

# ONE PROJECT, TWO COUNTRIES, MANY LANDSCAPES

JACK CORBETT

## ABSTRACT

How do UNESCO World Heritage Sites recognized for their unique qualities resist pressures for standardization from large bureaucratic systems? A Fulbright Carlos Rico Award enabled me to explore this question in small communities in Canada and Mexico. Nine months of fieldwork at two locations suggest that in practice local actors competing for ascendance and dominance of their respective landscapes may capture or neutralize nominally more powerful outside interests rather than surrender to them.

**Keywords:** Canada • community • cultural landscape • heritage • Mexico



## BACKGROUND

While most of us are familiar with the Fulbright Scholar Program some of the more tightly-focused opportunities such as the Arctic Initiative Award or Global Scholar Award are largely outside the general arena of Fulbright scholars. One of the least-known is the Fulbright Carlos Rico Award for North American Studies, a single award supported by the Canadian Fulbright Commission and the Fulbright Commission in Mexico (COMEXUS). The Carlos Rico Award encourages work addressing the North American context with particular attention to dimensions engaging Mexico and Canada. It offers a semester in each country at a university, research institution, or government agency.

In 2015-2016 I was fortunate enough to hold the Fulbright Carlos Rico Award. *Place, Adaptation, and Identity in Cultural Landscapes: Managing Complexity in Nova Scotia and Oaxaca* sought to understand what happens in small communities when a potentially transformative experience such as being named a World Heritage Site alters their relationship with national and international actors. Given the asymmetric nature of power and resources, it seemed likely national/international actors would gradually shape local organizational structures and processes associated with site management in the same general direction, either as reflected in national policy or the Cultural Heritage Centre of UNESCO. There seemed to be some notable irony that places selected for their unique qualities would gradually be molded along standardized lines by external forces, “best practices”, interest in local economic development, or other considerations. How might places experiencing such designations react, i.e., would they embrace or resist the prospects for change?

## STUDYING LANDSCAPES

Nova Scotia, Canada and Oaxaca, Mexico offered locations for comparative research. Both had rural sites recently receiving World Heritage designation as *cultural landscapes* in the sense that both address how human behavior has interacted intimately with the physical and ecological dimensions of place. Nova Scotia's Landscape of Grand Pre (hereafter LGP) celebrates struggles by early French settlers to creatively engineer coastal marshes for agricultural use reminiscent of the polder wetlands of Northwest Europe. Their descendants, known as Acadians, were displaced in 1755 when Britain took control, replaced by immigrants from New England. The Prehistoric Caves of Yagul and Mitla in the Central Valley of Oaxaca (hereafter Caves) honors the patient efforts of early hunter-gatherers to domesticate local plants, the forerunners of corn and squash, setting the stage for settled agriculture. If despite differences in local history, community circumstances, public policy, and even the nature of the landscapes themselves they show similar movement toward subordination to national and international direction, it could be that a long-term shift toward an induced homogenization would indeed be a possibility.

In addition to their status as cultural landscapes both sites are also political landscapes, to use Christopher Boyer's term. Political landscapes are those where competition over resources provokes intervention by political forces such as agencies, parties, or groups. They are structured by multiple layers of authority and jurisdiction, subjecting access and study to a need to navigate filters and constraints. To whom does one turn for access? To national authorities, as they grant or inhibit institutional contacts and information? To local governments, as they may facilitate or block opportunities for hands-on data-gathering? To political influentials well-placed to dispense or seek favors? By its nature such research requires boots-on-the-ground and the possibility to interview an array of actors. Tracing relationships and interactions, individual and institutional, is difficult if one's access is limited.

In practice, addressing questions of access meant multiple exercises in mapping. Maps of the World Heritage Sites as framed by their proponents did not coincide with maps of governmental jurisdictions or with the mental maps of local residents. LGP has no official status; nominally it is a rural agricultural community although increasingly it serves as a residential suburb of nearby Wolfville and has attracted a population of retirees. Caves bears the names of an uninhabited place and a town that is not actually encompassed by the heritage designation. Site maps obey criteria established at UNESCO's Cultural Heritage Centre in Paris, not necessarily criteria understood by local residents.

These observations regarding mapping reflect a central concern in addressing landscapes, i.e., boundary-making and recognition of conflicting interpretations as well as the legitimacy of claims built upon them. The Caves landscape extends across political boundaries yet excludes its best-known feature, the much later Zapotec pre-Hispanic ruins of Mitla. Why? Because

in the judgment of those defining the World Heritage Site, its contemporary urbanization stimulated by tourism compromised the quality of integrity considered essential to site designation. In practice LGP is defined by the desire of the influential Acadian community to center Site attention on its history, setting aside First Nations occupation of the site for thousands of years or more than 250 years of post-Acadian settlement.

### DECIPHERING MAPS

Maps of competing landscapes create dilemmas in selecting institutional affiliations. The affiliation selected may be regarded in some quarters as acceptance of a specific institutional interpretation of boundaries and values. Circumstances dictated affiliation with Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH for its acronym in Spanish) even though it was a central and sometimes controversial actor in setting boundaries. Fortunately, locally INAH is seen as an annoyance rather than influential. At LGP contact with Parks Canada was minimal even though as a national agency responsible for the National Historical Park making up most of LGP it might have seemed a logical choice. Instead, I turned to the Landscape of Grand Pre Governing Board, an eclectic body representing local landowners, a First Nations band, Acadian community groups, and other entities as presumed stakeholders in the site. That proved fortuitous in the sense it was largely uncontroversial, though ultimately internal schisms provoked its demise.

Maps may display political landscapes but others are imposed through the interpretations and priorities of different organizational actors. For Acadians LGP is a "landscape of memory" while for members of the Marsh Body, the association of landowners within the LGP, it is a working landscape. They spread pungent chicken manure to maintain fertility and rumble its narrow lanes with heavy equipment in planting and harvesting seasons. For tourists the LGP, backed by the Minas Basin and then the Bay of Fundy, is a picturesque landscape to be enjoyed while visiting area wineries or cycling in the same lanes used by local farm machinery. Acadian nostalgia collides with the production of forage for area livestock.

Caves is also a working landscape, but a landscape very much in transition. Understood as a principal site of the emergence of corn and squash cultivation several thousand years ago, today Caves offers employment to local guides assisting tourists curious how ancient inhabitants coaxed crops from the dry, rocky hillsides. In recent years corn cultivation has been partially replaced by maguey supporting mezcal production. Some older interviewees spoke with nostalgia about making *milpa* yet pragmatically embrace migration, tourism, and cultivating agave in demand by mezcal distillers; new landscapes emerge from old. Subsistence corn gives way to commerce and visitors.

What emerges from this exploration is that the UNESCO constructed “cultural landscape” conceals a multiplicity of specific interpretations overlapping and at times in conflict. Different actors at different times assert their preferences, sometimes leading to tension and discord. In practice local-external differences, while they may exist, take a subordinate place to competing local visions of landscape meaning and management. Boundaries of the LGP World Heritage Site and the Evangeline National Historical Park, while established locally and nationally, generate little friction. Competition among local actors, however, fostered stress so severe that in 2016 the original site management body dissolved, to be replaced by Landscape of Grand Pre Incorporated, shedding problematic participants. The LGP commissioned a site management plan envisioning an impressive visitor center to be located adjacent to the Parks Canada facility. Funding proved elusive and a suggestion for physical alterations to the existing Parks Canada structure went nowhere. More recently, the LGP has floated the idea of a visitor center in the town of Wolfville several miles from the LGP to capture the attention of tourism there.

While the agricultural landscape at Grand Pre retains the field configurations, drainage patterns, access roads, and other features established more than three centuries ago, San Pablo Mitla, the principal settlement associated with the Caves, has evolved from an agricultural community in the early twentieth century to its current tourist-based economy. A century ago, Mitla vigorously defended its land base against intrusions by outsiders. Today the dense array of shops and small restaurants underscores how residents have responded to tourism, replacing farming with sales of souvenirs and services. This urbanized landscape overwhelms remnants of pre-Hispanic structures and platforms.

### NAVIGATING SITE CULTURES

The way in which the past has been imprinted on LGP meant movement through it highlighted my presence and drew attention to my research. In a setting where the average stay lasts less than a day, my recurring appearance to ask questions and seek information provoked curiosity; why is this American asking questions about organizational relationships or governance practices? In some quarters this provoked unease as I inevitably intruded into domains largely obscured by the prevailing narrative, i.e., the initial struggle to settle a challenging environment, in the process establishing a distinctive Acadian identity, followed by a brutal expulsion and banishment, and then a dogged effort to reclaim the Acadian homeland. As an English-speaking outsider for some my motives were suspect. Others invited me to speak at the Wolfville Historical Society and the local Lions Club, for informal chats over coffee or breakfast, and otherwise did their best to be friendly or to make sure I understood, and presented, LPG in a favorable light.

The experience at Caves was markedly different. Working in communities such as Union Zapata and Villa de Diaz Ordaz, parts of the World Heritage Site outside the tourist circuit, gave a very different perspective. Union Zapata has a significant migration tie to North Carolina, and interviewees were far more interested in talking about life in Charlotte than their interactions with Mexican government. Questions about Caves were treated with a bemused, slightly disinterested tolerance before turning to what, for them, were more engaging topics. Unlike the Acadian insistence on a tailored narrative of the LPG landscape, mobilizing organizational resources to institutionalize it, Caves communities pursue landscape management through recurring negotiation with the federal government. Overall management of Caves is shared by the Commission on Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), exercising their budgetary and regulatory responsibilities in a largely top-down fashion reflecting national policy. Yet in practice agency direction is light, sporadic, and subject to challenge from local authorities. Local preference is to hold outsiders at bay, not to control the narrative.

### **SURVIVAL OF THE TENACIOUS**

If my presence and questions provoked little concern, and national-local relations were not as sensitive as I anticipated, was there anything roiling matters of community governance? Perhaps this was a theoretical concern not substantiated in practice. Yet at both LGP and Caves there were in fact matters connected to discord and tension leading back in turn to the World Heritage designation. In both cases these conditions could be traced to longstanding grievances between groups and communities. Resentment is focused, however, less toward the distant national government than to nearby rivals. Local frictions are tangible and immediate while policies defined in Mexico City or Ottawa would be far less malleable yet for the most part rest lightly.

Grievance also plays a significant role in shaping relations at LGP. Nova Scotia's Acadian community misses no effort to emphasize its heritage and centrality in provincial affairs, even though today it accounts for approximately 5 percent of the population. Resources generated by the provincial endowment fund created to support LGP flow to archaeological exploration of Acadian settlement, not the lengthy indigenous presence at the same site. The Parks Canada visitors center bookshop at the Evangeline National Historical Park is run by Societe Promotion Grand-Pre, and while it stocks material on the Acadian period one finds little on indigenous settlement or post-Acadian occupation and use. To non-Acadians these omissions suggest an attempt to shape both history and a contemporary narrative largely excluding other actors. Thus, the Acadian grievance over expulsion confronts non-Acadian grievances of a carefully-truncated interpretation of Nova Scotia development.

In the end expectations of national domination of local cultures proved misplaced. On the contrary, local interests, including grievances, not only resisted outside intervention but in some cases captured or manipulated it in service of local priorities. Parks Canada appears to defer to Acadian interests, and communities in Oaxaca value World Heritage status while mostly ignoring the external supervision it presumably brings. These experiences demonstrate that local preferences, tenaciously pursued, have the capacity to thwart grand designs lacking the moral commitment of the resistance or left to uneven implementation by distracted and overburdened functionaries.

*These experiences demonstrate that local preferences, tenaciously pursued, have the capacity to thwart grand designs lacking the moral commitment of the resistance or left to uneven implementation by distracted and overburdened functionaries*

Yet even as we see parallels in community determination to maintain a sense of control over their respective landscapes we cannot ignore an important difference. Acadians live “through” the land, i.e., it is a vessel carrying memory and therefore they seek to preserve, even concretize, LPG as a landscape of memory. The communities making up Caves live “on” the land; it provides sustenance and support. For Acadians the quality and depth of memory is central, yet few Acadians at LPG derive a living through agriculture. Instead, the physical landscape connects them to cultural heritage. For Caves maintenance of community is a core value. The economic base of a community may shift from corn to migration or tourism or mezcal, but the specifics of the landscape matter less than the social bonds holding communities together. Although UNESCO recognizes but one landscape at each of the World Heritage Sites, this Fulbright revealed there are in fact several, displaying even greater complexity and nuance than anticipated.

## FULBRIGHT FORWARD

While this project transitions to a follow-on and write-up phase, other Fulbright activities move forward. Some are very specific, such as assisting a colleague prepare a Fulbright application or serving on Fulbright screening committees for COMEXUS in Mexico. Others are more complex and ambitious; former Fulbrighters Nelly Robles, Anabel Lopez, Veronica Perez, Marcia Medrano, and I are moving forward with a Fulbright Alumni-supported project to facilitate collaboration among diverse indigenous communities in northern Oaxaca in pursuit of unrealized opportunities in ecotourism and agriculture. And recently I delivered to the Landscape of Grand Pre Incorporated a tapestry of its Site map woven by weavers in Teotitlan del Valle, a village adjacent to Caves, in recognition of challenges and prospects shared by the two World Heritage Sites. It now hangs in the Evangeline National Historic Park Visitors Center.

## NOTES

1. Boyer, C. *Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico*. Durham, NC. Duke University Press, 2015.
2. Campbell, C. *Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada*. Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.
3. George, E.W. "World Heritage, Tourism Destination, and Agricultural Heritage Landscape: The Case of Grand Pre, Nova Scotia, Canada." *Journal of Resources and Ecology*. 4:3 (2013), 275-284.
4. Liria, M.G., Davidson-Hunt, I.J. & Robson, J. P. "Artisanal Products and Land-Use Land-Cover Change in Indigenous Communities: The Case of Mezcal Production in Oaxaca, Mexico." *Land*, 11 (2022), 387-404.



Jack Corbett and Mexican colleagues listen to a presentation by Alder Phillips, Fulbright doctoral student in Oaxaca

---

## BIOGRAPHY

Jack Corbett is a professor in the Mark Hatfield School of Government, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon. Prior to his 2015-2016 Fulbright Carlos Rico Award he held a student Fulbright in Mexico (1969-70), a Fulbright Senior Lectureship at the Instituto Tecnológico de Oaxaca (1995-96), and served as Fulbright Distinguished Professor of North American Studies at the University of Alberta (2005). He may be reached at [oaxport@gmail.com](mailto:oaxport@gmail.com)

---