

Building Foundations of Trust

Achieving mutually beneficial outcomes through cultural engagement

By Josh Glew



Building shared knowledge and training local community members.

The duty to meaningfully consult with all affected communities is one of the most important stages in developing a secure, long-term project in the extractive industries. Obtaining a social licence to operate is increasingly complicated for companies around the world, and indeed here too in Canada. An ambiguity around the definition of meaningful engagement has left many companies unsure of how best to meet this obligation, and as a result many projects have suffered, sometimes irreparably. Community engagement is a key element of any corporate social responsibility plan, and because of this, it is more important than ever to collaborate with experienced and trusted firms.

When many organizations discuss designing sustainable plans, they focus on three main pillars: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and social sustainability. There is

however a fourth pillar that is rarely considered; cultural sustainability. The way any community views the land and the environment is deeply rooted in their culture and history. We see a mountain, Andean people may see an “Apu”, and they are not the same.

Building on our background in archaeology and cultural and heritage management, Western Heritage applies our Cultural Landscape approach to our engagement process. Cultural Landscapes incorporate both tangible and intangible values of cultural and natural features, as well as the interactions between people and their surrounding environment.

The Western Heritage process for community engagement follows four main stages:

- Building relationships and trust
- Building community knowledge

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- Building shared value
- Building sustainability

The most critical step in working with any community is building relationships and trust. Our approach is based on working with communities and providing them with the knowledge to fully understand proposed developments, along with the knowledge for effective conservation and management planning. We believe in the importance of working with communities to create shared value, and we believe strongly in the importance of building sustainability into any community plans. To do this, Western Heritage uses its own experienced staff, expert associates, and community members. The value of this approach is best explained with an example.

At a recent project Western Heritage was involved in, the developer had consulted with a local first nations group, and had engaged on environmental, economic, and social levels. The developer believed they had meaningfully engaged, but when Western Heritage arrived to conduct archaeological work, we found a very different situation. The developer was unaware that a separate first nations group had significant history on the land, and the proposed development housed a site they considered very culturally important. The group was aware of the environmental impacts, as well as the economic and social benefits, but did not want the project to proceed, because they felt the impact to their culture had not been addressed. Western Heritage hired individuals from the local community to work as part of the archaeological team, in the process building trust and most importantly, community knowledge about the site in question. During the course of the work, the community learned about how the site would be impacted, but also about the mutually beneficial outcomes that the project would produce. A framework was developed for ongoing consultation with all the relevant stakeholders, including cultural concerns with both groups. Even though the site had to be excavated for development to proceed, the group was satisfied that their concerns had been addressed, and that the history and cultural significance had been preserved for future generations to learn from. In the end, the project closed with a blessing ceremony for the project, attended by the developer, the local communities and government agencies.

Whether you represent the interests of a resource development company, a community involved in development, an Aboriginal or indigenous group, or a government agency, Western Heritage can work with you to develop a sustainable commu-



Closing ceremony commemorating community involvement on an infrastructure project.

nity engagement plan to align the goals of all stakeholders.

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