



# A Case of Access: Inuvialuit Engagement with the Smithsonian Institution's MacFarlane Collection

## Project Summary

Inuvialuit elders, youth and cultural experts worked with anthropologists, museum curators and others to generate and document Inuvialuit and curatorial knowledge about objects collected from the Anderson River region in Canada's Western Arctic by Hudson Bay trader Roderick McFarlane in the 1860s, now housed at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. Sharing and disseminating this knowledge in Inuvialuit communities, through anthropological networks, and to a broader public was an integral part of this project.

### What community needs or questions did this project address?

- The desire of Inuvialuit to reconnect with materials removed from their region 150 years ago, and to document Inuvialuit knowledge about the materials.
- The wish to pass on knowledge about the collection to younger generations of Inuvialuit.
- Capacity-building among Inuvialuit youth in videography and ethnographic documentation.
- Questions were raised during the course of the project concerning intellectual property (IP) issues surrounding the sharing of information and cultural knowledge.

### What research methods and approaches did the team use?

- Partnering with organizations that have shared interests.
- Collaborative/participatory research methodology used throughout.
- Research in museum collections and archives.
- Oral history.
- Ethnographic Interviewing.
- Videography.
- A wide variety of approaches to community outreach.
- Knowledge repatriation/ digital repatriation.
- Material culture reconstruction and re-creation
- Community consultations to evaluate work undertaken and identify next steps.
- The project team also developed a charter outlining operating principles and roles and responsibilities for working together, which provided a solid foundation for research relationships.

### What did the project accomplish?<sup>1</sup>

- Reconnected Inuvialuit cultural knowledge and personal memories with materials in the collection.
- Forged new relationships with the Smithsonian, with a sense of shared control and mutual respect: "We suggest that our project and similar initiatives are eroding institutional reluctance to open collections to reinterpretation by source communities, and demonstrating the cultural, intellectual, and curatorial benefits of sharing control over representation" (from the Final Report, p. 22)
- Trained youth in videography and other ethnographic methods.
- Sharing with community; broad dissemination and input through a variety of means and formats.
- This initiative spawned the "MacFarlane Collection Traditional Knowledge Repatriation Project," which obtained funding for the development of the *Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait/Inuvialuit Living History* website ([www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca](http://www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca)) that offers access to Inuvialuit cultural knowledge (including digital access to the MacFarlane collection) and allows for reciprocal knowledge sharing.

### What were the main challenges?

- Finding effective ways to share the MacFarlane collection with Inuvialuit, given their distance from the Smithsonian Institution.
- Fostering awareness and engagement by community members of all ages about heritage-related issues.
- Determining how to address policy and legal issues related to cultural heritage that emerged during the project, such as: who has intellectual property rights to traditional knowledge and other cultural information entrusted to their care? And what can be freely shared with others?
- The high cost of travel and research expenses for Arctic communities.
- The limited financial and human resources available for planning, coordinating, and undertaking cultural heritage projects.

### What insights about intellectual property and cultural heritage emerged?

- The key role that community-based Aboriginal institutions have in their communities as caretakers of cultural heritage.
- The importance of involving youth and elders.
- Re-uniting members of a community with material culture and museum collections inspires a range of rich cultural memories, traditional knowledge, and other connections and reinterpretations.
- Sharing control of representation and interpretation of museum

1 All ongoing.

collections has cultural, intellectual, and curatorial benefits for museums as well as for communities.

- Discussions emerged about commodification and appropriation about intellectual and cultural property rights related to clothing styles and other design elements.
- Virtual repatriation (a.k.a. knowledge repatriation) brought up questions about the past and the future relationship between museum collections and source communities: e.g., concerns about how the collection was obtained, how it is cared for, and whether the collection could be returned to the Inuvialuit, as well as concerns related to appropriate handling and dissemination of knowledge associated with the materials and what should or should not be shared with the public at large.
- This also raised questions about who has the authority to grant access to certain forms of knowledge.

## What lessons about good research practices emerged?

Some ingredients for good research relationships and outcomes, offered by team members (Final Report Appendix A, pp. 29-34), include:

- Entering a research relationship in the spirit of giving and receiving;
- Be flexible and open about your goals and plans;
- Expect that it will take time, commitment, and follow through on promises to build trust;
- Approach the negative with critical reflection and stay focused on the positive;
- Give voice to community partners and community members, and be sure to have plans for giving back;
- Be inclusive; be humble. Work from an ethic of care that places a moral responsibility on instilling a compassionate and nurturing attitude towards research participants rather than one that is more distant or objective;
- “For outside researchers, the most important thing is that the community must be ready and wanting this kind of a [collaborative] partnership. With this foundation, all else will fall into place...In our case, outside researchers have a range of expertise and skill sets, including the ability to find, access, manage and deploy funds. All partners have social and professional networks that have been very important in moving our project forward” (Appendix A, p. 32);
- Every project should develop research guidelines and protocols during the initial planning stage;
- Decide collaboratively who will own and curate project data. In this case, the Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre was identified as the holder of copyright and as the primary repository of data;
- Honest, open communication is a necessity;
- Use diverse media and forms of communication to report back to the community;
- Ongoing consultation with community members to determine the next steps for research;
- Create an action plan that goes beyond the scope of the particular initiative, and which views the initiative in the context of a larger set of goals and objectives;
- Effective planning means matching needs and objectives to available resources;
- “We are dealing in culturally sensitive matters, and it is incumbent on outsiders to respect the views and positions of cultural insiders on all questions of the partnership, and to negotiate plans and outcomes with an attitude of interpersonal respect” (Appendix A, p. 32).

## What resources, guidelines, or tools created by the project are available?

- Charter of operating principles and responsibilities for working as a Project Team.
- Tools for outreach: binders with images of the collection, booklets to elicit conversations.
- “A Case of Access” video documentary of the trip to the Smithsonian Institution, produced by the Inuvialuit Communications Society.
- Patterns and instructions for sewing some of the garments in the collection, available through the Inuvialuit Living History website and in a brochure.
- Presentations and publications for diverse public and professional audiences that contain insights on the collaborative process, the knowledge generated through interactions with the collection, and on issues of access to remote collections and archives (see full listing in the project Final Report).
- After the IPinCH phase of the project ended, the project team obtained additional funding to develop the *Inuvialuit Pitqusiit Inuuniarutait/Inuvialuit Living History* website, which offers digital access to the MacFarlane collection, as well as stories, interviews, and oral histories from, by, and about Inuvialuit people, culture, and history.

## Who participated in this initiative?

Project Team: Natasha Lyons, Ursus Heritage Consulting (Project Coordinator), Catherine Cockney, Manager, Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre, Mervin Joe, Western Arctic Field Unit, Parks Canada, Charles Arnold, Adjunct Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary, Kate Hennessy, Assistant Professor, School of Interactive Arts & Technology, Simon Fraser University, Stephen Loring, Arctic Studies Center, Smithsonian Institution; The following were members of the delegation that traveled to the Smithsonian in 2009: Helen Gruben (Inuvialuit Elder), Freda Raddi (Inuvialuit seamstress), James Pokiak (Inuvialuit Elder), Albert Elias (Inuvialuit Elder), Shayne Cockney (Inuvialuit Youth), Karis Gruben (Inuvialuit Youth), David Stewart (Inuvialuit Communications Society), Brett Purdy (Inuvialuit Communications Society), Maia Lepage (Photographer, Inuvik); Organizational Partners: Inuvialuit Cultural Resource Centre, Inuvialuit Communications Society, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Aurora Research Institute, Parks Canada, Reciprocal Research Network, Making Culture Lab at Simon Fraser University’s School of Interactive Arts and Technology, Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center.

## Learn more

This summary was drawn from the final report of the “A Case of Access” project. The full report and other resources created by the project team can be found here: <http://bit.ly/1g7CFLy>

[www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca](http://www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca)

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