

ABORIGINAL TOURISM

St. Eugene Mission, BC

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Thea Pedersen

STUDENT, FACULTY OF HUMAN ECOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

INTRODUCTION

The Aboriginal tourism industry in Canada is unlike the general Canadian tourism industry, as organizations within the industry place a holistic value on profits, culture, society, and the environment, rather than being primarily driven by profit. Responsibilities of organizations involved in Aboriginal tourism include making a business that is profitable, socially supportive, and environmentally inclusive, in the midst of adequately providing tourist services. Among these responsibilities are challenges specific to the Aboriginal community. Despite the challenges, there are examples within the industry where organizations have flourished by creating a balance between economic return and satisfaction within the community—The St. Eugene Mission Resort is a paragon of this. This report will provide a brief description of the Aboriginal tourism industry in general with respect to challenges and opportunities facing Canadian Aboriginal organizations involved in tourism. It will include a specific case study of The St. Eugene mission, a former residential school, turned tourist destination. This report will explore how the Ktunaxa First Nation community has responded to the project, and how the St. Eugene Mission project is counselling them through their grievances, based on empirical research and a personal reflection.

ABORIGINAL TOURISM IN CANADA

Tourism is a commercial industry by which a particular group demonstrates, teaches, and pro-

motes their lifestyles through range of activities. Aboriginal tourism in particular is described as a set of activities that are “generally consistent with Indigenous values about the sanctity of the land and people’s relationship to it” (Butler & Hinch, 2007, p. 3), where activities are manipulated to demonstrate the value of the land, culture, and beliefs, in order to improve relationships between the Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people of Canada. Aboriginal tourism is a growing industry, as the global tourism industry has demonstrated a shift in importance from a scenic excursion far from home, to a cultural experience where the rate of authenticity takes precedence over the distance travelled (Industry Canada, 2008). In addition, Aboriginal tourism seeks to integrate cultural elements into economic development. Butler et al. (2007) make a connection by stating that Aboriginal tourism demonstrates “a symbolic relationship ... to the extent that cultural survival contributes to economic success and economic success contributes to cultural survival” (p. 3).

Tourism services are difficult to define considering the industry’s inclusive tendencies that promote business within other areas (BearingPoint LP, 2003). For example, a tourist organization’s primary service could be providing luxurious accommodations, but to guarantee success, it is likely to employ other industries including catering facilities, transportation services, and souvenir retailers. Some “tourists shop at local arts and crafts outlets (71%) and antique markets while on their trips (49%)”

(BearingPoint LP, 2003, p. 15) suggesting that this industry is not only economically viable on its own, but it also promotes business in other areas of the Aboriginal economy, including retail.

Aboriginal tourism in Canada services a wide variety of interest groups. The United States is the industry's largest market, and the market expands as far as Western Europe (BearingPoint LP, 2003). The United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, and Switzerland have "markets ... (that) ... have been identified as having (strong) potentials for generating Aboriginal tourism travelers" (BearingPoint LP, 2003, p. 7) to Canada. The United Kingdom is Canada's largest overseas market in terms of tourism activity and generated revenue, while the United States produces the largest number of tourists overall (BearingPoint LP, 2003).

Although Aboriginal tourism acts as a catalyst for other economic activities, there are common challenges faced by organizations in the industry. Business development, management, and marketing are deemed as challenges that inhibit the economic activity of the industry. A lack of marketing skills and expertise are often considered the main threats to the sustainability and survival of an Aboriginal tourist project (Industry Canada, 2008). Knowledge regarding marketing is not just a matter of knowing how to promote the product or service, but knowing *where* to market the product or service. As different markets, for example, such as the United States and some Western European countries, have different interests and reasons for exploring Aboriginal tourist opportunities, organizations must assess the characteristics of each market and tailor their services toward the different markets.

Despite the challenges faced by Aboriginal tourism industry, it can be an economically viable industry, as well as an educational industry, in that it teaches non Aboriginal people about Aboriginal values and culture and promotes a positive relationship between them. Certain types of Aboriginal tourism facilitate education among the services they offer, and when done appropriately, it can benefit both the community as well as the general population. As Butler et al. (2007) states, "much of the harm that has been perpetuated by dominant society on Indigenous people has been, and continues to be, based on ignorance" (p 3). Thus, if such projects are able

to adequately educate tourists about contemporary Aboriginal issues with respect to historical events, the presence of hostile negative relationships between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people will be lessened, as ignorance regarding Aboriginal issues becomes something of the past.

ST. EUGENE MISSION RESORT

The St. Eugene Mission takes advantage of this opportunity, as they have taken a commonly misunderstood chapter of Canadian Aboriginal history and expanded on it by educating people in an economic and socially rewarding way. The St. Eugene Mission, located on reserve land near Cranbrook British Columbia, offers tourists a 4.5 star rated experience with access to an 18-hole golf course, a licensed casino, a gourmet restaurant, and of course luxury accommodations. The St. Eugene Mission is truly one of a kind, as the Ktunaxa First Nation community was the first band to create an economic resource out of a former residential school (Personal Communication, 2012).

A Brief History

In 2003, Sophie Pierre, former Chief of the St. Mary's band—one of the five Ktunaxa First Nations bands—took the liberty of announcing the grand re-opening of the St. Eugene Mission Resort and Casino. This marked an extraordinary accomplishment for the Ktunaxa First Nations people, considering the last opening of the site certainly did not receive the same level of encouragement. Former residential schools are infamous for the negative impacts they have had on students and survivors and their future generations. More often than not, these schools created irreversible feelings of sorrow that stripped the culture away from many Aboriginal people (Amnesty International, 2004), and the St. Eugene Mission was no exception to this daunting perception of residential schools. Gordon Sebastian—part of the St. Eugene Mission security team—suggests that the biggest problem created by residential schools is the after effect, as many former students and their families have yet to receive any emotional compensation for their losses (Personal Communication, 2012)—at least not prior to Steven Harper's public apology in 2008. Gordon was a

student at the former school for eleven years and was also one of the supporters of the project's vision. Sophie Pierre, chair of the St. Eugene Mission board, spent nine years of her childhood as a student at the former school. Neither of them imagined that forty-five years later they would be reopening the site in honour of the Ktunaxa First Nations people (Pierre, 2009 and Personal Communication, 2012).

In 1970, the Government of Canada decided that integrating Aboriginal students into the mainstream educational system would be more effective, thus marking the date of the school's closure (Pierre, 2009). After the school was shut down, the buildings and the land were bestowed upon the Ktunaxa First Nations people on behalf of the government and the church. Ideally, inheriting the land would be beneficial to the community that had lost so much because of the school activities, but in reality, it was the complete opposite as they were bequeathed with an unmanageable liability. Pierre refers to the period between the school closure and the re-opening as a "huge white elephant" (Pierre, 2009, p. 42), as it levied high monetary costs for the five bands to keep it running without any benefit to the community. After the land had been turned over to the five communities, many structural problems occurred, including severe flooding that happened due to poor plumbing (The Scrivener, 2004). Although the former government land had economic potential, the community did not have the resources, the capacity, or the emotional strength to uncover the possibilities that lay in the soil of the St. Eugene Mission, thus abandoning it for over twenty years.

The Project — Challenges

After years had passed since its closure, the Ktunaxa First Nations people were still grieving the losses they had experienced during the years of the school's operation. Due to lasting sorrow within the community, the initial idea to reopen the school as a tourist site received a lot of criticism and resistance (Pierre, 2009). In order to re-open the facility with a new purpose, the project had three requirements: to gather referendum from the five communities, to serve an economic purpose, and to have a secure starting equity. Therefore, in early planning stages,

the project faced many challenges as it lacked initial support and had minimal access to funding (Pierre, 2009).

Before starting the project, the St. Mary's band council needed full support and consent from the other bands in the Ktunaxa First Nations community. Bearing in mind the feelings of loss the victims of the Kootenay Indian Residential School experienced—a feeling that has been passed down through generations—it would seem only natural for survivors and their families to want nothing but for the building and anything associated with it to be destroyed (Personal Communication, 2012). Considering the heartbreak and disappointment they had gone through in the past, community members were reluctant to support the project in fear of being disappointed for a second time (Pierre, 2009). Convincing the community to transform their feelings of remorse into something more positive was a difficult task for Sophie Pierre and other activists—including Gordon—as many people felt that their losses were too overbearing to support the construction (Personal Communication, 2012). In addition to their feelings of resentment towards the old residential school property, many community members had a skeptical opinion about the project considering the reserve had yet to produce any economic success (Pierre, 2009). Sophie Pierre stated during her acceptance of the 2002 Cando Award, "there is little evidence of economic development on the reserve" (Cardinal & Hetu, 2003, p. 4). Considering these shared feelings of doubt, in combination with broken spirits, it was difficult to reach a consensus among community members.

However, despite the negative attitudes threatening business plans initially, project developers were able to slowly gather the support from the bands and community members. Gordon Sebastian talks about the unique emotional investment that community members had in the building and the land. It had a powerful essence, and despite their feelings of grief and resentment, people did not destroy it (Personal Communication, 2012). One community elder believed the project would help them in recovering and healing from their losses. Her words became a catalyst for the communities' support, as she stated, "if you think you lost so much in that building, it's not lost, you just need the courage to go back there and get it. You only

really lose something if you refuse to pick it up again” (Pierre, 2009, p. 42). It was here that the vision of the resort was born: to turn a negative into a positive (Personal Communication, 2012). The Ktunaxa First Nation bands came to a consensus; they were going to invest in this land in order to get back what they had lost. The five communities also agreed that if the school were to be re-opened, it had to serve an economic function that would benefit the Ktunaxa First Nations people (Cardinal et al, 2003). Transforming the former residential school into a tourist project would be the best economic and socially respectful decision and would create the most profit for the community.

Enticing funders and government to support the resort was the next barrier to its development. In order to start the development process, a forty million dollar initial investment was required. A similar doubt that was expressed amongst the community members was shared by funders, as securing funds for entrepreneurs on reserves is often a challenge, and especially in this particular case. First, due to stipulations in the Indian Act, there is often a high risk associated with investing in on-reserve business, as no guarantees exist for funders should recipients of funds default in their repayment. Second, the perceived feasibility of the resort was also a barrier to securing equity. Funders and government believed tourists would not be interested in staying in an abandoned residential school. It was difficult for funders like banks, hospitality institutions and government to see the potential of this economic proposition (Pierre, 2009). Nonetheless, the potential social aspect of this economic project—to be a facilitator of healing for the communities—became the main persuasion that enticed donors to become involved.

Eventually, the project received financing and was able to secure the equity it required in order to begin development. By creating partnerships with The Royal Bank of Canada, Aboriginal Business Canada, Human Resource Development Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and other investors, the St. Eugene Mission was able to develop its forty million dollar resort (The Scrivener, 2004). Although the project had received approval, as it had an economically stimulating business plan, consensus from the five communities, and the forty thousand dollar equity, operating the busi-

ness once it opened was no cinch. Despite the excitement and the success of opening the facility, just months after the grand re-opening, the resort found itself in a state of economic despair and was on the verge of bankruptcy (Pierre, 2006). In order to secure the bank and government loans, the resort needed to seek additional support from an outside source and thus formed a partnership with Coast Hotels and Resorts (Personal Communication, 2012). The St. Eugene Mission found itself in a bind at this point, as they were not ready to expand as quickly as Coast, since they were supported so heavily by government and bank loans, which often take a long time to secure (Personal Communication, 2012). As Sophie Pierre stated, “even though we were in business ... we were beyond broke” (Pierre, 2004, p. 44), faced with the difficult decision to either file for bankruptcy or get investments quickly. After deciding, “failure was not an option” (Pierre, 2004, p. 44) the St. Eugene Mission partnered with Delta Hotels and other First Nations communities in order to stay in business. The partnerships were a success.

Creating Partnerships

By refusing to disappoint a previously broken community and with the support of respected community partners, the resort was able to remain open and abstain from bankruptcy. In 2004, the community owned resort signed a partner agreement with two other First Nation communities in Canada; the Salmon Cree and Mnjikaning (Pierre, 2009). Partnerships amongst First Nations entrepreneurs can be an integral element to a business’ survival, as there are strengths and opportunities associated with forming partnerships in business in general, and Aboriginal on-reserve business in particular (Wuttunee, 2004). There are many reasons why partnerships can benefit a community owned business, including providing access to alternative and larger markets, an increase in access to capital, and a distribution of risk.

Particularly for on-reserve business endeavours, the advantages associated with forming partnerships can act as a saviour to the business. Rural reserves are often located in remote areas and the location may hinder the access to suitable and profit stimulating markets. In addition, many on-reserve businesses lack the skills and

training needed to promote the business, a common barrier seen in the Aboriginal tourism industry specifically (Industry Canada, 2008). For example, Gordon Sebastian stated that upon opening, marketing strategies were poor and the lack of marketing knowledge put the project in a vulnerable position (Personal Communication, 2012).

Partnerships are also attractive to struggling entrepreneurs because of their risk sharing function, which helps to alleviate a lot of the stress associated with sole ownership. Solely owned businesses take full responsibility of their business activity, so considering the higher business risks associated with Aboriginal business endeavours particularly on reserve, forming partnerships is often seen as a positive alternative to bankruptcy. That being said, The St. Eugene Mission Resort was able to reap the benefits of a strong partnership, and upon becoming self sufficient, the Ktunaxa First has the option of buying out the other First Nations (Personal Communication, 2012).

There is a cost-benefit analysis that needs to be considered when partnerships are formed. Since its opening, the St. Eugene Mission has seen a decrease in the amount of Aboriginal employees (Personal Communication, 2012), and this can be attributed to conflicting perceptions of success among the partners. There are strengths and weaknesses associated with joining partnerships and although they may seem extremely attractive to a struggling business, they may not be as appealing to the community in which the business is seeking to serve. That being said, even though the project is able to generate revenue with the existence of a partnership, the overall benefit to the community needs to be considered (Wuttunee, 2004).

The Project Today

After its opening in 2003, the resort served as a cost to the community as opposed to a benefit. However, by debt sharing and entering a partnership, the resort itself has managed to succeed with a 125-room luxury facility, an 18-hole golf course, and an interactive heritage centres (St. Eugene, 2010). The tourism industry is notorious for its ability to provide business for other entrepreneurs, therefore it is no surprise that the resort has been successful in creating jobs for

people directly and indirectly affiliated to the project. To date, it is estimated that approximately 20 percent of employees are Aboriginal, but this number fluctuates with each year and each season (Personal Communication, 2012). Although it is nice to see people from the community working in the resort, it is more important to have “people working in this industry who take it to heart” (Personal Communication, 2012) and people should not be hired based on their ethnic background. Filling a quota is important, but having people who are properly trained in business in general and the hospitality industry in particular are integral to service provision. Of the 20 percent of Aboriginal employees, four of them are former residential school students, including Gordon Sebastian. In addition to his position as a security guard at the resort, Gordon also works as the resort’s tour guide, where he shares his experience at the school and its affect on the modern community. This aspect of the resort contributes to the authenticity of the tourist service, an aspect of Aboriginal tourism that tourists have demonstrated an attraction to.

Based on the clientele, The St. Eugene Mission can attest to the notion that Aboriginal tourism in Canada has become an internationally attractive industry. The history of the site has served as a marketing tool in itself, as tourists from all over the world—including Germany, Belgium, and The Netherlands—have demonstrated a keen interest in the project (Personal communication, 2012). People do not just travel across Canada and the world for the beautiful resort, but they are interested in becoming involved in the historical components that the resort has to offer. Gordon talks about the types of tourists he sees on a regular basis, most of them unfamiliar with the history of the land, including international tourists and Canadian students. “I am especially happy when I see young students taking an interest in the St. Eugene Mission” (Personal Communication, 2012), as more schools are integrating a more Aboriginal studies people into academic curriculums.

CONCLUSION

As Gordon stated, the building has a strong influence over the people of The Ktunaxa First Nations, and although it was established to

redress their losses, it will take years for the benefits to be recognized. Gordon suggests that although the resort is a good start, it will not address the feelings of loss right away. In order to see the impact of this healing initiative, “people have to forgive” and it will take the turn of seven generations for the consequences of residential schools to dissipate (Personal Communication, 2012). Many former Indian residential schools have been destroyed upon school closures due to the tragic memories that subsist.

During the planning phase of the St. Eugene Mission Resort, many preferred to have the old structure completely destroyed before assigning it a new function. However, restoring the building and the former residential school property contributes to the uniqueness of the St. Eugene Mission. By restoring the building, rather than rebuilding it, the reincarnation of the St. Eugene Mission sends a powerful message to the Ktunaxa First Nations people, and other communities. It is an important life lesson for anyone to understand—whether it be an individual, a family, or a community—that backtracking and erasing history is not always possible in life. In post tragic events, regardless of the severity and circumstances, demolishing the reminders of the tragedy is not always an option. That being said, if developers had decided to tear down the former school and rebuild from the ground up, the St. Eugene Mission would elicit a different feeling from community members, families, and individuals who have any connection to the site, a feeling that may not promote the same level of success that the site has to date. Reopening St. Eugene Mission was not just a means of profiting from a community’s misfortunes; rather it can be interpreted as a community’s coping mechanism to address their losses. Not only has the luxurious fabricated atmosphere of the resort promoted tourism, but the mystifying history that resonates in the building has also served as its own marketing tool. In addition to their curiosity regarding the old residential school, tourists are also intrigued by the context of the project as it now serves as a benefit to the community. “People are in ‘awe’ when they come. Not only because of the resort’s beauty but most of them cannot believe that the government could have done this to people” (Personal Communication, 2012) and are often surprised when they learn about this tragic history.

After investigating the project and understanding its functions, researchers and tourists can be persuaded to support the St. Eugene Mission. Rather than capitalizing on the misfortunes of the Ktunaxa First Nations, I have realized that the project made the most of an opportunity to educate tourists in an economically rewarding way. Initially I was curious as to why entrepreneurs did not just reopen the site as a museum or a tribute to the former students and survivors, but I soon realized that by making it a multifunctional project it became more tourist alluring and economically stimulating. In addition, opening the site with a stronger focus on its economic benefit rather than educational purpose, gave the community an opportunity for resurgence.

It is inspiring that the Ktunaxa people were able to heal as a community by simultaneously providing for their people. They were able to overcome the challenges and threats that stood in their way by refusing to acknowledge failure as a possibility. This project sets a positive example for other on-reserve businesses, as forming alliances through partnerships can be a positive alternative to debt or bankruptcy. It is important that when starting a business, entrepreneurs—Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal—understand the challenges and the opportunities associated with a particular industry. It is important to understand what often challenges businesses of a similar nature, and avoiding discouragement by employing alternatives that make business possible, like partnerships. The resort demonstrates that utilizing the appropriate business tools, successful on-reserve businesses are possible.

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