

# First Nation Elder present on a ceremonial visit to Oiseau Rock



A view of the majestic Oiseau Rock as a fleet of boats approaches the ancient pictograph site provides an astonishing view as it rises 150 metres from the Ottawa River.

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**Equity Reporter**  
**SHEENBORO** • A flotilla of approximately 20 people set out on pontoon boats from the Sheenboro shores of Mayor Roy Perrault's home July 22 on route to Oiseau Rock.

The red ochre pictograph site rising 150 metres from the Ottawa River is situated on the northeastern shore, approximately 12 kilometres upstream from Fort William and 28 kilometres upriver from Pembroke, just across from the AECL Chalk River Nuclear plant.

Though the reasons to visit the iconic rock face are many, this outing was primarily organized by Benedikt Kuhn of the Pontiac Local Development Centre (CLD) as an effort to raise the awareness of the sacred site.

Marking a first visit for Tribe Elder Peter De Contie and three other Kitigan Zibi First Nation members from the Maniwaki Reserve, they were joined by representatives from various organizations such as the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications, Tourism Outaouais, and media representatives including an independent film maker working on a documentary of the rock site.

The excursion provided them a first hand opportunity to appreciate the beauty and value of the many-faceted rock.

"We have been working on having Oiseau Rock declared a heritage site by the province," said Kuhn, who has been coordinating an interpretation trail development project for the past year.

The first of the project's three phases is the development access road to the rock site of approximately 1.2 kilometres as well as a parking area to accommodate up to 15 vehicles.

The second phase would include the development of a 3.7 kilometre trail to the lookout area at the top of the elevation.

Phase three would be the management of the existing 0.7 kilometre trail stretching from the beach below where picnic tables, garbage cans, and outdoor toilet facilities are presently being managed by the Deep River Recreation Association, leading to a lookout at the top of the escarpment, with another trail forking off to a fresh water lake where hikers can stop for a picnic lunch.

Other developments of the site would include interpretational panels depicting the pictographs to educate the public of their symbolism to the First Nation culture, as well as developing a trail on a part of the peninsula that would permit visitors to come within sight of the rock face without having to access it by boat.

"We want to increase the volume of visitors to the area while focusing on reducing the impact and imprint of their passage," said Kuhn.

The rock's rich history is also marked by the passage of explorers, fur traders, early settlers, loggers, and steamboats used for shipping cargo and carry people up the River, according to Joann McCann, who spearheaded the Friends of Oiseau Rock stewardship group 11 years ago.

McCann wrote her essay

on Oiseau Rock while completing her Masters in Canadian studies at Carleton University with a concentration in First Nations Studies.

A short while after the fleet's arrival, approximately eight boats filled with curious onlookers soon arrived on the scene as McCann slid into her kayak to give an extensive tour of the pictographs.

As she glided along the rock face she pointed to the otherwise difficult to discern images on the face of the rock with her oar.

Meanwhile, De Contie stepped off the boat to a rock ledge where he left a tobacco offering and performed a sacred smudging ceremony, as his ancestors had done for centuries before, he said.

Using a sage and cedar-filled bowl, the elder purified the area and offered a prayer to thank the creator, according to his wife, Yvette, who explained the ceremony.

When asked about his first impression of the site, the elder, who was visibly saddened to see the pictographs nearly obliterated by the layers of graffiti now defacing the rock said, "I am very disappointed, there's a lot of graffiti here. These ochre paintings were left here by our ancestors to tell us a story."

Ochre, a mineral, was usually mixed with fish oil, animal fat, honey, or egg yolk in order to bind it long enough allowing it to stain the surface it was applied to, according to Larry Graham, Chair of the Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee, who also acted as one of the guides for the day-long tour.

Oiseau Rock is the largest pictograph site found in the Quebec part of the Canadian Shield, according to Dr. Daniel Arseneault, an archaeologist from Laval University, who has visited the site numerous times in an attempt to formulate a deeper analysis of the panels as well as scrutinize the deterioration of the site.

Though a laser technique for graffiti removal is successfully being used in the U.S., this method may not prove feasible at Oiseau Rock however, since transporting and using generators to run the equipment prove problematic, as does the large quantity of graffiti that would need to be removed, according to Arseneault.

Once the tour of the site was completed the fleet rounded the point to set anchor off the shore of the beach found at the base of the mountain.

While some of the guests ate a picnic lunch, others set foot on the trail to the lookout at the top of the

mountain.

Upon returning from the hike First Nations member and author, Stephen McGregor commented, "What a beautiful panoramic view, it was amazing, and definitely worth the climb."

As a culminating point to the day's events a ceremonial fire was lit by De Contie, who is also a Sacred Fire Keeper.

"I am sorry that you won't understand what I will be saying, but these words must only be spoken in my language," he explained as he began the hour-long custom.

When the intimate circle of approximately 15 people tightened, the elder began giving thanks for everything since the dawn of creation, reaffirming the sacred values of his people and the prominence of this landmark.

As the sacred procedure went on each person in attendance was given the opportunity to participate in the cleansing ceremony by sweeping the sage-scented smudge over their

heads, their midriff and lower bodies.

De Contie then spoke about the symbolism of the sacred feather which was entrusted to him by the Elders of his tribe, by his peers, his family, and his community.

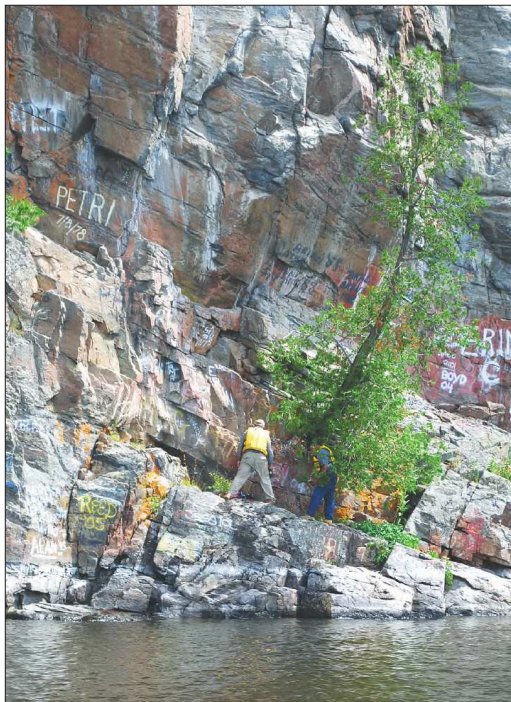
He related that he must always seek and speak the truth on their behalf, then invited each person to come forth and speak their mind in turn while holding the feather.

The deeply moving hour-long ritual ended with its participants aware that they had witnessed a unique procedure.

"I had never attended anything like this before and I am very grateful for this opportunity," said Perrault as he passed the feather to a companion.

The day ended with everyone in high spirits as they headed back to their Downey Bay departure location.

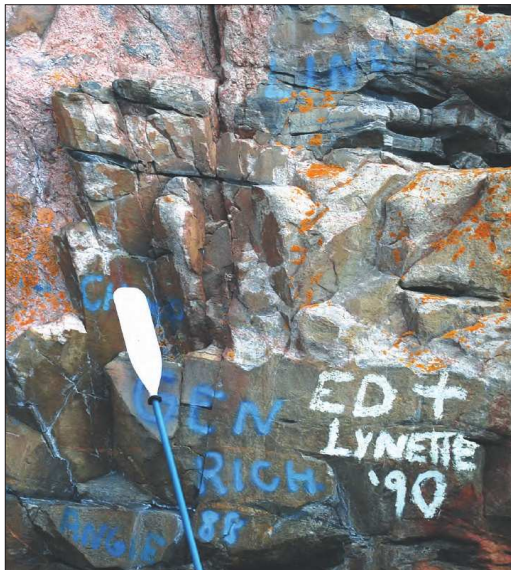
"We couldn't have had a more perfect day for this," concluded Kuhn, who was extremely pleased with the event's turnout.



Elder Peter De Contie, right, a Kitigan Zibi First Nations member from Maniwaki, performs a cleansing ritual at the base of the rock assisted by Larry Graham of the Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee.



Joann McCann provided a detailed tour of the ochre paintings. Pointing to an area just to the right of the number four in 94, an imaged believed to be a bear with a trail of dots behind it to signify a journey.



Just beneath Joann McCann's oar is a figure with upraised arms believed to be a depiction of Nanabojou, who was a stone tool-maker. Above the figure, the stone points shown would indicate homage to this spirit.

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