



# First Nations Interpretation Internships

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## Backgrounder

**Government  
of Alberta** ■

  
**Alberta Parks**

**Canadian  
Badlands**   


## Introduction

The First Nations Interpretation Internship at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park celebrates authentic cultural heritage, while also being future-focused. It demonstrates an innovative way of bridging past, present and future, using traditions and technology. This success story illustrates the value of strategic leaders who empower and trust staff to collaborate, innovate, and form partnerships.

## Project Background

The vision of Alberta Parks is to inspire people to discover, value, protect and enjoy the natural world, for current and future generations. One of our divisional priorities is Aboriginal engagement, and Writing-on-Stone provides a strong example of how we are achieving this.

Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation leads the Aboriginal Tourism Initiative, which encourages the development of cultural tourism experiences in the province. Alberta's new Tourism Plan highlights the tremendous opportunity to honour Alberta's First Nations heritage through new visitor experiences and programs. Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park is recognized as a strong role model in this area, and has great potential to enhance its offerings through innovative initiatives such as this.



**An Intern leads a Rock Art Tour at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park**

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park is situated in south central Alberta, only 6 km north of the Montana border. The traditional Blackfoot name for Writing-on-Stone is Áísínai'pi, which translates to 'it is pictured'. Áísínai'pi is the most sacred place for the Blackfoot, and today park management honour the tradition of First Nations leadership through regular meetings with a trusted advisory group of Blackfoot elders. The significance of Writing-on-Stone is formally recognized through its designations as a Provincial Park, a National Historic Site, and is a site considered worthy of World Heritage Site status.

In 2011, Alberta Parks introduced staff to a new Innovation Fund designed to support projects that foster innovation, create efficiencies, and generate revenue or support partnerships or sponsorship. It was stated that *ideas drive our future*, and each and every staff member in the Parks division was invited to put their ideas forward.

Writing-on-Stone staff submitted an application for a 'First Nations Internship', with the intent to deliver new public programs, raise the cultural awareness of staff and visitors, and provide outreach programs at other park locations. Innovation funding was allocated to this initiative, which empowered staff to develop the concept for implementation in 2013.



Interns used authentic replicas and technologies to interpret Blackfoot culture

The ministries of Tourism, Parks and Recreation and Aboriginal Relations agreed to enhance Aboriginal participation and employment opportunities in Alberta's provincial parks. Recognizing the strong link to tourism, Canadian Badlands Limited, a not-for-profit tourism organization in southern Alberta, was also invited to become a partner in this initiative. The leaders of Alberta Parks, Aboriginal Relations, and Canadian Badlands formed a robust partnership, which enabled implementation of the First Nations Internship in 2013.

## Key Results and Challenges in the Project

### ***Leadership Development***

A key intent of our program was to provide leadership development for First Nations staff. Through this program, our Interpretive Interns were empowered to share their cultural and personal stories, and were instrumental in making our results meaningful.

A First Nations Interpretive Supervisor prepared for recruitment, commencement, training, supervision, and mentorship of the Interns. Her ability to address Blackfoot cultural protocols and sensitivities proved to be invaluable.

**Program Delivery**

Our two Interns were very excited about bringing their traditional and western knowledge into the workplace. Their programs incorporated authentic replicas to bring our past to life, and also used various technologies help be relevant to today's visitors.



An Intern shows an osprey skull to school children at Beauvais Lake Provincial Park

Throughout the summer, the Interns visited and shared their traditional knowledge with staff at Writing-on-Stone, Dinosaur, Beauvais Lake, and Cypress Hills Provincial Parks. An additional cultural exchange occurred between our Interns and Quebec exchange student, whose francophone heritage added another layer of cultural sharing.



An Intern explores Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park with a colleague from Quebec

### ***Cultural Awareness***

A core intent of our program was to provide excellent training and two-way learning for the Interns and park staff. We began the season with a Cultural Awareness session that introduced staff to the important Blackfoot, Local, and park cultures. Then, we brought the Interns to a 3-day training retreat for Alberta Parks Interpreters.

We prepared and empowered our Interns to model the values of their culture, the organization, and themselves, which they shared with over 4,000 visitors during the summer.

### ***Relationship-building***

At the core of this initiative are relationships, which were empowered through the many interactions between the Interns and the diverse groups they met with. Many relationships were formed and strengthened, which grew trusted understanding, and continue to inspire positive outcomes at the individual and organizational level.

The Interns created personal links between the partner organizations and their indigenous

communities, improving relationships with the park, the Government of Alberta, and the diverse public. They wove this cultural mix back into their programs and within their home community.

The partnership between Alberta Parks, Aboriginal Relations, and the Canadian Badlands tourism organization is a model that develops leaders, enhances visitor experiences, builds intercultural awareness, and facilitates community relationship-building with government.

### ***Empowering leadership***

The principle of empowerment has been demonstrated by all in this partnership. What began as an innovative grassroots proposal, efficiently earned the support and respect of interdepartmental leaders who modeled relationship-building and collaboration, and who subsequently empowered frontline leaders to develop and deliver the program.



**Interpretation Interns co-present at the Writing-on-Stone amphitheatre**

## Lessons Learned

Many important lessons were learned from the unique successes and challenges that we faced.

Being new to their job and employment with the government, the Interns felt uneasy at first. But, as they developed new skills and learned the expectations of their role, they began to feel more comfortable and inspired to serve the public.

It is recognized globally that indigenous participation adds authenticity to heritage sites, which enhances truth and credibility. This concept was successfully applied to form a win-win-win between parks, tourism, and First Nations organizations and communities. The benefits for all are far

reaching and long lasting.



The education tipi at Writing-on-Stone

## Conclusion & More Information

We believe that our initiative has the potential to change Canada for the better. Our model brings people together, and connects people to each other and to the land.

We invite you to adopt and share our vision within your network, and encourage you to try something similar in your own setting.

### *For more information:*

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First Nations Interpretation Internship resources: [www.albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone/psla](http://www.albertaparks.ca/writing-on-stone/psla)