South Algonquin Ecomuseum Report

The proposed ecomuseum project would be a cost effective way to promote the tangible and intangible features of the Township’s natural, cultural and economic environments. South Algonquin has a vibrant history of sustainable practices, customs, and traditions that deserve attention. This project will draw attention to the key attributes of the Township as chosen by the citizens, and emphasize the unique experiences, knowledge, and heritage this region has to offer. This concept can utilize the municipality’s natural environment, as it has been vital to the growth and development of the community. Embedded in the ideals of this project is the ability to foster and sustain economic growth in the community. The main objective through this project is to attract tourists who will visit these areas of interest, and spend time and money in South Algonquin. This is one of only a select few rural communities in Canada in which this type of project is proposed, or underway. This ecomuseum project is a dynamic new way to shape rural tourism, at the same time allowing the citizens to participate and discuss key values or beliefs systems that have shaped their way of life here in South Algonquin.

According to Heritage Saskatchewan (2015), an ecomuseum by definition is “a community museum that provides a unique mechanism for community engagement, in which community members work to preserve and learn from [local] heritage in its living form. Through community consultations, stakeholders agree on natural and cultural assets that they value, and they create plans to ensure that they are preserved and used to foster a culture of sustainability”[[1]](#endnote-1) Therefore, this ecomuseum would be a product of your community, and one that emphasizes the conservation and preservation of heritage assets such as practices, festivals, industry, or wildlife. It is important to understand that this is not the typical ‘bricks and mortar’ museum with artifacts situated in one location. Nor are they classified as a park or a ‘Main Street Project”; as these are typically initiated and run by external bodies. Instead, an ecomuseum is a township wide experience focused on educating others on traditions, cultures and skills within your community. Additionally, the ecomuseum would emphasize features that are authentic to South Algonquin such as natural landscape or historical sites with activities that are unique to this township. Many communities simply have this “Main Street” idea that only focuses on a single geographic region and its surrounding built environment. The ecomuseum concept has no set scale, and can encompass an interdisciplinary scope of ideas, creating a more resilient and adaptable community; your community, therefore, *is* the experience. It will encompass a wide range of traditions, skills, and heritage pertaining to all the historical aspects this region has to offer. Ecomuseums provide a dynamic new experience, and will allow community organizations to collaborate and develop a plan that will allow for an economically prosperous future.

**Ecomuseum Principles:**

A primary feature of ecomuseums is their emphasis on the community. Unlike a traditional museum which has a collection of artifacts to attract guests, an ecomuseum uses the entire community’s features as the main attraction. However, the size of the ecomuseum is not necessarily limited by the actual community border, for example, the Kalyna Country Ecomuseum in Alberta is 20,000 square kilometers in size , and contains several communities within the actual “ecomuseum”[[2]](#endnote-2). In an ecomuseum, the community decides what features are important, such as a local industry, historical sites, natural features of the landscape, and cultural practices. As long as it is a feature that the community deems important, any unique community feature can be included in an ecomuseum.

One of the key aspects of ecomuseums is the role that community engagement plays in their development and management. Local residents are responsible for initiating development of the ecomuseum concept, controlling what features of the community the ecomuseum will include and managing the ecomuseum after it is established[[3]](#endnote-3). Ideally, ecomuseum development should include a diverse range of community residents from different backgrounds and interests. However, just because community members take the lead in the project doesn’t mean that residents are left to fend for themselves; in fact, communities looking to develop an ecomuseum can use the aid of local governments, local groups, or any other groups outside the community (such as Brock University). What matters in the long run is that, however an ecomuseum is developed, the community should play the main role in developing it. In essence, the development of an ecomuseum should be done *by* the community, not *for* the community.

Another principle that is important in ecomuseums is preserving both human-made and natural features. When a community identifies a certain aspect, such as a forest, as important, this feature is now officially recognized as valued. Because this feature is valued, effort should be made to protect these features in future planning and actions. Through assigning value to various community features, ecomuseums aim to change people’s attitudes towards conservation and give them an appreciation for conserving important aspects of the community. Due to the fact that ecomuseums place a high value on natural and human-made conservation, ecomuseums emphasize environmental sustainability and strive to incorporate sustainable development as a part of the town’s overall development plan.

Lastly, although ecomuseums can focus on historical elements of community life, enjoying and experiencing *current life* in the community is also a vital aspect of ecomuseums. For example, ecomuseums also focus on enhancing visitor experience by encouraging visitors to engage in local community recreational activities, such as, hiking, cross country skiing, canoeing, etc, and staying overnight in motels, cottages, or campgrounds.

**Ecomuseum Examples:**

Two examples that illustrate the ecomuseum concept are the Kalyna Country Ecomuseum in Alberta, and the Casentino Ecomuseum in Italy.

The Kalyna Country Ecomuseum was established in 1992 by Alberta Historic Sites and Archive Service and the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta. The Kalyna Country Ecomuseum is exceptionally large in size, spread out over 20,000 square kilometers, encompassing ten counties, fifty-eight towns, and several national and provincial parks which provide Kalyna Country’s main attractions. The area’s large size and patchwork of communities, historic sites, and parks offer visitors a wide range of possible activities. Visitors can enrich their experience by visiting local attractions, such as the Elk Point Pioneer Museum, and participating in town festivals, such as the Great White North Pumpkin Fair and Weigh Off in the Town of Smoky Lake. The region’s Ukrainian roots are prominently displayed through cultural attractions such as the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, which hosts events such as traditional Ukrainian holidays, Ukrainian heritage days, and Ukrainian food workshops. Additionally, visitors can take advantage of nature-based experiences by visiting Elk Island National Park and other provincial parks in the ecomuseum. Kalyna Country Ecomuseum strives to provide visitors with year-round activities, such as cross country skiing, snowmobiling, and dog sledding, in the winter, and golfing, hiking, and canoeing in spring and summer.

The Casentino Ecomusem in Italy was founded in the late 1990s by residents in Casentino with help from community funding organizations and town government[[4]](#endnote-4). The ecomuseum is organized along six main themes: archeological, castle civilization, water, woodland, pastoral agriculture, manufacturing. A unique feature of the Casentino Ecomuseum is the Memory Bank, which is a collection of interviews with residents. These interviews cover a wide range of topics, ranging from residents discussing what life was like when they were a child to how to cook a traditional meal. The goal of these interviews are to preserve local traditions, crafts, and traditional religious practices.

In addition to highlighting local traditions, the Casentino Ecomuseum also strives to showcase the relation between locals and the environment. Two main resources are emphasized by the ecomuseum: the history of the region’s relationship to water, and its forests. Water has a long history in the region and has been a dominant force in shaping the landscape. The ecomuseum allows visitors to explore the rivers through trails surrounding the region, and also gives one the opportunity to visit local watermills and become educated on the traditions and knowledge of harnessing the power of water. Visitors receive an sense of the community’s relation to forests and their bounty by visiting the Woodland and Mountains Museum in Stia, and the Chestnut Museum in Ortignano Raviolo[[5]](#endnote-5).

**Benefits to South Algonquin**

Developing an ecomuseum in South Algonquin has the potential to benefit the community in several ways. First, developing an ecomuseum will encourage local tourism. Developing an ecomuseum will allow the township to expand its tourism sector at low cost by emphasizing arts, culture, and nature, addressing concerns raised in the Tourism Summit in 2016 that South Algonquin lacked enough historical sites to develop tourism. In addition, developing an ecomuseum could allow South Algonquin to focus on developing and expanding its winter tourism offerings. Second, since ecomuseums can also highlight local industries, developing an ecomuseum is a great way for South Algonquin to showcase its sustainable forestry practices, which is a goal mentioned in the Township’s Strategic Community Plan. Lastly, developing an ecomuseum can strengthen South Algonquin by leading to more discussion and collaboration between the local government and local residents, and by providing an opportunity for increased participation in developing tourism and learning more about the township and the lifestyles of its residents.

1. Heritage Saskatchewan. (2015). *Ecomuseum Concept.* 1-31. Retrieved from: http://saskmuseums.org/files/FINAL\_Web\_Ecomuseums\_Report.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.kalynacountry.com/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Borrelli N., & Davis, P. (2012). *How culture shapes nature: Reflections on ecomuseum practices. 7*(1). 31-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.casentino.it/en/visit/ecomuseum.html [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.visittuscany.com/en/attractions/ecomuseum-ofcasentino/ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)