

On Government, Advocacy and Heritage

A Personal Look Back at Heritage



John Aldag

Over my 35 years in the field of heritage conservation with the federal government, I have taken on many roles. I have played internal advocate for preservation of heritage properties, to external advocate seeking support for heritage initiatives at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. I served as gatekeeper of federal funds to support non-federal heritage stewards, and now participate as policy maker and legislator. In this article, I explore my role as heritage advocate in these various capacities. I conclude with some best practices that I believe can benefit heritage advocates.

As Internal Advocate

When I joined Parks Canada in 1983, I was excited to be part of a national organization responsible for heritage conservation and presentation. I assumed the federal government would be a leader in conserving

our nation's treasures – both natural and cultural. I learned over my first decade that I was partly correct. The federal government of various political stripes has been a proud landlord of national parks in particular, and to a lesser extent, of national historic sites. The federal government is also constantly battling competing interests for finite resources. Parks Canada is fortunate for having sufficient financial support to stay alive, but also starved of financial resources to ever fully get ahead. I know this is also an issue faced within the heritage community at large, from non-profits to municipal and provincial organizations.

In the early part of my career, I saw how power directed investments. Sometimes power was wielded at the political level, sometimes at the senior manager level, and often at the local management level. Investments were often directed by strong personalities. Sometimes built heritage benefited, but oftentimes it did not. During this period of my career,

where I was working on the front-line in the field, and in the absence of clear criteria for guiding investments in the organization, I learned that relationships were key. Finding and building support for investments in built heritage required the ear of the right person wielding the most power – or the one who was most tenacious and passionate, or both.

Budget time could be bloody events, leaving egos and relationships bruised. Sometimes built heritage saw a win, but more often than not, other investment priorities such as contemporary assets, science and research, visitor programs and human resources were supported. During the 1980s, I saw how the federal government often led to the demise of our heritage through neglect. Sometimes investments were made late in the life of a heritage asset, but during this period, many assets were lost due to deterioration and sometimes outright destruction by mechanical means or fire. Over



Top: *The Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site, after Phase 1 of exterior upgrades.*
Photo credit: Parks Canada



Left: *Fisgard Lighthouse National Historic Site.*
Photo credit: Parks Canada

this time, I worked in Fort Walsh National Historic Site, Wood Buffalo National Park and Riding Mountain National Park. Some successes stand out, arising from the visionary leadership of the management team specifically at Riding Mountain National Park. Examples include the renovation of the heritage Visitor Centre, the expansion and renovation of the Administration Building (vs. demolition and replacement for both of these buildings), and the conservation of the East Gate Entrance Complex (vs. demolition of this facility).

The 1990s saw the development of improved heritage policies and guidelines for investing in Parks Canada's assets.

Clear investment frameworks and accountabilities for Parks Canada created the right climate to begin setting investment priorities, including asset-investment priorities.

Heritage assets were finally recognized as having value within the organization. During this period, I worked in the Yukon, the mountain parks based in Yoho, Kootenay and Lake Louise, and then southwestern Ontario. Adequate policies, accountabilities and investment frameworks made budget time less bloody and easier on relationships and egos.

The 2000s saw the continued development of heritage policies such as Commemorative Integrity Statements, which helped articulate the values embodied in heritage assets and connections to their national significance. Asset rating systems were developed, and policy decisions were made to invest in highest-risk assets. Investment decisions became more structured and evidence-based. Blood-loss was stemmed, egos were saved and relationships were generally still intact following budget time. I spent most of this period as Historic Sites Manager in BC, and was able to use updated policies and frameworks



Above: John Aldag in Period Costume with daughter (Kalani).
Photo credit: John Aldag

to secure significant funds to plan for the protection of heritage assets, and then to actually invest in these assets at Fort Langley National His-

toric Site, Fort Rodd Hill and Fisgard Lighthouse National Historic Site and the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site.

Key lessons learned concerning advocating within an organization include:

- Invest in relationships with decision-makers, particularly financial decision-makers and those in positions of power
- Seek out the support of visionary leaders, or become a visionary leader who can create appropriate policies and frameworks to support investments in heritage
- Support the implementation of heritage frameworks and policies and ensure these are respected in decision-making

I was able to advocate for specific projects in support of heritage conservation using these various strategies from different positions that I held within the organization, and saw significant investments in heritage assets arise from these efforts.

As External Advocate

I sometimes needed to reach out to external parties to carry the torch for causes that were important within my organization. Upon my arrival at Fort Langley, an initiative was underway at the municipal level to take over the property

from the federal government. Lack of community engagement, unrealized community potential including tourism opportunities, and deteriorating assets including what is arguably the oldest building in BC were irritants within the community. I needed to set a new direction for the management of the site that included investments in the historic structures. The community supported a renewed vision for the fort, and lobbied Parks Canada to make the necessary investments to realize this vision.

I also was approached by external parties who needed the support of the federal government to seek assistance for heritage initiatives within the community. I was able to use the strengths of my organization, and the credibility of my position, to lend weight to initiatives that were underway within the community to advance heritage conservation. In some cases, local non-profit organizations needed letters of support for funding applications to protect heritage assets. In other cases, municipal heritage champions needed support for their efforts in heritage planning and conservation. A network of heritage experts within the community allowed for strong and credible lobbying. Existing heritage plans were respected by municipal politicians when approving developments, and heritage elements of the community were preserved.

Key to these efforts were relationships with a variety of outside in-

dividuals ranging from municipal and provincial colleagues as well as politicians. Staff and volunteers from nonprofit organizations were also key allies, as were the local business community and tourism organizations.

Cast your net wide within your community to find supporters for heritage conservation initiatives.

Groups tend to rally when a specific building is under threat, and then disband once the crisis is over. A sustained show of support for heritage conservation is needed at the grassroots level to ensure politicians and bureaucrats remember the importance of heritage to the citizenry. This also helps retain financial commitments to heritage during budget exercises.

As Legislator and Policy-Maker

In my new capacity as Member of Parliament, I am able to apply all the above lessons as I work to advocate for investments in heritage by the federal government. Relationships, knowledge of existing legislation and policies, understanding of existing programs and deficiencies of existing programs are all skills that are helping match outside projects to existing government programs. I'm also able to work on affecting

change within the existing legislative framework.

One such example is Bill C-323, a Private Member's Bill by Peter Van Loan, to create a tax credit for the conservation of heritage properties. I am working across party lines, using relationships, to gather support for this bill. I am working with a variety of outside organizations to advocate for the bill, as well as to gather additional information to supplement the reasons to support this bill by government. I'm using my knowledge of current legislative and policy deficiencies to gain support for this bill and possibly other initiatives to support heritage conservation in Canada. In this spirit, I encourage BCMA members to send letters of support for Bill C-323 to your local Member of Parliament as well as members of Cabinet including the Finance Minister, the Environment Minister, the Heritage Minister and the Prime Minister.

Best Practices

I believe some of the best approaches for effective heritage advocacy include:

- Strong and diverse relationships
- Sustained momentum for heritage conservation within a community or organization
- Development, implementation, monitoring and accountability for effective policies, principles and practices for heritage conservation
- Knowledge of existing legislation
- Understanding of funding opportunities and specific criteria related to any given funding program
- Continued communication with politicians and bureaucrats on heritage priorities
- Use of personal and professional networks to support advocacy efforts increases the show of support for heritage conservation

John Aldag is Member of Parliament for Cloverdale – Langley City. Elected in 2015, Aldag sits on the Environment and Climate Change Standing Committee. Previously Aldag spent 32 years with Parks Canada, ending his career as Historic Sites Manager for Coastal BC, and was responsible for Fort Langley, Fort Rodd Hill, Fisgard Lighthouse and Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Sites. Aldag also coordinated the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada program for the lower mainland and Vancouver Island, and participated in selection of applications for the National Cost-Share Program.



Above: Fort Langley National Historic Site.
Photo credit: Parks Canada