

Seeds of Self-Determination: How Snuneymuxw Built Economic Power

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the development of the Petroglyph Development Group (PDG), the economic organization of the Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN), tracing its growth from initial community-based ventures to larger undertakings such as the co-management of Saysutshun (Newcastle Island Marine Park) and the acquisition of Casino Nanaimo and Elements Casino Victoria. These initiatives illustrate how gradual capacity-building and learning processes allowed the Nation to engage in complex economic activities over time. This case study highlights four central practices found in the Snuneymuxw experience: starting with manageable projects that build operational knowledge and human capital; maintaining a long-term vision for development; aligning investments with cultural values and place-based priorities; and diversifying revenue sources to strengthen economic resilience. The PDG's trajectory highlights how community-led planning and culturally grounded decision-making can shape sustainable pathways toward self-determination and economic sovereignty.

For over 5,000 years, the Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN) has hunted, fished, and lived in Vancouver Island's central east coast. Despite this long history, colonial policies such as the 1854 Douglas Treaty and the Indian Act's land reductions resulted in the Nation retaining only a fraction of its traditional territory (SFN, n.d.). However, 2014's Thap'qum Specific Claim marked a turning point, with the \$50 million and 70-acre settlement providing financial resources, land, and formal recognition of treaty violations (SFN, n.d.).

Like many Indigenous Nations across Canada, SFN views economic development as a means to advance self-determination, cultural preservation, and greater independence from provincial and federal constraints. To achieve this, in 2014, the Nation established the Petroglyph Development Group (PDG), which is owned by the SFN and governed by a board made up of Snuneymuxw Chief and Council members (PDG, n.d.). In its early years, PDG focused on smaller initiatives, including the Tuytaxun General Store, which provided employment opportunities for community members and a steady platform for learning the mechanics of running community-owned businesses (PDG, n.d.). As Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun (who works with PDG) explains, the work "brings me a lot of pride to be able to help advance economic reconciliation for SFN, to contribute towards the creation of new jobs and careers for our people, and to work towards establishing sustainable wealth for future generations" (Vancouver Island University, 2021). Importantly, the lessons SFN and PDG learned from their involvement in the community and the store created a framework that allowed them to pursue larger and more complex ventures over time.

One of these larger challenges was the stewardship of Saysutshun, also known as Newcastle Island Marine Park. For SFN, this place has always been a sacred village site for hosting ceremonies, as well as a traditional hunting ground ("Newcastle to Saysutshun," 2021). In Hul'q'umi'num, a Coast Salish language spoken by the Snuneymuxw people, Saysutshun means 'training for running,' which contextualizes the island's use as a place of preparation.

Today, PDG cares for Saysutshun in partnership with BC Parks. Visitors are welcomed with cultural and tourism experiences that reflect Snuneymuxw knowledge and practice, including walking tours guided by community members, traditional salmon barbecues, and programs bringing the land's stories to life (PDG, n.d.). These activities generate income while also strengthening connections to land, language, and identity. For SFN, economic development expresses identity, strengthens community capacity, and creates opportunities that will carry forward to future generations. These ventures illustrate a broader movement that integrates traditional values with contemporary governance and positions economic empowerment as a mechanism for nation-building, allowing SFN to identify and address their specific needs without external oversight.

The shift from small-scale enterprises to transformative projects reached a new level in June 2024, when PDG signed an agreement with Great Canadian Entertainment to acquire Casino Nanaimo, located on Snuneymuxw traditional territory (Nightingale, 2025). The deal included operational control and the transfer of the land title, reaffirming SFN's territorial and economic sovereignty (Great Canadian Entertainment, 2024). In September 2024, PDG further extended its reach through a second agreement to

acquire Elements Casino Victoria (Sweetman, 2024). These landmark acquisitions were finalized in January 2025, following regulatory approvals by the BC Lottery Corporation and the Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch (Porter, 2025). Under the agreement terms, PDG received two years of transitional operational support from Great Canadian Entertainment to facilitate a seamless handover (Durling, 2024). PDG's current focus includes maintaining Great Canadian Casino's staffing structure, integrating the newly acquired teams, and deploying operations to generate revenue that supports broader community investments (Porter, 2025). This will ensure a smooth transition and a reliable revenue flow to support SFN's ongoing development goals.

This investment was a major step on the community's road to self-determination, reflecting years of negotiations and vision. In an interview with Canadian Gaming Business, PDG CEO Ian Simpson highlighted that Snuneymuxw leadership has been working toward casino ownership since the 1990s with an eye towards long-term economic independence (Porter, 2025). By acquiring the Nanaimo Casino, SFN regained control over a valuable downtown asset and reclaimed land at the heart of its historic Xwsol'lexwel village site. PDG and SFN leadership emphasized that future development around the casino will center on community benefits while honouring the location's cultural significance (Johnny K, 2024).

Furthermore, the acquisition of the two casinos was motivated by a culturally rooted connection to gaming. As Simpson stated, "Gaming culture is very much part of the fabric of Snuneymuxw" (Porter, 2025, para. 5). Traditional games, such as Slahal, have been played by the Coast Salish People for thousands of years. According to oral history, the game was given to them by the creator, and game pieces over 14,000 years old have been found (Deveiteo, 2021). This deep-rooted connection highlights how these acquisitions align not only with SFN's economic priorities but their cultural ones as well.

Indeed, the significance of these acquisitions goes far beyond the economic. Snuneymuxw Chief Mike Wyse emphasizes these sites' symbolic importance for land reclamation, national sovereignty, and the foundational structure of the Nation (Nightingale, 2025). And, as PDG President Erralyn Joseph notes, these acquisitions returned sacred ancestral village sites to the community (Johnny K, 2024). In light of this, SFN is currently exploring sustainable housing and infrastructure on lands previously occupied by Camp Nanaimo, a former military camp whose lands were transferred to the Nation in 2024 (Province of British Columbia, 2024; Rawnsley, 2024).

These acquisitions represent decades of Indigenous economic planning, persistent negotiation, and strategic pursuit of self-determination. The acquisition of Casino Nanaimo and Elements Casino Victoria signals a return of economic agency to SFN, establishing a visible presence on ancestral land and laying the financial groundwork for long-term, culturally rooted development. For many SFN members, these transactions are viewed as generational victories in reclaiming jurisdiction over territory, infrastructure, and capital investments previously denied to the community.

One of the most immediate impacts is the generation of own-source revenue, which is income derived from economic ventures that are independent of federal or

provincial transfers. These funds can be reinvested in essential programs, such as housing, language revitalization, youth outreach, elder care, and infrastructure, without the restrictions often associated with government funding (Petroglyph Development Group, 2025). Through PDG's stewardship of gaming profits, SFN is expanding its investment portfolio while maintaining direct control over spending priorities, without the oversight of provincial and federal governments.

Equally important is the emphasis on employment and workforce development. PDG leadership affirmed that both casino acquisitions retained existing staff and prioritized professional development for SFN members (Porter, 2025). These efforts align with the Nation's broader goals to build human capital and foster long-term career pathways within the local economy. PDG's portfolio today includes work in gaming, tourism, cannabis, transportation, and land management, a portfolio that reflects years of deliberate effort, thoughtful partnerships, and a consistent focus on creating lasting economic opportunities. Furthermore, by investing in different industries, the Nation is reducing risks and opening new pathways for professional development. This approach supports economic resilience and creates a broader range of opportunities for individuals within the community to grow and thrive.

Looking ahead, the Snuneymuxw First Nation is well-positioned to generate sustained revenue, attract visitors, expand trade, and influence regional planning decisions. Building on a strong foundation of culturally aligned development, the Nation has demonstrated how strategic planning and economic diversification can support long-term community well-being. Over the coming decade, Snuneymuxw is becoming a leading example of Indigenous-led urban renewal, where economic growth strengthens both cultural vitality and political independence. Future development will continue to advance prosperity on the Nation's own terms and within its traditional territories.

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