

Eastern Parks

Whiteshell Provincial Park

Bannock Point Petroforms



The Bannock Point Petroforms are figures laid out on bedrock in the forms of turtles, snakes and humans, and also in abstract patterns. Anishinabe and other First Nations people believe that they were left here long ago for the benefit of all people that might visit this site to receive their teachings and healing.

There are no fixed interpretations of the figures. There are many levels of understanding, therefore, many ways to interpret the teachings. With each visit they can become more and more meaningful. An introduction to petroforms is available in the publication *Petroforms of Manitoba*, which is distributed at Whiteshell park offices and at Public Information Services in Winnipeg.

The petroforms sites are sacred places used from time to time by First Nations people for ceremonial purposes. If ceremonies are in progress we suggest that you postpone your visit. Please respect this place as you would your church, synagogue, mosque or other place of worship.

Park Interpreters offer guided tours of the Bannock Point Petroforms throughout the summer. The interpreters will offer insight and share knowledge of the Petroform site and their importance. Tours are approximately 1.5 hours long and are free of charge. Please bring a hat and drinking water to make the experience more enjoyable.

For more information please contact:
Whiteshell Park Interpreter: 204-369-3157



Teaching Places, Healing Places: the Petroforms of Manitoba

Teaching places. Doorways to other worlds. Physical reminders of instructions given to Native people by the spirits. Anishinabe, also known as Ojibway or Saulteaux, still attach importance to the major petroform sites of southeastern Manitoba as special teaching and healing places. These rock alignments, known as petroforms, serve as physical reminders of the instructions that have been given to the Anishinabe by the Creator. These adherents of the Midewewin, or Grand Medicine Society, are dedicated to spirituality and the pursuit of knowledge. To them, the area containing the petroforms is Manito Ahbee, the place where God sits. It is the site where the original Anishinabe was lowered from the sky to the ground by the Creator. While the first people to use the petroforms have not been identified, these stones are not just relics of past rituals of unknown people. Their importance to the Anishinabe continues to this day. The petroform sites are places where the spirits teach those who are open to instruction.

Members of the Midewewin, a society of healers, practise a code of ethics that promotes a long and healthy life through a commitment to the values of wisdom, love, respect, courage, honesty, humility and truth. The membership provide spiritual, physical and emotional healing to all who come seeking help. Increased knowledge in the use of natural medicines and in the



Figure 1: Petroform which may represent a scroll teaching
(Historic Resources Branch)

power to heal are recognized by the member's passage through four to eight stages or "degrees." Advancement from one degree to another involves intensive periods of instruction, quests for spiritual knowledge, and initiation rites. The details of these rituals were often recorded in picture form on birchbark scrolls. Petroforms also may be recordings of these teachings.

What are Petroforms?

Petroforms are defined as features formed by the placement (not piling) of stones to create the outlines of figures or shapes. The stones or small boulders are arranged on bedrock outcrops in the shapes of snakes, turtles, humans and geometric forms. Archaeologists group petroforms with rock paintings or "pictographs" and refer to them as "rock art," although both are thought to have been made by Native people for religious purposes. It seems likely that petroforms were intentionally built in remote places so that whatever ceremonies were conducted there could be done privately.

Interpretation of Individual Petroforms

In a study conducted in 1989-1990 for the Manitoba Parks Branch, the Roseau River Three Fires Society, a local chapter of a larger international group of traditional "people of the Midewewin," interpreted several of the petroforms. Their explanation of the meaning of the following petroforms should not be considered the only authentic or correct version. Rather, their interpretations illustrate how the petroforms can be used for teaching purposes. Other Native groups or individuals may view the petroforms in different, but equally valid ways:

Birch Bark Scrolls - This feature (Fig. 1) represents a scroll teaching about the choice of lifestyle that humans take. There are three paths. The Creator allows us to choose. There is a path for the white man and there is a path for the Anishinabe. One cannot choose the path in between because it ends quickly and death awaits the spirit. At some time in the future the two paths will come together, but we are not there yet. The rocks on both sides are there to continue to build upon the path that is chosen.

The Sweat Lodge - This feature (Fig. 2) represents Waynaboozhoo's Sweat Lodge. Waynaboozhoo is the original Anishinabe.

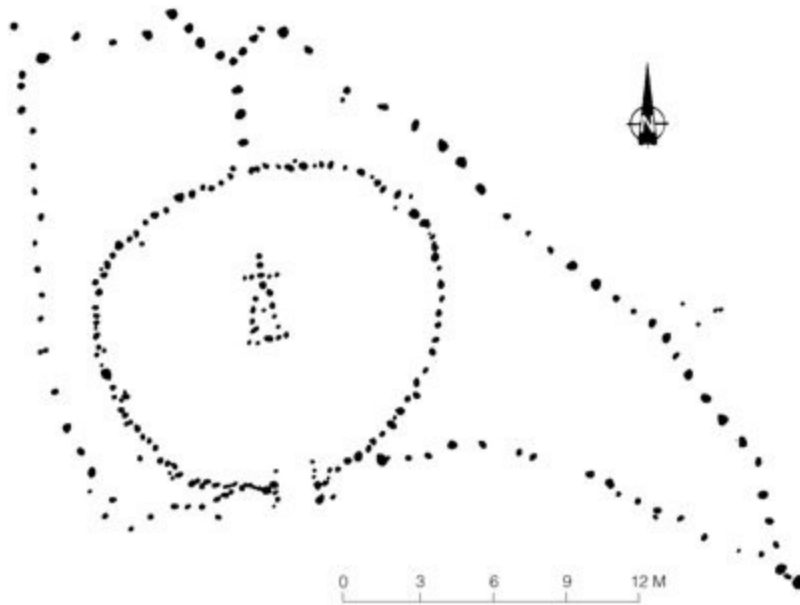


Figure 2: Sweat Lodge feature (*Historic Resources Branch*)

In the Midewewin, The Sweat Lodge is very important. The history of how the Anishinabe received the Sweat Lodge is in itself a teaching. The Sweat Lodge was given to a boy who travelled to the dark side of the moon and met with the seven Grandfathers. It was given to the Anishinabe as a means of purifying the mind and body. The "sweat" must be conducted in accordance with a proper understanding. For those who participate, it can be a very powerful experience. When one is finished in the Sweat Lodge, "the eastern doorway is opened and a person crawls humbly out into the world, it is like being born anew."



Aerial photograph of sweat lodge feature (*Historic Resources Branch*)

The Sweat Lodge by itself has the power to "cure" some sicknesses, but it is primarily a purification rite that is a first step to other ceremonies. The physical, emotional and spiritual purification of a person is a necessary preparation for participation in many religious ceremonies. It is especially important for those undertaking sacred instruction.

Immortality - This feature (Fig. 3) has to do with a teaching or legend that has a meaning for all people. In the legend, one of the Anishinabe people asked Waynaboozhoo (who is both good and evil, both human and spirit) for everlasting life. This person wanted immortality, so Waynaboozhoo turned him into a rock. We must be careful what we wish for.

Most of the teachings contain very practical instructions on everyday living and morality. Although deceptively "simple," these lessons are difficult for most people to apply due to their human nature.

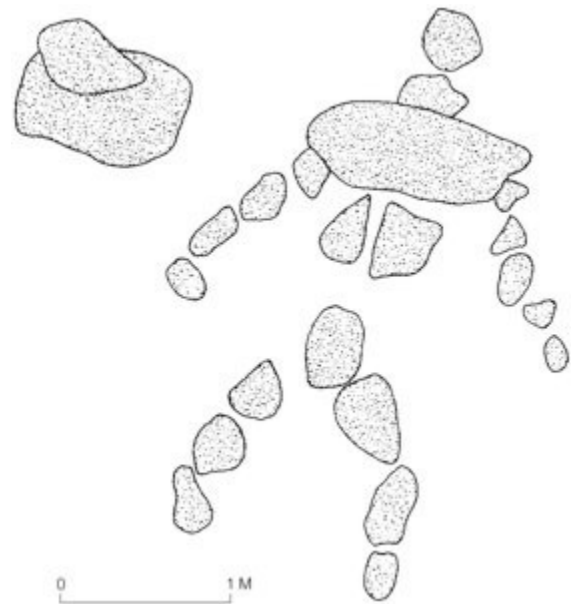


Figure 3: Human effigy feature
(Historic Resources Branch)

An Archaeological Perspective

Archaeologists have difficulty studying and interpreting petroforms because they are not like conventional archaeological sites. The stones making up a petroform were simply placed on a bare rock surface. The stones have not been covered with soil over time; they are not buried beneath the ground surface like most archaeological sites. As well, artifacts are not usually found at petroform sites. Therefore, it is impossible to calculate their ages on the basis of their associations with datable materials or how deeply they are buried.

At one location in the Whiteshell, archaeologists found an ancient Native campsite about 300 metres from two small petroforms. Excavation of a portion of the campsite revealed Native pottery and stone tools dating to approximately A.D. 500. Because no other archaeological sites or petroforms were located nearby, some archaeologists assume that the people who made this campsite also built and used the two petroforms. If that assumption is correct, then at least some of the



Figure 4: Snake petroform.
(Historic Resources Branch)

petroforms are very old.

Archaeologists have also studied the location and distribution of the variously-shaped petroforms. Most often, snakes and turtles are found along lakeshores and rivers near natural portages. It appears that snakes are located at portages between rivers, and turtles between lakes. Because water routes were natural highways, these petroforms may have served as signposts to help people avoid dangerous rapids or to point out shortcuts.

Petroforms found in the most remote locations tend to be larger and made up of geometric shapes. These sites are probably places in which rituals or ceremonies were held. Several years ago, archaeologists determined that many of the geometrically-shaped petroforms are oriented to that part of the eastern horizon in which the sun rises during summer. This does not mean that these petroforms could be used to predict where the sun would rise at any given time. More likely, the petroforms were built to point toward the general direction of the sunrise. This fact is not surprising, as the sun played an important role in the religious beliefs of many Native people.

Exactly who made the petroforms is a question that cannot be answered. If some petroforms date to A.D. 500 as archaeologists have estimated, it will be impossible to determine who built them in terms of historical Native groups. Today the nearest Native groups are Anishinabe and they use the sites, but the Anishinabe do not claim to have the only valid interpretation of the meaning of the petroforms.



Turtle petroform
(Ken Porteous)

A Fragile Heritage

Petroforms, consisting simply of stones placed on bare surfaces, are very susceptible to destruction from natural agents, such as animals or even the weather, as well as people who may inadvertently carry away the stones to build campfires, or who purposefully "rearrange" sites or build "new" ones. For archaeologists, the scientific study of petroforms can yield insights into

the lives of Native people that are not available by other means. Therefore, archaeologists are interested in studying and preserving petroforms for future generations. For the Anishinabe, the petroforms and the areas surrounding these features are sacred places where the spirits communicate with them. The teachings inherent in the petroforms are considered necessary for the present and future physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the Anishinabe. Deliberate destruction of the petroforms would be similar to defacing a church, synagogue or other place of worship.

In order to preserve and protect important sites such as the petroforms, the Manitoba government passed The Heritage Resources Act in 1986. Under terms of this law, it is illegal to collect, move or alter objects of archaeological or heritage significance without obtaining a permit, and a fine may be levied against those who do not comply. In addition, any person finding an object or feature, such as a petroform, is required to report the finding. Please contact the nearest Manitoba Conservation district office. By so doing, it will be possible to have sites such as the petroforms preserved and protected for future generations.

Native people still use the petroform sites. If you find an offering, such as tobacco or cloth, at a site, please do not disturb it. Similarly, should you happen to come upon an individual or a group using a site, please respect their right to do so in privacy and withdraw gracefully.

Historic Resources Branch



Figure 5. Artist's conception of construction of a petroform
(L. Jamieson)