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Abstract
Terra nullius provided a, now defunct, legal allowance for colonial activities in North America. No longer widely used, the concept persists in the widespread use of the term wilderness. Inferring that the Canadian landscape is largely unaltered, pathless, and without attached meaning, wilderness negates the creation and maintenance of Indigenous landscapes. The myth that much of the Canadian landscape consists of pristine and untouched wilderness is perpetuated by several aspects of Canadian society: the natural resource industry, environmentalists, wilderness tourism, and Canadian nationalism. Each of these areas benefits from or exploits in some way, the concept of wilderness. Archaeology, through decades of cultural resource management (CRM) survey, has populated the Canadian landscape with thousands of archaeological sites, which are only a representative fraction of past Indigenous activities. These sites extend well into areas publicly perceived as pristine wilderness. Using concepts from landscape archaeology, this paper addresses the absence of a continuum in perceiving the Canadian landscape and questions archaeology’s role in perpetuating rather than resolving this flaw.

Keywords
wilderness, cultural resource management (CRM), landscape archaeology

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Joshua Dent

Introduction

The contribution of archaeology to the formation of nationalist identities is well documented in various countries (Bar-Yosef & Mazar 1982; Daniel 1950; Kohl 1998; Kristiansen 1981; McGuire 2008). Nationalist archaeology, as characterized by Trigger (1984), supplements the development of a national narrative benefiting, or justifying the positions of an ethnic or national group using archaeological fieldwork and research. In Canada, any nationalist archaeology (excepting perhaps Indigenous archaeology) also assumes Trigger’s second form of alternative archaeology, colonialist archaeology:

In these countries, archaeology was practised by a colonising population that had no historical ties with the peoples whose past they were studying. While the colonisers had every reason to glorify their own past, they had no reason to extol the past of the peoples they were subjugating and supplanting. Indeed, they sought by emphasising the primitiveness and lack of accomplishments of these peoples to justify their own poor treatment of them. (Trigger 1984:360)

It is tempting to consign the above statement to the historical trends in archaeology from whence it came, extolling the virtues of contemporary post-modernism, post-processualism and reflexivity in exorcising the discipline of its colonial demons. If this were true then the participation of archaeology, active or otherwise, in perpetuating any particular colonial myth should be anathema to contemporary adherents of post-processualism. Yet, much of contemporary archaeology is complicit in the maintenance of an element of colonialism through its perpetuation of the myth of the Canadian wilderness. Despite Indigenous assertions to the contrary, coupled with extensive research on how the Canadian landscape is, and was, populated and made meaningful by Indigenous groups for millennia (Aporta 2009; Guernsey 2008; Oetelaar and Oetelaar 2006; Oliver 2007; Whitridge 2004), the wilderness myth remains a central theme in the creation of Canada’s nationalist narrative or founding myth. Landscape archaeology has the potential to deconstruct this myth.

Questioning the wilderness/frontier in Canada is not a novel subject in the social sciences and humanities (Furniss 1997; Guernsey 2008; Klimko 1994). However this discourse often focuses on the results and consequences of these myths or their institutional origins. This paper therefore initially treads well-covered territory, pulling examples from existing literature to explain and give evidence of the pervasiveness of the concept of wilderness in Canadian society. Where it begins to depart the beaten path is in attempts to conceptualize the pervasiveness of wilderness using a theoretical framework drawn from the field of landscape archaeology and in attempts to Indigenize not only the Canadian landscape but research concerning wilderness (Findlay 2000).

Landscape archaeology can be traced back to the 1920s, but it is only with the last two decades that the subject has achieved an intellectual authority of its own (Anschuetz, Wilshusen and Scheick 2001; Stoddard and Zubrow 1999). The subfield maintains a fairly open definition essentially concerned with how land was perceived and manipulated by past peoples; although this openness has been the subject of some
debate (Anschuetz, Wilshusen and Scheick 2001). Within this intellectual clearing the paper closes with the positing of one potential solution to the wilderness question located in the field of cultural resource management (CRM).

Contemporary CRM focuses on the government-mandated preservation of heritage (built and archaeological) in the preliminary phases of land development. However despite decades of CRM fieldwork identifying heritage sites on the Canadian landscape little is publicly known or available.

The sheer amount of this archaeological research could be construed as evidence of the discipline’s rejection of the wilderness myth. However, the restrictions placed on the dissemination of archaeological information in CRM perpetuate the wilderness myth by not adequately representing the extent of Indigenous landscapes to the Canadian public. A similar critique could be levelled at academic archaeology and its seeming unwillingness to engage and refute these wilderness myths in the public sphere. Other considerations must also be highlighted, especially the extent to which descendant Indigenous groups wish their dwelt (Ingold 1993) landscapes be known to other Canadians. The potential for looting and other intentional forms of destruction to archaeological sites must be addressed when considering the means and ramifications of publicly debunking the wilderness myth. This paper will examine the origins of the Canadian wilderness myth, outline a more representative concept of the Canadian landscape, and document archaeology’s role in perpetuating and its potential to debunk the colonial holdover that is terra nullius.

**Terra nullius**

The significance of the concept of terra nullius, no man’s land, in Canadian legal and historical frameworks is pervasive. The roots of the contemporary Canadian wilderness myth, along with the origin of almost every Treaty dispute and land claims settlement in the country, lie in this antiquated legal tradition (Bell and Asch 1997). The concept of terra nullius was developed during the 17th century as part of the continuing colonization of Indigenous territories by the imperial powers in Europe (Venne 1997). According to Bennett, “it followed that such territories would vest automatically in the first civilized power that chose to occupy them, regardless of the wishes or resistance of the Indigenous population” (quoted in Venne 1997: 185). English thinker John Locke was responsible for the initial ideas of terra nullius, developing it from the Roman concept of res nullius or “empty land” (Gosden 2004:27). Essentially the concept entailed that all unoccupied lands were common property until developed in some way (Gosden 2004).

While no longer explicitly present in the Canadian public consciousness, the spectre of terra nullius continues to haunt Indigenous peoples in the form of the term wilderness:

First Nations landscapes were never read or interpreted within their own particular cultural contexts, but were read and interpreted through the colonial lens of a wilderness. Erasing First Nations landscapes and replacing them with a preconceived understanding of “wilderness” allowing the landscape to be physically, socially, conceptually cleared for the colonial settlement of the land. (Guernsey 2008:121-122)
Conceptions of wilderness paralleled the notion of *terra nullius* during the initial European settlement of the Canadian landscape, but while *terra nullius* faded from use, wilderness continues. The legal concept of *Crown Land*, that is government (provincial and federal) administered territory (non-private and often undeveloped) within Commonwealth countries including Canada, also perpetuates the wilderness myth assigning a broad concept to describe a diverse area, an oversimplification of past and present uses of that area.

*Contemporary Wilderness*

Wilderness, the contemporary concept, is pervasive in the Canadian context. This concept is best probably defined as codified and normalized (Bourdieu 1991) in the public imagination by the dictionary:

*wilderness:*  
*a* (1): a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings  
(2): an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community  
*b*: an empty or pathless area or region (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

These regions are perceived as uncultivated and uninhabited, subject to colonial settlement and other forms of economic and political exploitation, all while retaining the wilderness moniker. Resource development conducted by forestry, mining and oil and gas companies, the rhetoric of environmental movements and wilderness tourism, and forms of Canadian nationalism, all benefit when vast tracts of land are considered perpetually pathless and uninhabited (see Joy Baker’s 2002 article for a more in-depth discussion of wilderness and economic/class issues).

*Development companies and Environmentalists*

The forestry, mining and oil and gas development sectors all operate under specific legislative restrictions and bureaucratically imposed guidelines, most of which concern development on Crown, as opposed to private land. These Acts and guidelines stipulate that heritage, including archaeological sites, must be considered before any development impacting the land proceeds. These guidelines are often met through the contracting of CRM firms specializing in built and archaeological heritage preservation. Notions of wilderness, supported by the blanket term of Crown Land, reinforce the validity of resource removal from areas perceived as never inhabited by, and with no significance for contemporary Indigenous communities (See below).

Similar to the development companies they often oppose, environmental movements also minimize not only the physical effect Indigenous groups had on the landscape, but also their construction of a “domesticated”, significant landscape (Conte 2007). Explicit in the language on websites of environmental organizations including the Sierra Club Canada and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) are perceptions of certain landscapes as being pristine or untouched wilderness and minimizing any traditional Indigenous utility:

Canada's Boreal forest represents 25% of the world's remaining *frontier* forests, while southern forests in Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes form a surprisingly *wild* network of *wilderness*, despite *encroaching* development.

Forests are of enormous value to Canada, providing:
• vital wildlife habitat
• a filter for air and water
• a hedge against climate change, by storing carbon
• a place for recreation
• a source of pulp and paper, ideally with responsible logging practices (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society; emphases added)

The use of the words frontier, encroaching and wilderness and the absence of Indigenous values of Canada’s boreal forests, explicitly denies Indigenous perspectives, activities or narratives attached to these areas (MacDonald 2005). This contradiction is often expressed through attempts to incorporate Indigenous groups into conceptions of the wilderness, trivializing the effect Indigenous groups had on the landscape and reinforcing colonial stereotypes. The confusion that can ensue is probably best exemplified by a heading on the Green Party of Canada’s website, Greens Support First Nations and Arctic Wilderness (Green Party of Canada 2010). Equating the Arctic with a pathless region while simultaneously voicing support for First Nations seems hypocritical as Arctic Indigenous (Inuit peoples distinguishing themselves from First Nations) paths have great time depth, are still frequently travelled and historically meaningful (Aporta 2009). The perception that these “wild” areas are untraveled also resonates with environmentalists and ecotourists.

Tourism and Canadian nationalism

Wilderness tourism is a booming industry in Canada. In 2004 the Yukon government estimates that 57,000 wilderness-associated tourists spent $34 million in the territory (Yukon 2008). The fascination with “wild” areas is well documented (Dean 2007; Frome 1974; Harvey 2007; MacLaren 2007; Miles 2009) and the price people are willing to pay to experience the wilderness drives the wilderness tourism industry in Canada. Perceived Indigenous presence on these “wild” landscapes slips into themes similar to those of environmentalists, mistakenly viewing them as non-entities whose millennia in North America had little to no impact on the desired wilderness. Attracting people to different regions of Canada via wilderness tourism also contributes to Canada’s use of the wilderness landscape to build a nationalist identity.

The Canadian national wilderness identity is nowhere more evident than in National Parks designated by Parks Canada which are, so the narrative goes, vast expanses of pristine, untouched land set aside for the enjoyment of future generations (Byrne 1968, Payne 2007). Even national historic sites are placed in such a way that they emphasize the historic placement of European culture in an “empty” landscape (Klimko 1994). When creating a Canadian identity during the centennial, Euro-Canadian accomplishments took precedence:

The advent of Canada’s centennial in 1967 provided an opportune time to flaunt EuroCanadian achievements. Although Native sites were considered for tourist development they most frequently had some connection with EuroCanadian events, such as Cut Knife Hill or Batouche both associated with the 1885 Riel Rebellion (Taylor 1990:89). In this nationalistic scenario Native people provided the important contrast between “savagery/wilderness” and civilization a contrast needed to demonstrate EuroCanadian achievements (Francis 1992). (Klimko 1994:184)

Klimko (1994) demonstrates, through her analysis of reconstructed fur trading forts,
that First Nations were, and arguably still are, presented as minor characters, or what Ewers refers to as “mere bit players in this important wilderness drama” (1972:1). The placement of Fort William nine miles inland from its original location may be seen as contributing to this perception (Klimko 1994). The original fort was located in what is now the Canadian Pacific rail yards in Thunder Bay (Figure 1) but was rebuilt in a forested (wilderness) area inland and out of context (Figure 2).

![Figure 1. Original location of Fort William (Google Earth)](image1)

![Figure 2. Contemporary location of the reconstructed Fort William (Google Earth)](image2)

A fur-trading fort in the middle of the City of Thunder Bay may not impart the desired sense of remoteness and early pioneering spirit that drives this form of Canadian nationalism and drives Canada’s founding myth; doubtless the costs and inconvenience of relocating the rail yards were also factors in the ultimate location of the reconstruction. Another great example of the rendering of the Indigenous past as invisible can be found in Furniss’s (1997) examination of school curricula, literature...
and public places in the William’s Lake area of central British Columbia. Furniss found that a frontier mythos focusing on European settlement and subsequent subjugation of an untamed wilderness dominated conceptualizations of the region and its past. This domination came at the expense of Indigenous narratives and the reality that the region was, and in fact still is, a hub of activity between the Tsilhqot’in (Chilcotin) and Secwepemc (Shuswap) peoples (Ball, Storey and Dent 2009).

Contemporary characterizations of a past wilderness can be contrasted with and negated through researching and disseminating the past and contemporary narratives of Indigenous groups in an unbroken continuum of dwelling on the landscape (Ingold 1993). Archaeologists, viewed as “experts” on the past by colonial tradition, have a responsibility to disrupt the Canadian wilderness myth, not only in the interests of social justice but because the extent of wilderness is a quantifiable fallacy.

The Role of Archaeology

Landscape archaeology can contribute to debunking the notions of wilderness expressed above. Landscape archaeology can assist in identifying the physical remains of past Indigenous activities and people in the Canadian wilderness. It can also address how wilderness as a settler-idealized landscape came about and contrast this with the realities of a landscape constructed and conceptualized by Indigenous peoples (Knapp and Ashmore 1999).

Archaeology, through CRM survey, is required by provincial legislation before any land development. Resource extraction companies are therefore one of the primary vehicles of funding for CRM archaeological surveys prior to any environmental impacts. Consequently, archaeologists have located numerous archaeological sites in large tracts of Crown land meant for far-ranging resource extraction and delivery – forestry, mining, and oil; roads, transmission lines and pipelines. Anyone with access to British Columbia’s Remote Access to Archaeological Data (RAAD) can see the extent to which these archaeological sites are distributed across the British Columbian landscape.

Access to this data is restricted to individuals with provincially designated permissions and therefore, the extent of past Indigenous occupation of areas widely seen as wilderness is not publically known as further evidenced by Furniss’s (1997) work in this same region (Figure 3). Additionally, CRM practitioners, through expedited survey, “clear” development areas of archaeology or the potential of archaeology in compliance with the provincial legislation concerning heritage (Smith 2008). Simply because no archaeological sites were located in the course of a necessarily efficient survey, does not mean that surveyed areas were neither inhabited nor considered significant at any point in the past. In order to accommodate this discrepancy, many provincial jurisdictions require some form of consultation with local Indigenous groups to account for activities, such as traditional land-use, that may not be evident archaeologically (British Columbia Heritage
Conservation Act 1996; Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture 2010). Whether this information should be made publicly accessible and the benefits and hazards of doing so is something else entirely. Landscape archaeology is often employed in CRM through the development of regional predictive models and the use of geographic information systems (GIS) but landscape archaeology can contribute much more to CRM than methodologies.

Landscapes

Although employing similar methodologies (ground survey, GIS, regional modelling), the prevailing theories of CRM and landscape archaeology nonetheless differ. In distancing itself from a purely quantitative area of research, landscape archaeology has developed a diverse and valuable foundation of theory combining etic (objective) and emic (subjective) data that distinguishes it from other areas of archaeology, particularly CRM. Largely due to its reliance on private funding, which is usually disinterested in developing theory, CRM subsists on government-imposed methodologies as opposed to developing innovative, if expensive, techniques (i.e. remote sensing, although this is beginning to change as technologies become more affordable). When considering the “wilderness” and acknowledging that much, probably all, of Canada is a “contested space” (Bender 1998) it is helpful to use landscape archaeology to understand how these landscapes are created. Several concepts of particular use include Ingold’s (1993) notions of dwelling and taskscape, and Knapp and Ashmore’s (1999) three types of landscape: constructed, conceptualized and ideational.

Landscape, in the context of this paper, refers to the coordination of the conceptual, constructed and ideational in interpreting the physical world (Knapp and
Ashmore 1999). Integral to this definition is a caveat provided by Whitridge:

There is no imaginative place-world wholly apart from quantifiably real landscapes, bodies, and things, but neither is there a material world that is not thoroughly invested with significance as a precondition of human thought and action. (2004:216)

In a very direct way this latter concept precludes the very existence of wilderness, since the simple human perception, or acknowledgement, of a space immediately imbues that space with significance. Therefore, by this definition, a landscape cannot be a wilderness. The allowance that these landscapes can be simultaneously perceived in multiple and different ways is also critical to understanding how spaces and places become and stay contested.

Ingold’s contribution to the theory of landscape archaeology relevant to this discussion consists of the concepts of dwelling and taskscape. Ingold suggests the formation of a “dwelling perspective” in anthropology:

according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of - and testimony to - the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves. (Ingold 1993:152).

Conceptualizing this “dwelling perspective”, Ingold has incorporated the task, “defined as any practical operation, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment” (1993:158), as the formative process through which dwelling occurs:

In other words, tasks are the constitutive acts of dwelling. No more than features of the landscape, however, are tasks suspended in a vacuum. Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together... It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape. Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so - by analogy - the taskscape is an array of related activities. (Ingold 1993:158)

Temporality is central to the development of dwelling through the establishment of a continuum of past, present and perceived future tasks or tasksapes (Ingold 1993). Incorporating Knapp and Ashmore’s three varieties of landscapes, constructed, conceptualized and ideational, with Ingold creates a useful environment for discerning the landscapes of settlers and those of Indigenous peoples (1999:10-13). The following are paraphrased definitions of each of three varieties of landscape:

- **Constructed Landscapes**: Physically created by humans.
- **Conceptualized Landscapes**: Not physically created by humans (i.e. natural features) but nonetheless imbued with significance.
- **Ideational Landscapes**: Imaginary and emotional. Symbolic and representative. The least linked to physical reality of the three.

Using this landscape archaeological framework, we can contemplate how the Canadian landscape came to be perceived by its non-Indigenous population and why “wilderness” persists as a defining feature.
**Wilderness Perspectives**

Two conceptions of the Canadian landscape help lay the foundation for why settlers and their descendants see the colonized landscape from a pioneering civilization versus the wilderness perspective, as represented in the Canadian founding myth. The first, as already alluded to above, involves the “cleared” or “emptied” landscape (Gazin-Schwartz 2008; Smith 2008). The second is Gosden’s “widowed” landscape (2004:117). The first relates that the landscape was prepared for settlement with the removal of First Nations to reservations; the second is that due to disease, the Indigenous population was significantly reduced by the time systematic settlement began. Both “cleared” and “widowed” landscapes likely account for many of the areas encountered by European settlers. When these settlers arrived in the vicinity of former Indigenous settlements, the habitations were both already empty and quickly developed over or they quickly became overgrown and forgotten. Any memory of the former settlements and their missing occupants would fade as subsequent colonial generations dwelt in the landscape. The disconnect between the millennia of taskscapes and Indigenous dwelling in the landscape and the self-perceived pioneering of European colonizers is characterized in Guernsey’s *Constructing the Wilderness and Clearing the Landscape: A Legacy of Colonialism in Northern British Columbia* (2008):

First Nations landscape perspectives are products of long-held, traditional land-use values that were at one time completely unconnected from colonial-driven understandings of the North American landscape. In my ethnographic work with the Tsimshian community of Kitsumkalum, people spoke about how their families for generations had a living from the forests of northern British Columbia and how their very identity was linked to the land (Guernsey 2004)… Prior to contact with Europeans, the landscapes of the Americas were understood through Indigenous/Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews. (Guernsey 2008:120-121)

The significance of this disconnect is evidenced in the prevalence of the term *wilderness* in past and contemporary Canadian discourse. In some cases there was no continuum that connected the taskscapes of Indigenous groups with the developing taskscapes of European settlers because of the cleared, emptied and widowed landscapes they encountered. The result is two parallel sets of constructed, conceptualized and ideational landscapes occurring in the same space. First, the settler sees a wilderness to be developed, inhabited, exploited and protected, however, in reality, this wilderness is strictly an ideational, imaginary landscape and it overlays the country, masking the Indigenous significance beneath. The Indigenous perspective however, sees a landscape containing millennia of significance and introspectively recognizes the repercussions of using the term wilderness:

New words are the key. They can’t be just technical or scientific words … They’ve got to be words that are attached to the land. And it is the case with this refiguring wilderness. You’ve grown from it, your descendents have grown from it, you’ve been part of this growth from the land as well. There is no such thing as “wilderness” … Wilderness is now losing the meaning it had for colonial purposes … Words are the key that dismantles us, and words are the keys that can build us up as well. So it is very important that this refigured vocabulary and meaning be

The role of archaeology in dispelling the settler ideational landscape of wilderness lies in publicly emphasizing the geographical breadth and temporal depth of the Indigenous taskscape and the corresponding dwelt landscape.

Clearing the Mask

Archaeologically debunking wilderness involves the dispelling of another myth in addition to the consideration and incorporation of contemporary Indigenous perspectives.

The myth that undeveloped land is devoid of significance until it is altered parallels the concept of wilderness and, can in fact be associated with the etymological origin of *terra nullius: res nullius*, “empty land” until developed in some way, usually through agriculture (Gosden 2004). *Res nullius* assumes that constructed landscapes carry significance and serve a function, whereas conceptualized landscapes have no purpose and are just constructed landscapes in-waiting. Simply putting it into the theoretical framework of Knapp and Ashmore should serve to dispel the myth, but, for the sake of clarity, an example is required. Parks Canada serves to emphasize the pristine and the untouched, and also to demonstrate how undeveloped land can have meaning and significance even within contemporary Canadian society. Not considering that past Indigenous groups had this same ability to create meaning without immediately apparent development and subsequently claiming that areas without proof, archaeological or otherwise, of Indigenous activities are insignificant and without meaning to Indigenous peoples subjects us to hectares of hypocrisy. This is especially true given the limits of archaeological fieldwork and artifact preservation in finding proof of previous activities. Even with the limits of archaeology in Canada, much of what is widely considered wilderness actually includes thousands of archaeological sites rediscovered through decades of CRM.

However, this information must be used cautiously in dispelling the Canadian wilderness myth given Indigenous and archaeological concerns about looting and other forms of intentional destruction to these sites should their locations become widely known. Other forms of Indigenous heritage considered sacred and not meant for particular engagement could also be subject to disturbance should the extent of Indigenous landscapes become common knowledge (Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 2000). Archaeologists and Indigenous peoples must engage in active dialogue to determine how or even if, Indigenous taskscape should be widely publicized (Findlay 2000).

Conclusion

The persistence of the notions of wilderness in the Canadian context is maintained by several aspects of Canadian society: the resource development sector, the environmental movement, the wilderness tourism industry, and Canadian nationalism generally. Whatever benefits these areas draw from this myth come at the expense of Indigenous communities and resurrect the antiquated colonial concept of *terra nullius*. Archaeologists in Canada are, at least partially, more aware than the broader public of the extent of Indigenous engagement with the landscape that became Canada. Speaking from positions of authority within academia and the provincial legislative framework (CRM), we are in an optimal position to dispel the wilderness myth to the wider Canadian public. This action would seek to re-establish a continuum of Ingold’s “dwelling
perspective,” acknowledging the shift from a dominant Indigenous taskscape to a colonially influenced one: acknowledging that the land ceased to be wilderness from the moment the first human engaged with it, at which point it became a landscape. However, archaeologists must dispel the wilderness myth in concert with contemporary Indigenous communities or otherwise be doomed to simply repeating the past and perpetuating an exclusive, flawed, colonial perspective.

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