

# Presentation to the Panel on the Future of the Trent-Severn Waterway

by the  
**Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle**

Orillia, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007

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## Introduction

“Mnjikaning” in the Ojibway language means “the place of the fish fence” . The Fish Fence at the Atherley Narrows is one of the oldest human developments in North America. Over many thousands of years, wooden stakes were driven into the silt bottom of the narrows between Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching to direct fish to an area where they could easily be speared or netted. Until about 100 years ago, this complex system of underwater fences or weirs was used by Aboriginal peoples to harvest fish.

In recognition of this rare and ancient place, the government of Canada officially declared the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs a National Historic Site in 1982.

Who and what is the Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle? In the early 1990’s, during the environmental assessment for the new bridge span at the Narrows, a group of concerned citizens met with staff from Parks Canada after it had been determined by marine archaeologists that several weir stakes along the westerly side of the Narrows were in danger of being lost as a result of erosion – and many others believed, were in the way of construction. Parks Canada archaeologists recommended the removal and preservation of the weir stakes. This was a very controversial matter, but eventually, the Chippewas of Rama First Nation ( as it was then known) and other local citizens, came to accept the decision. This took a long time, and as the group continued to meet they explored the amazing stories and teachings that are an integral part of this National Historic Site.

Our group became incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in the Province of Ontario in 1996. Our objectives are:

- 1. To participate in the preservation and protection of the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs National Historic Site at the narrows between Lakes Couchiching and Simcoe.*
- 2. To encourage and foster an understanding and awareness of the site and of its importance to the native cultures that existed here for thousands of years, and to build on this understanding in order to create a closer harmony among all cultures through the development of an interpretive/learning centre.*
- 3. To conduct educational seminars for the public and teaching sessions for school children about this meeting place of fish and people and about the spirituality, technology, social organization and activities of the people who gathered at this sacred site.*

We operate with a seven member board of directors that we call our “Steering Wheel”. Our general membership is comprised of a few individuals who work closely with the Steering Wheel to further our objectives, as well as a much larger group of people who are primarily interested in hearing the stories and attending ceremony and celebrations. We are all volunteers.

For my own part, I had never heard of the Fish Weirs until that first meeting in 1992, and certainly was not aware of its historic designation. In truth, Parks Canada staff admitted they had been reluctant to raise the profile of this unique but fragile site as it did not have the resources to adequately protect or commemorate it. This serious lack of financial resources remains an issue and is one reason we are making this presentation this evening.

## **Commemorative Integrity**

According to Parks Canada, “a National Historic Site has commemorative integrity when:

- The resources that symbolize/represent its importance are not impaired or under threat
- The reasons for its national significance are communicated well to the public
- The site’s heritage values are respected by all those whose decisions would affect the site.”

At the present time, none of these three conditions have been met for this NHS.

Parks Canada staff recently organized a Commemorative Integrity Workshop for the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs N.H.S. which was held at Casino Rama and Rama Mnjikaning First Nation, June 7/8, 2007. It is hoped that by sometime in 2008, a Commemorative Integrity Statement will be formally approved for this site. It is our understanding that the next step after that will be the preparation of a Management Plan for the Site. It is a long process.

The MFFC has not been waiting for the past 15 years for these official government documents and plans to be completed. We have been very busy, although not always in a way that is visible to the public or to others with jurisdiction over the Narrows and its environs.

Our accomplishments include:

- A brochure that is distributed through several venues;
- The production of a video, now in DVD format, that is sold to the public, given away to local libraries, as well as to the many individuals who have assisted us in one way or another.
- Hosting the Simcoe County Historical Association’s annual barbecue at which the Honourable James K. Bartleman was a special guest;
- Putting on many gatherings where the stories of the weirs and other teachings are shared;
- Making presentations to school groups, senior citizens, tourists and special interest groups (including recently the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources);
- Participating in Doors Open Orillia and the Ramara Funfest, as well as in the past the Arts for Peace Festival, the Rama Mnjikaning Aboriginal Day celebrations and the Mariposa Folk Festival.

In addition, we commissioned a consulting firm to put together a compendium of all known and available information on the Narrows. Following that we retained Barry Parker of Spirit Hawk Aboriginal Tourism services to lead us through a planning exercise over a period of about two years which resulted in several important tools to further our objectives.

We would be remiss in leading the Panel to believe that we did these things without government help – indeed we could not have accomplished any of this without the assistance and guidance of Parks Canada and TSW staff, particularly Sheryl Smith, Aboriginal Affairs Advisor for Parks Canada and the late Jim Norris of the TSW. We have also been assisted financially through the Casino Rama Community Wellness Fund and the Trillium Foundation. However, time marches on and our primary goal – a facility or facilities that can tell the stories and engage the public in a more meaningful way, remains elusive and will continue to be until such time as the Federal Government commits to carrying out its obligations with respect to the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs National Historic Site.

## **Discussion paper #2 Cultural Resources**

We have reviewed the Panel's Discussion Paper #2 on Cultural Resources in preparation for this evening's presentation and agree in general with all of the ideas put forward. In particular, the idea of formalizing First Nation's involvement in the research and management of First Nations archaeological resources and Aboriginal history sites on waterway lands and waters is critical. While the views expressed by our group do not necessarily represent the views of Rama Mnjikaning First Nation, we are very sensitive to this issue and the many complications and misunderstandings that can arise.

A few years ago, our consultant Mr. Parker, Mark Douglas, and Mary Lou Kirby met with the then Superintendent of the TSW along with TSW and Parks Canada staff in Peterborough to explore the idea of formalizing a partnership on the model of the "Friends of the TSW". The idea was well received but deemed by both parties to be premature as we were a long way from determining how best to present the story of the Fish Weirs to the public. If there was to be a bricks and mortar facility, where would it be and who would be involved? How could we ensure that the First Nations were on-side with our vision for the project?

Currently, we are in the process of putting on paper a conceptual master plan of the ideas that have been brought forward and intend to present this to Chief and Council, the City of Orillia, Township of Ramara as well as other organizations that could be potential partners. And while it is good that there are many potential partners, we cannot image many other situations where there are so many players in the game. Nothing is done easily or quickly.

For example, one of our goals is to build a boardwalk out into the marsh that borders the old East Channel where many of the weir stakes remain. An environmental assessment will be required as well as dealing with permission to construct this on Crown Land. The mind boggles and one hardly knows how to begin. The same thing applies to building a recreational 4 season bridge over the Narrows – a project that is also being explored by another group of citizens of which we are a participant, as it would provide a wonderful viewing opportunity and

venue for story panels. The CNR, Fisheries and Oceans, the TSW, Parks Canada, the OMNR, the two municipalities, Rama Mnjikaning First Nation –all would have to be brought on-side. Perhaps the Waterway needs an “ombudsman” to assist in such endeavours.

## **Environmental Issues**

The Fish Weirs are not just an archaeological relic. The water, the air, the fish, the birds and animals, and the people are all part of this story. The fact that this simple technology sustained the people for so many millennia has significance not just for Aboriginal people but for everyone of us, particularly as we start to become more aware of the fragility of many of our food sources. We are concerned with the state of all of these elements and with how they may be affected by activities developments that occur on and adjacent to the Narrows. We would expect the Master Plan for the Mnjikaning Fish Weirs National Historic Site to be cognizant of these matters as well.

## **Conclusion**

We appreciate being given this opportunity to address the panel. We understand that the Panel has a great many weighty matters to consider with respect to the maintenance and operation of the Waterway. Public awareness and support of the TSW can only be enhanced by telling the whole story and telling it well. The Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle looks forward to being a partner in that process.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle  
Mary Lou Kirby, Director and Treasurer