunities (at least during the peak of the resource boom), many of course had a very different experience. Identifying and commemorating heritage on Herschel Island – *Qikiqtaruk* is therefore a complex matter, exacerbated perhaps by the fact that the most visually obvious historic structures left on the island are precisely those associated with the whaling and missionary past of the site. The Inuvialuit heritage is less tangible and lies in oral narratives, traditional environmental knowledge, continuing traditional practices, eroding archeological sites and so forth. The challenge of heritage commemoration and conservation is to appropriately manage the rich material fabric associated with the Island's history, while meaningfully supporting the living heritage of the Inuvialuit.

A third challenge to managing the natural and cultural heritage of the Island is climate change, evidence of which is plentiful on and around Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* (Donnelly 2017; Irrgang et al 2018; Myers-Smith et al n.d.; Radosavljevic 2016) . Impacts of climate change can be seen in the form of:

- Rising sea levels and increased storm surges that flood the Pauline Cove town site;
- Rapid coastline erosion resulting from wave action associated with a longer ice free season each summer and fall;

- Dramatic retrogressive slumping on creeks and cliffs caused by soil instability due to thawing permafrost;
- Rapid change to vegetation communities and the introduction of invasive species due to warmer temperatures, wetter soil conditions and increased soil salinity in slumped areas.
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In these ways, climate change is having an impact on ecological integrity by changing habitat for native flora and fauna. Additionally, it is posing a clear and present threat to tangible cultural resources.

Graves and their markers, sod houses and ice cellars are heaving and collapsing as the permafrost thaws; archaeological features along the shoreline are rapidly disappearing because of coastal erosion; and buried artefacts with organic material are degrading more quickly with the increase in moisture of the soil. The numerous built structures that make up the historic zone are also very much at risk. Increased snow loading on buildings, driftwood logs colliding with walls during high water events, and deterioration of building foundations compromising structural support are all the result of climate change (Olynyk 2012, 2008). As a result of these threats, Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* was added to the World Monuments Watch in 2008 (<https://www.wmf.org/project/herschel-island>) - a program that partners with the World Monuments Fund to assist stakeholder communities with the conservation of cultural heritage. That said, the threat to cultural heritage posed by climate change also impacts traditional activities and cultural practices by making access to the island more difficult for the Inuvialuit (as a result of changing sea ice conditions in fall and spring) and affecting wildlife health and habitat.



**Figure 4.** View of Pauline Cove from the tundra with Ivvavik National Park in the background.  
*Photograph by Lisa Prosper.*

## **Opportunities**

In as much as there are a number of challenges to conceptually and practically bridging the conservation of nature and culture on Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk*, these challenges also present outstanding opportunities for stakeholders and the heritage field more generally. In fact there is no shortage of strategies that have been or could be adopted to blur the current distinction between nature and culture set out in the park zoning while simultaneously addressing a host of challenges presented by climate change. Strategies are also needed to improve relevance of the site to local Inuvialuit communities and the region as a whole. Many such strategies can be connected back to site management objectives and priorities identified in the latest Park management plan, which include:

- Building Inuvialuit connections to Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* through summer/elder youth camps and increased visitation, Inuvialuit staffing and use of Inuvialuit language and place names, and education, outreach and interpretation activities;
- Assessing and managing heritage resources in relation to effects of climate change, documenting archaeological and palaeontological resources, and developing and implementing policy for management of burial sites;
- Pursuing designation as a territorial historic site, and maintaining status on Canada's tentative list for World Heritage;
- Communicating and building appreciation for heritage values at Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* through interpretation, education and outreach (WMAc-NS 2018).

Traditional use of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* as place for harvesting fish, whale, caribou and polar bear, as well as a logical stopping point on the travel route between the MacKenzie Delta and Kaktovik (Alaska), constitutes a set of activities that make use of both the historic infrastructure at Pauline Cove and the wildlife rich tundra across the remainder of the Island. By hosting harvesting and culture camps – which has happened periodically in the past and will hopefully take place more frequently going forward – the park can increase the relevance of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* to several Indigenous communities. These camps also recognize that culture and nature on the Island have always been intertwined and need to be managed together. Harvesting and culture camps are also an excellent way of promoting traditional stewardship values of the Island's wildlife and perpetuating skills and knowledge (i.e. intangible heritage) concerning sustainable use and ethical and effective harvesting techniques. This is particularly important, because from an Inuvialuit perspective being on the land, carrying out traditional activities and passing on knowledge is more culturally relevant than maintaining heritage structures associated with a colonial history of commercial resource extraction in the Beaufort Sea. However, if the latter can help serve the needs of the former, then a broader range of heritage values – both Inuvialuit and non-Inuvialuit – can be meaningfully conserved and commemorated.

As noted, climate change is having a rapid and substantial effect on the integrity of historic structures and cultural resources at Pauline Cove while also changing the natural environment of the Island by creating conditions for increased slumping (that removes terrestrial habitat and degrades freshwater and marine habitat) and altering the vegetation regimes on the Island that form the base of the food chain. Monitoring, basic maintenance and building defences against storm surges are all carried out on the material heritage at Pauline Cove. An improved budget for this program would not only allow for more ambitious conservation program, but also provide employment opportunities for local communities in carrying out or supporting the work that needs to be done. Much of the historic infrastructure at Pauline Cove is used to house teams of researchers studying the impacts of climate change to the natural environment on the Island and during high summer there is often more demand for facilities than availability. Restoration and adaptive re-use of more degraded structures as accommodation for research teams (and indeed traditional users) would facilitate ongoing and future research on the environmental impacts of climate change, which in turn is well positioned to offer further economic benefits to local communities in the form of research assistant and support positions. Ultimately, the conservation of the cultural resources and natural science research on the island are closely intertwined and mutually enabling.

It can be argued that the heritage values of Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* lie at the intersection of culture and nature. From traditional harvesting, through the eras of commercial whaling and trapping, to the contemporary period defined by an interest in perpetuating cultural traditions and studying the impacts of climate change, human activity has always depended on and in turn influenced the surrounding natural environment of the Island. Adopting a landscape perspective that positions the island as the combined product of nature and culture(s) over time provides a framework for heritage conservation that cross-cuts these two spheres, which have in the past been managed in pursuit of different objectives. It is equally important to understand both the natural and cultural heritage of Herschel Island – *Qikiqtaruk* as being dynamic rather than static. Given geographical and geological imperatives, the natural environment on the Island has long been dynamic and this has only increased under the influence of climate change, which is felt

more strongly here than in most other places in the Yukon. Similarly, culture on Herschel Island - *Qikiqtaruk* is dynamic given that the Island continues to be a privileged place for perpetuating traditional Inuvialuit practices and has new found relevance as a hub for research and tourism in the region. These activities add new layers to the physical and memorialized layers resulting from previous Inuvialuit and settler histories. The challenge and opportunity is to manage heritage on Herschel Island – *Qikiqtaruk* as a living, evolving and integrated concept where natural and cultural processes can carry forward. For this to be the case, natural and cultural history must have a role to play in shaping present day activity, which in a concrete sense implies continued use of the historic town site and Island as a whole in shaping and supporting Inuvialuit living culture, furthering scientific understanding of the changing Arctic and managing the small, but significant tourist economy of the region.

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## **Biographical Note**

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