

## TOPIC 1.1

# What is “Culture”?

What are some words that come to mind when you think of the word “culture”?

Does art create culture or does culture create art?

## Introduction

Imagine you have just been informed that you have to leave your home in 24 hours. You will never be able to return. Along with your family and friends, you will be travelling to a distant place where you will have to build a new home and community. You are able to take some of your belongings with you. However, all of your possessions must fit into a single travel trunk. What will you take?

In the exercise above you began to identify various objects that form a part of your culture. In simple terms, **culture** is the way of life of a group of people.

Given the fact that you did not have much room in your trunk, you had to give some careful thought about what to pack. Some of your objects may have been for practical purposes, such as cooking or hunting for food. Other objects may have been for relaxation, such as a guitar or a game. You may have included some photographs because they reminded you of close relationships or something special from your past.

Each of the things that you chose to include provides some insight into your culture. However, culture is made up of more than objects. It also includes things

1.1



that are less tangible, such as the way we behave and the values that guide our decisions.

Cultures are complexes of material and non-material features or traits, also sometimes called tangible and non-tangible items. **Cultural traits** are the identifiable elements of a cultural complex. Groups of similar traits are called **components** or sub-systems of culture.

Cultural traits can be organized into three components:

**Artifacts** – the objects, material items, and technologies created by a culture. They provide basic necessities, recreation, entertainment, and most of the things that

make life easier for people. Examples include buildings, tools, cars, musical instruments, and computers.

**Sociofacts** – the structures and organizations of a culture which influence social behaviour. Sociofacts include families, governments, education systems, sports organizations, religious groups, and any other grouping designed for specific activities.

**Mentifacts** – The shared ideas, values, and beliefs of a culture. Examples include religion, language, viewpoints, and ideas about right or wrong behaviour.

**“Culture is everything; culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we tie our ties – it is not only the fact of writing books or building houses.”**

– Aimé Césaire, Martiniquen writer, speaking to the World Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, 1995

### *Experiencing The Arts*

Shanawdithit used drawings to describe her Beothuk culture. View her work on page 638.

1.2



## Culture Complexes

Examined on their own, culture traits can only provide us with limited information about a particular culture. However, when we examine how culture traits connect, we gain deeper insight. When two or more culture traits interact with each other, they form a **culture complex**.

Consider how the following culture traits might interrelate: a pair of skates, knowing how to skate, and enjoying winter activities. What culture complexes can be formed? Playing hockey? Ice dancing? Speed skating? Skating just for fun? Each of these interactions is a distinct culture complex.

Culture complexes help influence and define us. For example, a person who skates may practise at the rink

early every morning before going to school. He or she may also participate in dance to help improve his or her skill as a skater. That individual's circle of friends might also include other skaters. Also, during the Winter Olympics he or she might be more inclined to watch skating as opposed to another sport.

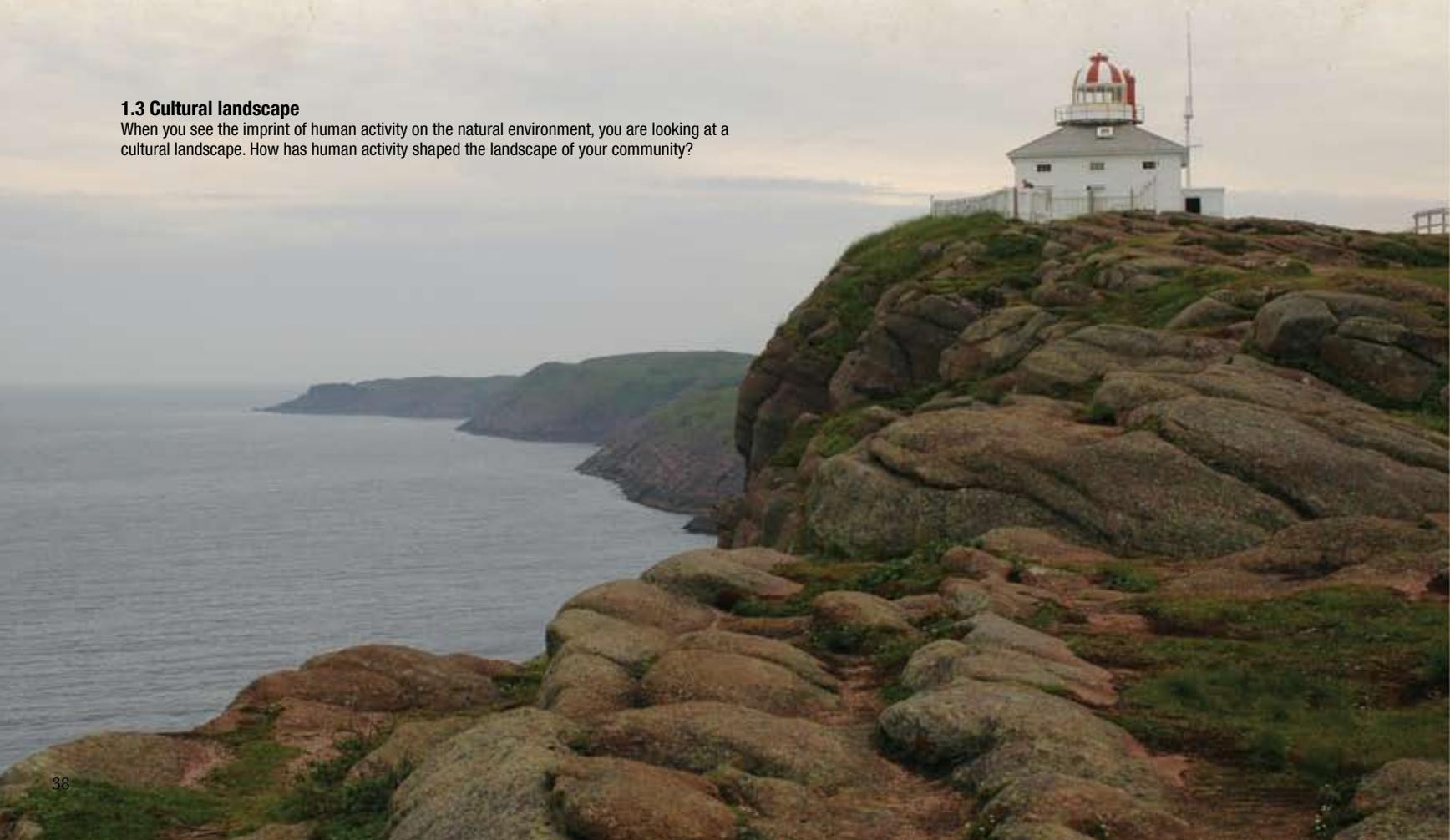
Throughout this course you will be examining the way of life of the people who have occupied "this place" since humans first arrived here over 9000 years ago. By exploring various culture complexes, you will gain a deeper understanding of our way of life today and what our way of life may look like in the future.

**“A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.”**

– Mohandas Gandhi

### 1.3 Cultural landscape

When you see the imprint of human activity on the natural environment, you are looking at a cultural landscape. How has human activity shaped the landscape of your community?





1.4

*Each photograph depicts a culture complex. Identify the artifacts, sociofacts and mentifacts that are a part of each activity.*

## Questions:

1. Think of your school. What are some examples of artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts? Use a chart to organize your answer. Record 10 examples of each.
2. Human activities have shaped the landscape of your community. What are the five most prominent features of your cultural landscape?
3. Which of the following has the most influence on a person's way of life – artifacts, sociofacts, or mentifacts? Explain.
4. As a class, create a collage that represents either the "culture of the class" or "youth culture" in general. Each student should bring in photographs that represent the most significant artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts of the culture chosen.