

Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project

Future Research Partnership Report

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Background

The 'Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project' builds upon the research experience developed within UNBC's Community Development Institute through the Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project. That earlier work identified tourism (in its various forms) to be an important but poorly understood part of northern BC's economy. The current Project made use of our extensive network of community contacts to further explore the opportunities and challenges for the tourism sector across northern BC. The purpose of the Project was to create a foundation of knowledge and connections to support new community economic development work and create opportunities to leverage future research/development funds.

The Project timeline was from April 2005 to December 2005. The research plan involved interviews and data collection with economic development and tourism industry actors across northern BC. The interviews were conducted from April to October 2005 in communities from 100 Mile House to Atlin, and from the Alberta border to the Queen Charlotte Islands. The purpose was to identify core issues supporting and challenging economic development opportunities in the tourism sector. The goal was to provide a foundation to support more detailed research on creating economic development across the region.

Introduction

A key element of the Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project was to create a foundation of information and linkages to support future economic development research. This report highlights some of the linkages and opportunities that have been created through the Project which have the potential for supporting future economic development research collaborations. The timeliness of this research Project, combined with the Community Development Institute's track record of community engagement across northern BC, help to accelerate the formation of these forms of linkages. As a result, some of the future research possibilities identified below are already actively being pursued.

Potential Partners

Through the Project, we were able to identify a range of organizations interested in tourism research. The list below is by no means exhaustive but was developed to highlight the breadth of places from which partners may bring expertise or resources to future tourism research.

Universities:

Simon Fraser University

- Centre for Tourism Policy and Research
- Cooperative Resource Management Institute
- Centre for Coastal Studies
- Centre for Sustainable Community Development
- Department of Resource and Environmental Management
- Department of Geography

University of British Columbia:

- Sustainable Development Research Institute
- Centre for Human Settlements
- Faculty of Forestry
- School of Community and Regional Planning
- Department of Geography
- Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability

University of Northern British Columbia:

- Community Development Institute
- Institute of Natural Resources and Environmental Studies
- Resource Recreation and Tourism Program
- Geography Program
- School of Planning
- Environmental Studies Program

University of Victoria

- B.C. Institute for Cooperative Studies
- Department of Environmental Studies
- Department of Geography

BC Provincial Government:

- Tourism BC
- BC Parks Branch
- Ministry of Economic Development
- Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation
- Ministry of Community Services, especially the Community Transition Branch
- Ministry of Economic Development
- Ministry of Environment

- Ministry of Forests and Range
- Ministry of Tourism, Sport, and the Arts
- Ministry of Small Business and Revenue

Federal Government:

- Western Economic Diversification
 - Community Futures Network
- Rural Secretariat
 - BC Rural Team
- Indian and Northern Affairs
- Canadian Forest Service

Others:

- regional tourism associations
- BC Progress Board
- individual Chambers of Commerce
- BC Chambers of Commerce Association
- individual Visitor Information Centres
- Union of British Columbia Municipalities
- individual municipalities and regional districts
- Northern Development Initiative
- the various provincial trusts now in place
- Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition
- Omineca Beetle Action Coalition

Emerging Partnerships From Project:

As noted above, the timeliness of the Project helped to accelerate the formation of research linkages. This section outlines some of the research opportunities now being actively pursued.

- The Community Development Institute at UNBC is in the midst of developing a deeper working relationship with the Northern Rockies - Alaska Highway Tourism Association (NRAHTA) and the project they are running with Brandon University. The focus of the project is to develop enhanced regional coordination and capacity. The CDI's interest with NRAHTA is several years old and builds upon relationships created through the Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project. Brandon University's support is coming from the federal Rural Secretariat and is being mobilized through their Rural Development Institute. The NRAHTA project represents one of several pilots underway across western Canada to support and develop collaborative rural and regional development approaches.

- Dr. Anne Hardy from UNBC's Resource Recreation and Tourism (RRT) Program is developing substantial new research projects in the Bella Coola area supported by a range of stakeholders. These stakeholders included the Central Coast Regional District, the Bella Coola Tourism Association, as well as BC Ferries. All three of these stakeholders are assisting with the research project costs. The research builds upon an interest in developing a better sense of the tourism market and opportunities for the Bella Coola valley.
- Dr. Anne Hardy from UNBC's RRT Program is also developing and executing a 'drive tourism' project in the Prince George area together with a number of local partners. The focus of the project is recreational vehicle travelers who overnight in shopping mall parking lots. As highlighted a number of years ago by CDI research, this is a growing issue of interest across northern BC. The findings from our current Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project have highlighted many times the need to differentiate the tourism sector into increasingly fine sub-markets in order to effectively develop products that can benefit from potential economic opportunities now being missed. The drive tourism work started this past summer and will continue.
- More generally, the RRT Program at UNBC has entered into discussions with both the Northern BC Tourism Association and the Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism Association around forward planning for a better incorporation of tourism industry issues and opportunities into community and economic development. This has the potential to include both regional strategic level planning processes, as well as research on specific community needs or the needs of specific tourism sub-markets. Current discussions with the Cariboo Chilcotin Coast Tourism Association have the potential to develop into a long term research partnership.
- The CDI at UNBC and Tourism BC are both interested in developing a collaborative research partnership. As first steps in developing this partnership, the CDI met with Richard Porges, Director of Research at Tourism BC, to talk about opportunities and needs. Mr. Porges also came to northern BC to participate as the featured speaker in the Community Development Institute's Fall Speaker series.

Key Research Partnership Opportunities

In addition to the research partnerships and projects that have already developed through the Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project, a number of important areas for future research work were identified. This section outlines some of these opportunities. In each case, pursuit of these research opportunities opens the door to a wide range of partnership possibilities. Similarly, many of these opportunities link research needs from the local, to the regional, and to the provincial levels.

Provincial Parks

- The BC Parks Branch provided good early support to the Project. The park observations report, as well as interviews with economic development stakeholders, highlighted a number of research topics that will require more work. Included among these topics is:
 - the role of local residents in campground use,
 - the information and interpretive needs of campers,
 - links between the provincial park user sub-market of the camping traffic and the rest of the sub-markets in the drive tourism area,
 - ways to more effectively market BC's tourism opportunities and products to this sub-market,
 - as well as the specific services needs of provincial parks campers.

Municipal and Private Campground Operators

- The Project clearly identified a lack of information about how the drive tourism sector of BC's tourism economy is structured. This reiterates earlier findings from the Northern BC Economic Development Vision and Strategy Project. The lack of information about the sub-market structure, and the needs and wants of various component travelers within each of those sub-markets, is limiting effective product development. More importantly, it means that potential economic revenue from some of these drive tourism sub-markets may be passing both communities and regions by for lack of attractions. Potential research topics in this area include:
 - a more comprehensive inventory of the facilities, and services, available through the different campground supply sectors (provincial parks, municipal campgrounds, and private sector campgrounds) across northern BC,
 - a more clear delineation of the drive tourism sub-markets and what they are searching for in terms of accommodations, attractions, and other tourism products,

- a better sense of the different social, demographic, economic, and even philosophical characteristics of these drive tourism sub-markets and how to effectively target information and advertising campaigns to maximize on potential economic opportunity,
- a better understanding of travel behaviours with these individual drive tourism sub-markets in order to understand local and regional impacts if the preferred type of accommodation/attraction/product supplier is not available (could be combined with economic leakage studies), and
- a gap analysis comparing evidence on the facilities and services available through the different campground supply sectors with the demand side needs/wants of the various drive tourism sub-markets

Visitor Information Centres

- A considerable range of research topics were identified through the Project in terms of how to better support the on-going development of northern BC's Visitor Information Centres. These key research areas include:
 - the topic of funding support, funding options, the timing of funding announcements by various support agencies, and implications of annual versus long-term funding arrangements,
 - the topic of human resources and both the hiring of top quality students or staff, as well as the needs/opportunities to increase staff expertise and professionalism through skills/training,
 - the structure of the VICs themselves and can include studies of best practices on how to organize and manage their operations, as well as build linkages with other local economic development organizations,
 - the need to look at best practices information about how to operate (including hours of operation, length of season, and the use of Internet communications technologies to assist with marketing) the VICs in order to maximize local and regional impacts,
 - the need to explore and suggest models for enhanced coordination or networking among VICs in order to ensure that travelers are better serviced, and northern BC retains more of the potential revenues available through the tourism economy,

- types and standards of services being provided through VICs and how these meet the needs of those using these facilities (including how this also needs to be more clearly linked to the wants/needs of the various drive tourism sub-markets),
- a gap analysis for comparing evidence on the demand side needs/wants of the various drive tourism sub-markets with the products and services made available through the VICs, and
- a related gap analysis comparing evidence on the wants/needs of the various drive tourism sub-markets with the ways by which BC tourism operators markets and communicated information about their products and attractions.

Other Suggestions from Economic Stakeholders

- The Project met with a wide range of economic development stakeholders across northern BC. These meetings highlighted potential research needs under three general areas:
 - The first of these concerned a better delineation of the local residents who participate in the community's/area's tourism economy through
 - their use of local/regional campgrounds,
 - their ownership of local/regional recreational property, and
 - their year-round local/regional 'tourism' or 'cottaging' type activities.
 - There was also identified the need to differentiate between short-distance and long-distance travelers for both marketing and product development.
 - There is a related need for research that helps to differentiate between short-visit and long-term stay travelers for both marketing and product development.
- A second general area of future research needs spoke to the limitations on local and regional economic development planning which have been created by a lack of comprehensive market intelligence on the various markets and sub-markets of the tourism industry. This topic of complexity within and among the various tourism market/sub-markets has been noted several times above.

- A third general area of emerging research needs concerned a more detailed and critical evaluation of future trends within the tourism economy. This included:
 - a better understanding of tourism product and marketing implications around the pending retirement of the aging baby boomer population as they will not only be the largest, the healthiest, the wealthiest, but also the best educated population cohort ever to approach retirement in North America,
 - forecasting research in order to explore how the pending relaxation of travel regulations by the Chinese government so as to permit its citizens to more easily come to Canada will affect levels of demands and product needs across northern BC,
 - forecasting focused upon India (a state which already possesses the largest middle class in the world) and how changing levels of affluence may create opportunities for tourism activities and products across northern BC,
 - a more general set of research needs under this topic concern taking a global perspective on evaluating future tourism trends, opportunities, and competitive threats, and
 - research across a global marketplace around an evaluation of the market elasticity of tourism under a range of issues (including but not limited to areas like changing US homeland security regulations, energy costs, SARS/Bird Flu and other health issues, publicity from events such as the 2003 wildfires, and a range of other issues).

Summary

As noted in the introduction, a key element of the Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project was to create a foundation of information and linkages to support future economic development research. This report highlights some of the linkages that have already been created as well as a host of needed research topics and potential partners who may be interested in supporting future economic development research collaborations. The scale of the demand for more information and better research intelligence also highlights that there are roles and opportunities for a wide range of BC's universities, public agencies, and private sector industry operators to participate, share, lead, partner, and contribute. The interest in the Project and the numbers of suggested topic areas for further research highlight again the timeliness of the Northern BC Tourism and Development Foundation Project.