



# Connecting Wanuskewin and Schools

**Doug Smith and Sam Robinson, with  
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In conversation between Doug Smith and the staff of the Wanuskewin Heritage Park, a research problem emerged: How could Wanuskewin get more students to the site to help fulfill its educational mandate? Smith assembled a team of primary teachers and put the question to them. Together they decided that Wanuskewin could be connected to Saskatchewan schools through a handbook for primary teachers planning a field trip to the site. Out of this solution to an identified problem, an action research project was born to develop the handbook through collaboration between the teachers, Wanuskewin staff, and university personnel.

The handbook, *Connecting Wanuskewin and Saskatchewan Schools*, is available in hard copy from the Stewart Resources Centre of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation and in electronic form at [www.usask.ca/education/wanuskewin](http://www.usask.ca/education/wanuskewin). It may also be accessed through the McDowell Foundation's web site. The handbook stresses experiential learning supported by classroom activity. One teacher explained:

In order for [primary students] to experience what goes on at Wanuskewin, they have to touch, listen.... That's the way students learn. It has to be visually there. They have to hear it. It has to make sense for them. I believe "hands on" does that.

The teachers also worked to make the handbook practical, comprehensive, easy to use, and applicable to the curriculum. It includes information about the Heritage Park, Aboriginal culture, archaeology, curriculum connections, learning activities in various subject areas, field trip preparation, and resources. As a result, its utility goes beyond site visits to assist teachers in making Aboriginal culture part of their classrooms throughout the year.

The action research process used to develop the handbook was carefully documented by Doug Smith and Sam Robinson and analyzed in a separate report with the same title published by the McDowell Foundation. The report gives an account of the interviews conducted with the project participants, discusses themes that emerged in the interviews, and describes the field trials of the handbook. In their analysis of the project, Smith and Robinson point out that it was representative of the nature of action research in its ability to encompass personal, professional and political objectives. On the personal level, the teachers extended their awareness of Aboriginal knowledge; the Wanuskewin staff were introduced to the world of teachers and their needs in conducting field trips with students; and the university personnel learned more about Wanuskewin, Aboriginal culture and action research. On the professional level, the research produced a handbook of value to teachers and improved field trips to the site for students, teachers and

*It helps to show that Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan are not one and alike. That even if I know that as an Aboriginal person, my students, for example, probably don't have a very clear view on that yet.... They don't know if they are Cree or Saulteau.*



Jan Stirling, Megan Lee, Norine Tourangeau and Colleen Kowaluk visit the Wanuskewin Heritage Park.

Wanuskewin staff. On the political level, the impact of the project was indirect, but deeper and longer lasting. Smith and Robinson state:

It was a project in which three Aboriginal and five Non-aboriginal personnel worked together. Although each of the Non-aboriginal participants had had cross-cultural experience, they noted the value in having the Wanuskewin resource personnel as part of the team. All

participants, it was interesting to note were conscious of the long-range, long-term value of this project. They clearly saw their role as setting a foundation to improve and enhance relationships between First Nations and Non-aboriginal people in Saskatchewan. It was a project to help young children grow in their understanding and acceptance of differences among people.

*I don't come from an education background, so it was really interesting to see the way teachers think and how when you're developing a curriculum the steps you have to go through.*

*Like with the dance, not picking up an eagle feather if it falls, stuff like that was... just kind of blew me away, because I didn't know about it. And I think there is so much stuff, so much information that we don't know.*