

PRESS RELEASE

Intervale Conducts Assessment of Aboriginal Heritage Interpretation Program at Nahanni National Park Reserve

March 2008 - Intervale was contracted by Parks Canada in August 2007 to conduct an assessment of effectiveness of the Aboriginal Heritage Presentation Program at Nahanni National Park Reserve (NNPR), located in the beautiful wilderness area referred to as the Naha Dehe in Northwest Territories. As part of this contract, Intervale and its associates at the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute conducted a literature review and documented case studies of relevant Aboriginal heritage programs in North America and abroad. They also presented a product-market match that identifies several interpretation product opportunities by category and matches them to real and potential markets.

In August of 2007, Intervale President Kathleen Blanchard traveled to NNPR and Fort Simpson to view the Park Reserve, experience interpretive programs, and meet with key stakeholders during the peak period of operation. Over a period of nine days, she met with Parks Canada staff, Aboriginal representatives to the Naha Dehe Consensus Team, community cultural demonstration presenters, student heritage presenters, plus the pilots and outfitters that service visitors to the Park Reserve. The Naha Dehe Consensus Team is the co-management advisory body to the Park Reserve. She was flown to campsites at Rabbitkettle Lake and Virginia Falls along the Nahanni River, where she observed seven guided hikes, community cultural presentations, and campfire programs led by Aboriginal staff and volunteers. Using a set of research tools, she also conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of a variety of key stakeholder groups and brief intercept interviews with visitors.

Results of the assessment show high overall satisfaction with the Aboriginal Heritage Presentation Program among both day users and river users, whose comments also revealed a desire to interact on a more personal basis with the First Nations Elders and other presenters of cultural traditions, crafts, and stories. In general, the program content of the guided hikes, community cultural demonstration programs, and campfire programs was rated highly. Two themes were common to all programs: a desire to maintain the ecological integrity of the Naha Dehe and to maintain the activities and traditions of Aboriginal peoples within the watershed area. It was suggested that a more deliberate effort be made to encourage stewardship action by visitors when they leave the Park. Suggestions for strengthening the program included greater program innovation and use of the senses, and more active engagement with participants. Most weaknesses observed could be addressed through existing or heightened efforts in pre-season interpretation training, setting and maintaining standards, more consultation with Aboriginal representatives, more mentoring, and the creation of a "cultural liaison"

staff position. Adequate financial resources and the means to hire, train, and retain staff were identified as critical to a stronger, enhanced program.

The special opportunity of interacting with members of the local Aboriginal community is one of the most important aspects of the overall NNPR experience. Based on this assessment, it would appear that some visitors are not making the most of that opportunity. Intervale recommends providing more advance information about the Aboriginal Heritage Presentation Program, more frequent contact with Aboriginal staff and community members, and more effective use of facilitators during Program delivery.

Parks Canada and its First Nations partners at NNPR seek to expand and improve the effectiveness of their Aboriginal Heritage Presentation Program and to provide visitors with a quality experience that is effective, memorable, authentic, and traditional. The results of this assessment will combine with information that Parks Canada is collecting from an array of other sources, including an on-line visitor survey. From these studies, Parks Canada and its local First Nations partners at NNPR will work together to develop a new or enhanced, innovative, and effective Aboriginal Heritage Presentation Program at NNPR.

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