



Guest Blog

What does heritage have to do with wellbeing?

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This post is an extended version of a post that appeared on Heritage Saskatchewan's blog in November 2019. To read that post, [click here](#).

Since the [Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing](#) (SIW) was launched on October 10, 2019, one of the many questions we have been getting recently is: "What is a heritage organisation [[Heritage Saskatchewan](#)] doing with an index of wellbeing?" More simply put, what does heritage have to do with wellbeing?

This is understandable – from a purely auditory sense, Canadians tend to associate "wellbeing" with "health" and "heritage" with "history" or "culture". We have made these internal associations largely based on over a century of how these topics are bureaucratically organised, whether at the government or school level. "Health" and "culture" are not readily linked in our minds, despite the fact that there has been a plethora of modern medical and sociological research linking the two concepts. Our health and culture are intrinsically linked, particularly when it comes to our mental health and when examining our health holistically, both at the individual and community levels.

I will go back to "wellbeing" and "heritage". Wellbeing is not only related to health, but also happiness and comfort¹. One's overall wellbeing could be suffering despite being in excellent health, while one could be in palliative care and still have an overall positive sense of wellbeing. Heritage is important to our sense of wellbeing because it is the lens through which we see ourselves, our communities, and our futures.

¹ Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing's definition of wellbeing: "Wellbeing is achieved when people are physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy; economically secure; have a strong sense of identity, belonging and place; and have the confidence and capacity to engage as citizens."

All of the domains² in the SIW intersect with each other and relate to our heritage. Our definition of wellbeing encompasses health (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual), economic security, and citizenship. A person and/or community with positive wellbeing also has a strong sense of identity, belonging, and place – which ties directly into Heritage Saskatchewan’s definition of Living Heritage.

It is easy to see how health and economic security relate to each other. Those with chronic poor health are less likely to have strong economic security. Those who lack economic security are less likely to worry about healthcare maintenance. If either health or economic security is lacking, citizenship is often of even lower priority. There is a lot of apathy about politics because people think “things aren’t going to get better for me anyways”. These are external expressions of our internal sense of belonging, place, and identity.

Our sense of place is linked to the stories that we tell about it. When we go to a different place, are we excited to talk about where we are from? Ashamed or embarrassed? Do we pretend to be from somewhere else? Do we distance ourselves? Do we talk incessantly about how things used to be, rather than how things are? Do we talk about how we could improve the place we live in? (For that matter, are “the place we live in” and “the place we are from” even the same?)

Places – landscapes, buildings, communities, peoples – have stories to tell. These stories matter to us. Stories about the same place are different for each of us. We change over time, as do places. We think differently about our childhood home depending on the type of childhood we had, meaning even brothers and sisters growing up together can have vastly different senses of place and identity. In turn, this affects our sense of wellbeing.

So how is Saskatchewan doing? How are Saskatchewanians faring wellbeing-wise?

In short, most of the domains measured by the SIW have increased over the past twenty years, reflecting the economic boom of the 2000s and early 2010s. That would indicate that overall, the wellbeing of the average Saskatchewanian has improved since the early 1990s. But that does raise the question – who is the average Saskatchewanian?

This again ties to our sense of belonging: how close are each of us, individually, to this mythical average Saskatchewanian? How close are our communities to the mythical average Saskatchewan community? How are we serving communities as they are? How are we serving our outliers – those that conform least to this mythical average?

There is no question that Saskatchewan has urbanised and become more diverse over the past few decades (in many ways). This makes the “average Saskatchewanian” more elusive and less reflective of the province’s population as a whole. This is a *good* thing, but it changes the story. It changes Saskatchewan’s identity. How does that change how we see ourselves? How we see our neighbours? Our communities?

This is the essence of Living Heritage and how it connects to wellbeing.

More information on Heritage Saskatchewan: heritagesask.ca

More information on the Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing: saskwellbeing.ca

² Education; Living Standards; Healthy Populations; Time Use; Community Vitality; Environment; Democratic Engagement; and Leisure & Culture