

Baffinland's proposed railway near inuksuk chain

Archaeologist says it's the longest intact navigational system of its kind ever documented

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An inuksuk stands near the Meadowbank Gold Mine near Baker Lake, Nunavut in 2009. A chain of inuksuit lies near the route of a proposed railway between Baffinland's Mary River iron mine near Pond Inlet and a proposed port at Steensby Inlet. (Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press)

One of the outstanding questions about the impacts of the proposed Mary River Iron Mine near Pond Inlet is what will happen to a chain of ancient inuksuit.

An inuksuk is a marker built from stones. Inuksuit take many forms and serve a variety of purposes, such as marking a sacred place, an aid for hunters, and in this case to help navigation.

A path to Steensby Inlet is marked by a chain of inuksuit, some dating back 4,500 years, according to Carleton University archaeologist Sylvie LeBlanc. The uninterrupted alignment of nearly 100 inuksuit extends for more than six kilometres from the shore of 10 km Lake to the mouth of Steensby Inlet.

LeBlanc said it is the longest intact navigational system of its kind ever documented.

But the inuksuit are near Baffinland's proposed 150-kilometre railway from the mine to the proposed port at Steensby Inlet.

LeBlanc registered her concerns with the Nunavut Impact Review Board that rock eruptions and vibrations from blasting activities during railway construction could affect the structures.

The Government of Nunavut requested more information from Baffinland in March on how far away the trains would be from heritage sites like the inuksuit, saying the buffer distance between the development and cultural sites was not clearly stated in Baffinland's final environmental impact statement.

Dr. Doug Stenton, Nunavut's director of heritage, wants that distance clearly defined "in order to be assured that archeological and paleontological resources will be protected."

Richard Cook of Baffinland Iron Mines said the company will take steps to avoid archeological sites in the project area.

"There will be no-go zones near the project development area where Baffinland staff will not be allowed," he said.

Cook said Baffinland wants to do an archeological program this summer and that the company has already submitted a work application to the Nunavut Government.