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MILITARY LEGACIES AND INDIGENOUS HERITAGE IN CANADA'S NEWEST NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

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Introduction

In 2015, the Canadian government announced the creation of the Akami-Uapishk^u-KakKasuaak-Mealy Mountain National Park Reserve (MMNPR), comprising nearly 11,000 km² on the central coast of Labrador. The intention was to protect the natural landscape and safeguard a 7,000-year history of Indigenous heritage through co-management with local Innu and Inuit populations whose settlements buffer the park borders (Figure 6.1). Ostensibly, these intentions are cause for celebration, demonstrating Canada's commitment to ecological and cultural preservation while addressing reconciliation with Indigenous communities. However, this fails to acknowledge the region's darker heritage whereby Innu and Inuit were coerced from their traditional territories within park boundaries over the course of the 20th century by colonial military activities and resettlement policies. Given that the park exists as an illusion of uninhabited space, it is impossible to separate regional depopulation and colonial control from the creation of the park. In effect, the establishment of the park is a further act of colonial domination, not only over geographical space but also over the Indigenous history and heritage it contains. Archaeological surveys undertaken in the early 2000s on the Porcupine Strand, a scenic sand dune beach along the eastern edge of the park, speak directly to this process. The work recorded over 100 Indigenous archaeological sites, demonstrating the vibrance of land use and settlement between deglaciation and the 20th century in just one small part of the park. The archaeology also correlates the decline of 20th-century Indigenous settlement with an increase in state-sanctioned military activities as the munitions and equipment of war replace Indigenous material culture. Local residents introduced us to the history of the NORAMEX wargames: amphibious exercises held on the Strand by Canadian and American troops in 1949 and 1952 – the infancy of the Cold War.



FIGURE 6.1 Mealy Mountains National Park Reserve in local, regional and national context.

The remains of these games encroached on Indigenous archaeological sites and deposited toxic material on the landscape, impacting the ecosystem of the Strand and posing physical risks for both contemporary Indigenous use and visitors.

The MMNPR, therefore, represents much more than a federal exercise in landscape protection and reconciliation. It encapsulates the history of the Polemocene – an age of permanent war readiness that drove the policies of colonial states through the 20th century – as it was played out in the Canadian north. This timescape contains an alternative history of disrupted Indigenous lives, and alienation from their lands, leaving in its wake a potentially hazardous heritage. This draws into question the motivations for park development and whether parks are created to hide (or ignore) certain parts of the past or to reconcile with it. Archaeology, history, and memory are used below to situate the toxic material inside the park in a long-term context and interpret the entanglement of colonialism, military activity and park establishment as well as the impacts on contemporary Innu and Inuit communities. Although the park might be seen as yet another form of Indigenous colonisation, we suggest that in creating the park, Canada may have inadvertently created an opportunity for real reconciliation with Innu and Inuit in Labrador and that there is real value in confronting the history of colonialism and its legacy of cultural and ecological harm.

Background

Parks Canada, the federal agency tasked with protecting natural and cultural heritage, first indicated an interest in creating the MMNPR in the 1970s during an expansion of the national park system (Parks Canada [National Parks Service] 1971). Labradorians initially resisted fearing it was just another exercise in colonial disenfranchisement. The transition of the Mealy Mountain region into a federal park did nothing to address unsettled Indigenous land claims and would infringe on the limited subsistence harvesting Innu and Inuit still relied on. Indigenous distrust of external decision-makers was well-entrenched (Bill 1982; Parks Canada 1977). By 1980, plans for the park were shelved, but in 2001, with land claims advancing, Parks Canada and the province of Newfoundland and Labrador tried again. Following years of negotiation, the MMNPR was established in 2015 (Parks Canada 2018). Today, the MMNPR is co-managed by Parks Canada and three Indigenous administrations with ancestral connections to the region. The Innu Nation, Nunatsiavut Government and NunatuKavut Community Council engage with Parks Canada via cooperative management boards. This model preserves Indigenous access to the park and provides pathways to participation in park management and tourism development. At the same time, the underlying framework (and the park's very existence) are imposed by provincial and federal policymakers with their own agendas founded in colonial-era assumptions of control of both the region and its inhabitants.

Independent of park establishment, between 2001 and 2004 Rankin conducted an archaeological survey of the Porcupine Strand, an area that falls within the

traditional territories of all three groups, and recorded 106 Indigenous archaeological sites (Rankin 2002a, 2003). Concentrations of First Nations sites were recorded in the southern and northern reaches of the Strand (19 sites and 42 sites, respectively); one Inuit site was recorded at Cape Porcupine, and 20 more on adjacent islands. Most of the First Nations sites date to the period between 3500–2800 years ago, with some as old as 7000 years. The Innu consider the people who occupied these sites as ancestors and draw on hundreds of Innu toponyms and travel routes associated with hunting, fishing and trading within the MMNPR area as evidence of their ongoing connections to the territory (Pepamuteiati nitassinat 2008). Inuit are relative newcomers to the Porcupine Strand, arriving by the 17th century (Rankin 2015). Inuit presence is manifested today in the lives of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut Inuit who reside in communities bordering the MMNPR and continue to use Park lands for subsistence and recreation.

Although Innu and Inuit had travelled south to meet with European fishers and whalers since the 16th century (Rankin et al. 2015), direct colonial influence in the region began with the arrival of British traders in the late 18th century. They and the settlers who followed in the 19th and 20th centuries affected local Indigenous lifeways. By the 19th century, most Inuit were engaged in the fishing and trapping industries, and many lived in small fishing villages along the Strand during the summer (seven of these villages were recorded), shifting to more solitary winter homes elsewhere on the Strand to pursue trapping. Innu remained nomadic until the mid-20th century, travelling to the Strand to fish and trade. Early colonial activities impacted the rhythm of Innu and Inuit lifeways but allowed considerable autonomy that did not sever their connections to the land (Rankin et al. 2012).

This changed in the 20th century as successive colonial governments, entangled in wars abroad, tested and rehearsed their military capacity in the Canadian north. Not coincidentally, this also allowed colonial governments to firmly establish their political sovereignty in Labrador under the guise of protection - particularly after Newfoundland and Labrador, a dominion of the United Kingdom, joined Canada in 1949. This militarism contributed directly and indirectly to the depopulation of the Porcupine Strand between World War I and the early Cold War and led to the deposition of toxic military materials. Like other regions of northern North America, colonial policies of militarism had significant consequences for Indigenous communities that had no voice in these decisions (Hird 2016; Pegues 2021, 143).

Colonialism and the Military

Over the course of the 20th century, the perpetual state of global militarisation defined as the Polecene (Antonacci 2021; Reno 2019), influenced the decisions of colonial governments located thousands of kilometres from the Porcupine Strand. Consequences of their policies incrementally affected Innu and Inuit both indirectly and directly, causing deaths, depopulating traditional lands and altering cultural practices. Ultimately these communities, already remote from the seats of power, became so

marginalised that governments came to see this region as empty and isolated. This paved the way both to Cold War wargames and to the creation of the MMNPR.

The pre-Cold War effects of military colonialism in central Labrador were indirect, as soldiers returning from World War I brought the Spanish flu. The flu arrived on the Porcupine Strand in November 1918. Deaths began within days, but the colonial government in St. John's (1,500 km away) refused to send assistance so late in the shipping season. Following desperate appeals, one minister said: 'Let 'em die: the government will be saved the trouble of feeding them' (Budgell 2018:157). Indigenous communities were left to cope with the pandemic on their own. In Sandwich Bay, on the southeastern edge of the MMNPR, slightly more than 20% of the 320 inhabitants died (Buckle 2003, 111). On the Porcupine Strand itself, the 2001–2004 fieldwork recorded cabins abandoned following flu deaths (Kelvin 2011). As the flu subsided, an assimilationist residential school was opened for orphans. This removed the children from their homes along the Strand, separating them from extended kin and opportunities to learn traditional life skills (Procter 2020). Faced with poverty, many surviving families moved to Cartwright.

World War II further impacted Indigenous settlements on the Strand as Canadian and American militaries constructed infrastructure throughout Labrador to aid Great Britain by moving supplies and personnel by air (Kennedy 2015, 252). In 1941, an airbase was constructed in Goose Bay, while to the south of the Porcupine Strand, Cartwright became part of a network of weather stations and fuel depots supporting coastal reconnaissance. Both installations attracted Innu and Inuit men eager for a regular income (Pace 2008, 42). The wage economy increased economic differences between Indigenous families as some were unable to send men away for work. Ultimately, communities on the Strand and in the MMNPR area became further marginalised, impoverished and isolated (Kennedy 2015, 256).

The peripheralisation of the Strand because of wars half a world away created an illusion of an empty wilderness, and therefore an ideal space for Cold War exercises. In 1948 this 'isolated northern beach' (Rawley 1949) was chosen for a joint Canadian/American amphibious landing exercise intended to advance naval combat readiness for cold weather operations.

Operation NORAMEX took place in October 1949. It began with a reconnaissance of Cape Porcupine by Navy Underwater Demolition Team swimmers (Rawley 1949) and beach strikes by planes launched from an aircraft carrier (White 1949). This was followed by minesweeping, a simulated shore bombardment (White 1949), and an amphibious beach landing by 2,800 marines (Rawley 1949; White 1949). The landing secured a simulated 'enemy' held weather station, airstrip and other outlying installations (White 1949).

NORAMEX II occurred at the north end of the Porcupine Strand, at Sandy Cove, in December 1952 with the same goals (Liles 2010). It included both airborne attacks and assaults by more traditional landing barges (U.S. Department of the Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel Information 1953; U.S. Department of the Navy, Bureau of Aeronautics 1953).

Considerations were made for safety but were focussed on the exercise itself. Certain areas were designated for bombs and gunfire and safety regulations required the removal of dud ammunition (Canadian Section of the Military Cooperation Committee 1953). Still, 50 years later archaeological surveys recorded unexploded ordnance (UXO) and broken equipment. Remediation has never been fully addressed.

After the NORAMEX operations, military activities shifted from the Porcupine Strand to Cartwright. An American-operated General Surveillance Radar Station was present from 1953 to 1968 as part of the Pine Tree Agreement for Air Defence. During this period, policies of resettlement were formalised as the federal government offered cash incentives to entice the remaining Inuit families from the Strand and into larger centres citing services such as education, medical care and economic opportunities (Kennedy 2015, 265–267). For similar reasons, nomadic Innu were also pressed by both government and church officials to settle into permanent villages. In the 1980s, on the western border of the MMNPR, 5 Wing Goose Bay became a NATO base and interior Labrador was used for low-level flying exercises. This brought new threats to Innu who inhabited bombing ranges, and to the caribou herds central to their subsistence (Chow 1987; Strowbridge 1989; Wadden 2001). The Cartwright Long Range Radar Site replaced the former radar station in 1998. Currently, the Canadian Armed Forces are the only military body in Labrador with the exception of occasional exercises by allied countries. Innu and Inuit use of the Strand again declined following the cod and salmon fishing moratoria of the 1990s, and the primary reason for visits to the Strand became recreation.

The intrusion of American and Canadian militaries onto the Porcupine Strand had both immediate and long-lasting effects on local Indigenous people, their heritage, and the environments in which they lived. While inhabitants complained of the noise, far more disturbing was the failure of the government to notify them that wargames were planned (Davies pers. comm.). Operation planning documents reveal that the Americans were aware of a few Indigenous settlements, mostly far from the Strand, and that warnings would be issued to civilians by Canadian personnel if there was a potential danger (Canadian Section of the Military Cooperation Committee 1953; Lackenbauer and Heidt 2019). However, residents do not remember receiving such warnings. Given that the NORAMEX operations took place in autumn it is possible that people were difficult to locate, as Inuit inhabitants were in the process of ‘shifting’ from summer to winter settlements along the Strand. It seems more likely that the American and Canadian militaries believed the area to be uninhabited following decades of regional population decline and its ‘isolated’ setting. Either way, the failure of the military to understand local settlement strategies resulted in the destruction of property and heritage resources, and at least one death. During the 1952 landings, Inuit homes at nearby Plant’s Bight were damaged by artillery shelling (Mugford pers. comm.). Flat Waters resident Israel Williams died, supposedly of a heart attack ‘brought on by

fright' during the operation. His body, curled under the kitchen table, was later recovered by his family (Way pers. comm.).

Between 2001 and 2004 the Porcupine Strand Archaeology Project recorded remnants of the NORAMEX operations at 11 site locations – all located near the site of the 1952 wargames. We recorded machine gun shells, vials of ear plugs, communication cables, razor wire, and blast holes impacting much older Indigenous archaeological sites (Rankin 2002a and b) (Figure 6.2a). In the years since, Inuit visiting the Strand have informed us about many more military artifacts they have recovered or photographed. Jeff Martin, a NunatuKavut beneficiary from Cartwright, has photographed abandoned landing craft, machine parts, bomb casings and campsites (Figure 6.2b and c). In 2008, Martin collected 5 kg of 'unusual rock' that was later identified as dunnite (ammonium picrate), a 20th-century military explosive (CBC News 2008). The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Department of National Defense (DND) soon became involved, searching the Strand and detonating several stores of the explosive near Cape Porcupine, including one adjacent to an early Inuit winter house. In 2009, DND sent a representative to meet with Rankin's archaeological crew to discuss protocols for further encounters with the explosive. It is well known locally that unexploded ordnance still exists on the Porcupine Strand. Martin recently told us that there is more material visible where he initially collected the dunnite and believes that it regularly washes ashore.¹



FIGURE 6.2 Remains of Operation Noramex on the Porcupine Strand: a) Machine gun shells atop a Maritime Archaic site; b) Bomb casing, c) Landing vessel.

Clean-up of military infrastructure is an ongoing and costly process for the Canadian government. In 1997 the United States reached a deal with Canada giving Ottawa a \$100 million credit to buy arms from the United States over a period of 10 years as compensation for the environmental destruction left behind at former military sites. Yet, the clean-up of the military base in Goose Bay alone is projected to cost \$300 million (CAD) (Pugliese 2009). Many of the current and former military sites are considered contaminated or contain UXO and are under assessment or in remediation, including Cape Porcupine. There are no details concerning future remediation or potential health issues that may arise from this kind of contamination.

Local Innu and Inuit were suspicious of Parks Canada's original interest in developing national parks in Labrador in the 1970s, due in part to their prior colonial experiences. Park establishment proposals were set aside until provincial and federal governments began to address the rights and land claims of communities whose history and cultural heritage were entwined in the land. The MMNPR was therefore not established until 2015. At the time of writing, Parks Canada is preparing to celebrate the area's natural and cultural splendours with the world and the MMNPR is co-managed by three Indigenous descendant populations. Yet this is clearly at odds with its history of conflict legacies that emptied the region of permanent inhabitants a mere few decades before the creation of the park reserve. It would seem that the government's agenda is once again based on colonial assumptions of *terra nullius*, of empty and unused land. Little thought seems to have been given to historical injustices or the toxic material abandoned in the reserve. When we asked if they had a strategy to deal with this material, Parks Canada did not have an official response, only that '... [they were] aware that military exercises occurred on the Strand however, further investigation and a deeper understanding of these activities by PC have not yet occurred' (Parks Canada, pers comm.).

Discussion

In this paper, we have framed the dark history and toxic heritage as part of the Polemocene, a contemporary 'age of war' characterised by military profusion through space, material, and time (Antonacci 2021; Reno 2019, 195–201; see also Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016), which is articulated on the Porcupine Strand by human absences and problematic material presences. As outlined above, the deposition of toxic materials by the NORAMEX wargames on the Strand took place in an infinitesimally short moment in relation to the 7,000 years of Indigenous heritage and yet it has a long trajectory of growing entanglement with global military conflict situated within a colonial policy towards the region and its inhabitants.

The recent move to create the MMNPR in this area can thus be seen as part of military environmentalism, where conflict sites can facilitate so-called collateral values – secondary, unexpected benefits for nature-cultural heritage conservation within the scars left by the devastation of war (Lookingbill and Smallwood 2019). This position has been extensively critiqued for greenwashing military spaces

through secondary and coincidental benefits while hiding toxic legacies and erasing histories of dispossession and harm to the people most impacted by military developments (Havlick 2007; 2019; Coates et al. 2011). The conflict heritage and its aftermaths on the Porcupine Strand underscore this critique since the creation of the national park has at its heart Polemocene militarism and colonialism.

By entering co-management of the MMNPR with Innu and Inuit communities, Parks Canada has indicated a willingness to address reconciliation for the harm colonialism wrought. But the establishment of a National Park is by its very nature a further stage of colonialism. A 'park' is not a traditional land use. And while the park has been established in consultation with Innu and Inuit, it was not initiated by them. The very idea of the park has been imposed from above, with consultation an afterthought. Fundamentally, the selection of this area as a national park suggests a preference of the federal government to consider this as an empty landscape (for similar scenarios see Reno 2019, 174–178; Valadares 2018). On the contrary, it has very clearly been modified by human agency, both ancient and recent. This alienation is minimally overcome by allowing Innu and Inuit access to the land for traditional activities which may eventually be discouraged through new tourism-based economies. Tourism also brings its own concerns as both ancient and recent archaeological remains are in a dynamic sand dune environment that continually shifts thereby covering and uncovering archaeological objects, including toxic ones, intermittently exposing them to threats by and to visitors.

Finally, the park has done little to address the toxic history of the region or mitigate the dangerous and toxic material found along the Porcupine Strand. In this manner, the codification of the park and the toxic heritage extend the Polemocene impacts on the Porcupine Strand into the future by reinforcing processes of alienation which keep descendent communities from occupying the land in traditional ways in favour of tourism or through the possibility of environmentally complex clean-up efforts of harmful material.

Conclusion

The NORAMEX operations and the initial proposal for the creation of MMNPR in the 1970s both stem from the perception of the area as 'isolated' and largely devoid of people. In contrast, archaeological surveys have highlighted a deep history of Indigenous occupation, but in so doing have exposed the legacies of this disenfranchisement. The scattered, toxic artifacts found on the shores of a new park in northeastern Canada demonstrate that the park's creation is inherently intermingled with militarism and Indigenous erasure under the guise of protection and preparedness. Those same toxic materials could now aid reconciliation with descendant communities by making what was once invisible visible to all, and by remembering and addressing the legacies of dispossession and contamination.

One possible route forward is to constructively employ both the dark history and the military material as a heritage to bring the various stakeholders of the MMNPR

together. By using recent heritage within the park boundaries as a discursive object about the area's past, better working relationships may be forged to manage all the area's natural and cultural heritage and to reintroduce Innu and Inuit engagements with the land. This too may be difficult. While technically part of the archaeological Cold War heritage of the park (Hanson 2016), Innu and Inuit do not necessarily view modern military activities within the MMNPR as significant. The Innu Nation, for example, views these resources as contamination that should be cleaned up to alleviate further damage to the cultural and natural resources. Yet for this to happen it may be essential to confront the toxic legacy of the park directly through consultation and remediation. Acknowledging and interpreting Indigenous disenfranchisement in the park may lead to a wider understanding of the effects of militarism and colonialism for both Innu and Inuit communities and the general public, and allow for greater reconciliation. In turn, this could lead to an emphasis on remediation of the toxic materials and encourage further Indigenous engagement with and in the park.

The history of this small corner of Labrador has some implications in considering toxic heritage on a broader scale. It highlights the fact that toxicity takes many forms, is dependent on individual perspectives and takes on different degrees of importance in different political contexts. For a government concerned with the welfare of the area's inhabitants and users, for example, the priority would have to be finding culturally appropriate ways to address the history, disarm the war materials and make the area safe. In contrast, for a government concerned with putting Canada's exceptionalism on display, the toxicity of the war games detritus has no real relevance, since the underlying premise is that the area currently has no inhabitants or users – making it the perfect setting for a park. And yet, there remains a path to real reconciliation to be found within the colonial enterprise. To achieve this the park must make room for alternate histories that cross the boundaries of culture and power and give voice to the dark history as part of its creation narrative.

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Note

- 1 Many sites associated with the military in Labrador are now considered contaminated by the Canadian government and have been reported to the Federal Contaminated Sites Inventory (<https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/fcsi-rscf/home-accueil-eng.aspx>). The DND UXO and Legacy Sites program currently lists Cape Porcupine as 'In Assessment' but further details are lacking (<https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/uxo/uxo-locations.html>).

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