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Indigenous tourism oper significant growth in rec in rural areas, but some communities aren’t getti

BY ROBERT WISLA

Over the last few decades, First Nations have become a significant portion of British Columbia’s massive tourism industry, from running resorts, casinos, hotels and gas stations to wineries and experience tours. Across the province, there has been substantial growth in Indigenous-led tourism.

A labour market report by Indigenous Tourism BC (ITBC) found that, in 2017, more than 400 Indigenous tourism-focused businesses were operating in the province, which contributed about $705 million in gross domestic output to the provincial economy and more than 7,400 full-time jobs, 48 per cent of which were filled by Indigenous people. These businesses represented $387 million in wages and salaries and more than $39 million in tax revenue.

While the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on tourism in B.C., industry experts today expect to see a significant rebound in Indigenous tourism over the coming years as visitors, both local and international, are increasingly interested in authentic experiences and learning more about Indigenous culture and traditions.

A growing industry

Paula Amos, of Hesquiaht and Squamish Nation heritage, serves as the chief marketing and development officer for ITBC, an organization dedicated to advancing Indigenous tourism throughout the province by fostering partnerships, building capacity, and advocating for industry growth.

Indigenous-led tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the industry, and that growth is mainly due to more travellers seeking a deeper understanding of the people and places they visit, according to Amos.

“I’ve been working with Indigenous Tourism BC for over 20 years, and my goal was always to work in economic development for Indigenous people. But I think the biggest return for me is that we get to educate visitors about who we are ... through tourism,” Amos says.

“It shifts our identity of who we are as a people here. With reconciliation, there’s economic reconciliation, but there’s also education, which is a big component of that learning, and when you’re travelling, that’s part of the richness of B.C., the diversity that we have here.”

As the Indigenous tourism landscape continues to grow, so too does the diversity of experiences on tap, adds Amos.

“Wherever you go, you’re going to have a different experience. And we have so many different languages in the province,” she says. “There is a lot of rich history here that people don’t know about, to learn about it, besides the dark history. It’s an exciting industry, and I think it’s giving voice to Indigenous people.”

With more than 200 First Nations speaking 34 languages and close to 60 dialects, B.C. has one of the most diverse makeups of Indigenous people in the country. According to the 2021

PHOTO BY ROBIN O’NEILL COURTESY OF THE SLCC

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census, 290,210 people identify as Indigenous (Metis, First Nations and Inuit) in the province, making up nearly six per cent of B.C.'s population overall, and representing 16 per cent of Canada's total Indigenous population.

While international visitors continue to make up the majority of tourists seeking out Indigenous cultural experiences, Amos says, over the last few years, Canadians are becoming more interested in First Nations culture and traditions themselves, particularly after the harrowing 2021 discovery of children's remains at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School.

"It's been interesting, because the international travellers were always the key market, mainly for Indigenous tourism businesses, but during the pandemic, with reconciliation, with UNDRIP and also the finding of the 215 [children], that seems to have shifted," she says.

"Locals want to learn more about Indigenous First Nations people and Indigenous people in British Columbia. So, we are seeing growth happen for Indigenous tourism from the domestic market, which is great for businesses because they were able to survive through the pandemic."

According to Amos, Indigenous communities are increasingly viewing tourism as a vital economic driver, with First Nations across B.C. buying existing tourism operations and making them their own. She highlighted examples such as the Heiltsuk Nation on the Central Coast purchasing the Shearwater Resort and Marina, the Gitxaala Nation buying the Crest Hotel in Prince Rupert, and other nations purchasing resorts in the Thompson Okanagan region.

"I think for people during the pandemic who were thinking of retiring or getting out of the industry, they got out of the industry. But First Nations people are now seeing tourism as an economic driver. It's become an opportunity to purchase the existing tourism assets; it's expanding their portfolio for economic development," Amos says.

"[B.C. has long] been a rich province for fisheries, forestry, oil and gas. But tourism has always been a strong industry as well, and now we're seeing more and more First Nations communities getting involved."

A regional success story

If you're looking for a prime example of an Indigenous tourism success story, you can't do much better than the Xwisten Experience Tour, which has grown significantly over the past two decades.

The Xwisten, also known as the Bridge River Indian Band, a community and people within the larger St'át'imc Nation, is located 11 kilometres north of the District of Lillooet. For the past 19 years, the band has sought to educate people from across the world on their people's distinct culture, language, and way of life.

Throughout the one- or three-hour-long tours, local guides take visitors through the Xwisten's traditional fishing grounds, along the Bridge and Fraser rivers, where the St'át'imc people have lived and fished for thousands of years.

The experience allows visitors to gain an understanding of the unique culture, traditions and language of the Xwisten people, and provides significant economic benefits to the rural community.

Band member Nikki Raven Frank is in her third year as a tour guide, following in the footsteps of her mother, one of the Xwisten's original guides when the experience tour launched in 2004.

"We really want to share the experience and the knowledge and the culture of our St'át'imc Nation to any guests and travellers who want to come through," Frank says. "It's just mainly about showing the culture and how our ancestors survived for centuries."

The three-hour tour includes a visit to an excavated pit house where members of the Xwisten lived for centuries, offering insights into how and where the Band fishes—along with a meal. In this case, salmon caught fresh from the river and barbecued at the Bearfoot Grill.

The tours have grown considerably in popularity over the last 20 years, especially in the previous decade, with tourists coming from near and far, particularly after the Sea to Sky portion of Highway 99 was upgraded ahead of the 2010 Winter Olympics.

"The neat thing about this tourism is seeing it becoming very successful over the years," Frank says. "I definitely see a lot more tourism happening because a lot of my tourists do come from Whistler [and] the Sea to Sky, and I see our community finally going on the map after 20 years."

As the tours grew in popularity, the Band expanded them, adding better signage, a concession stand, viewing platforms, and employing more band members to work as guides and various other positions.

"We didn't have the website or brochures or anything [in the beginning], and every year we've expanded, and having this business grow, just by word of mouth, all the way internationally through social media, is great," Frank says.

"They love the sights, the views, the stories, the songs. I always sing our guests some of our traditional songs inside the pit house to give it a stronger feel," she adds of the visitors she sees on the tour.

"A lot of people don't know about St'át'imc culture, but by the end of the tour, they have a better understanding of what the people have been through."

It's through these first-hand experiences, shaped by the people who have lived on these lands for generations, that true empathy is created.

"More people are knowing more about our people; they have more sympathy and understanding, because that's what we talk about as well," Frank says. "I just want to keep on encouraging people to take our tour. We look forward to meeting everyone. And we're always open and welcoming."

PHOTO BY RYAN ROBINSON COURTESY OF THE SLCC

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Indigenous tourism at a Sea to Sky high

In the Sea to Sky, the Lil'wat and Squamish Nations have led the way in developing a variety of successful tourism-focused operations across the region.

The most significant of these is inarguably the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre (SLCC) in Whistler, the award-winning Indigenous museum that shares the stories of both Nations on whose shared, unceded territory it sits.

Heather Paul is the executive director of the SLCC. Over her time working for the organization, she has seen the positive effects the museum has brought, both culturally and economically, to the Nations and wider community.

"The SLCC was built as a legacy of the shared agreement between the Squamish Nation and Lil'wat Nation. At that time, it was an unprecedented, shared agreement, and it's often said also to be a legacy of the [2010] Olympics," Paul says.

"Its purpose is to share the culture, language and history of both Nations and how distinct and unique they are within the world and also, over the last three years, has turned into an essential service for the community as well," she adds.

"As the road and the path towards Truth and Reconciliation lands more in the classrooms and at dinner tables, in the workplace, those conversations are becoming more at the forefront. People are looking towards places like cultural centres to learn, and it is your first stop

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE XWISTEN EXPERIENCE TOUR

in understanding people who were originally from whose territory you're on."

The SLCC provides substantial benefits to the Nations through meaningful employment for 56-plus people, 95 per cent of which are Indigenous and mostly live on reserves, ranging from the Lower Mainland to Mount Currie and beyond. Paul says that, in 2022, the SLCC paid more than $1.2 million in payroll and contracts to Indigenous people.

In addition to meaningful employment, Paul says the organization is also working to deliver a sense of community to the Indigenous staff who may not feel like they belong in Whistler.

"We've worked hard and created programs to improve that sense of belonging, and part of that was educating the community about stories and the culture and the language and getting to know [the SLCC's cultural ambassadors] by name: who they are, what they love and how they love. How they show up in authentic and giving ways, for not only the community, but for the world, as we open our doors to tourism."

Approximately 46 per cent of visitors to the SLCC come from outside of Canada, with the remainder from the Sea to Sky (21 per cent), British Columbia (19 per cent), and the rest of Canada (14 per cent).

Paul sees the SLCC as an important step towards wider Truth and Reconciliation, a hub of educational programming that has helped people from far and wide better understand the unique and distinct cultures of the Squamish and Lil'wat.

"We estimated we've had about 500,000 people go through the museum experience since we opened, and I would guess 499,900 have been changed," she says.

"Whether they're changed in the sense that they understand an Indigenous perspective and lens or learn something about the culture, the flora, the people or the language that makes them think differently, or as simple as our ambassadors teaching someone when they leave to not use the word Indian again."

That knowledge doesn't start and end with each individual visitor either, Paul says.

"That story travels with them when they share what they learned when they were here; those stories end up at the dinner tables with family and friends. The truth keeps pushing itself forward like a paddle in a canoe," she adds.

An emotional Paul describes the SLCC's ambassadors as one of the greatest gifts Whistler has been given in the last 15 years.

"They gift themselves with their time in a space that can be tricky and uncomfortable with questions that are fuelled from ignorance, that the person doesn't mean, but still can hurt," she says.

"They show up every day and do it again with joy and pride because they're speaking the voices of their ancestors and their great-great-grandchildren who they go out and love even though they haven't been born yet."

Is everyone benefitting from Indigenous tourism's growth?

While increased visitation can bring substantial benefits to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike, it can also bring challenges to smaller First Nation communities which, in some cases, are not seeing the economic benefits while bearing the brunt of the negative impacts, such as increased pollution, littering, nascent trespassing and increased traffic through their reserve communities.

N'Quatqua is one such Nation that is not receiving its fair share of the Sea to Sky tourism pie; located about 77 km north of Whistler's Village Centre, near the shores of Anderson Lake, in the last few pandemic-fuelled years, the small community of about 400 people experienced a surge in traffic, as more visitors travelled through their reserve to reach the remote lake.

"The numbers are growing pretty fast. They have to go right through the middle of our community. There are literally hundreds of boats that have to go by our community," says N'Quatqua Chief Micah Thevarge.

"Now people are noticing the pollution in the lake because we have so many boats, and we don't know if boats are being pulled out of the ocean and right into the lake, and then they're gone from one lake to another without being cleaned."

With the added traffic, Thevarge says many N'Quatqua are growing increasingly concerned that one of their kids, pets or free-range animals might get hit by a passing vehicle, which would pull away the already scant resources from the community.

"I think the biggest thing for me still is the pressure on all the emergency services, all the first responders, like the police. The tribal police have to cover so much area already, and they're short-staffed, and when we have more traffic, there'll be a lot of accidents and stuff like that. So, it takes away services from the community members," he says.

According to Thevarge, the Nation began to see an increase in traffic due to the closure of Joffre and Lillooet lakes during the pandemic, as well as through people discovering Anderson Lake via social media.

While traffic through the community continues to rise, Thevarge says none of it supports the Nation.

"N'Quatqua doesn't benefit from it at all," he adds.

While the Nation used to operate a gas station and convenience store in the heart of the reserve, it closed down in 2022 due to myriad complex factors, resulting in the community losing one of the few means it had to capture some of the economic benefits from passing visitors.

"Right now, only a few community members with private property are benefiting from the tourists; they either own a campsite on their private property, or maybe they allow helicopters to land on their private property to do heli-skiing in the mountains," Thevarge says. "That affects our people because it's our backcountry, and when we go hiking out there and touring around ourselves, we're finding all this garbage and stuff that could only be the heli-skiers or the snowmobilers that leave it up there."

Thevarge says his community doesn't really have a relationship with regional tourism advocacy organizations, and explained that managing this growing number of tourists is challenging for a small band with limited capacity and other pressing priorities.

"There are fishing tours that come out of Pemberton, or come out of wherever, and so they're utilizing our lakes and rivers and bringing more people in, and ... there's no consultation whatsoever for running a business in and around our community," Thevarge says.

Thevarge says the Nation is looking at hiring an economic development manager who would focus on opportunities in and around the community and make plans for tourism and other business endeavours, but is waiting until the completion of a new administrative building before starting the process.

Growing relationships

Managing growing tourism in Indigenous communities either not wanting or not equipped to handle waves of visitors can be challenging. That's why impressing the proper etiquette on tourists visiting these cultural areas is crucial to prevent accidental disturbances of spiritual sites or traditional foraging grounds.

Melody Thacker works for Tourism Lillooet, and manages the Lillooet Visitor Information Centre at the historic Miyazaki House and says there is an ongoing effort to grow tourism opportunities with local First Nation communities and improve cultural awareness of the land.

"As a local resident, even before I worked here, I've been pretty vocal as an activist, and I have for a long time tried to gently say to people you're on unceded territory, and if you want to go to these [First Nation] areas, you should have permission," Thacker says.

"When I send people out to Xwisten or farther out, say up the Bridge River Valley towards Gold Bridge or the Yalakom, I do a lot of explaining. Sometimes, I will spend upwards of an hour with people talking to them about safety, respect, fire safety, invasive species, animals, and where they can go and where they're not open to go."

PHOTO BY ROBERT WISLA

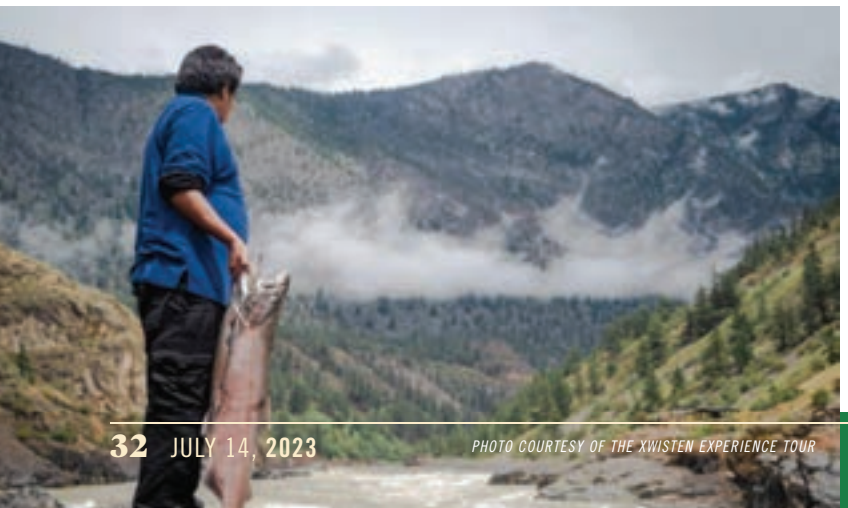
Tourism Pemberton executive director Christine Raymond says there is ongoing consultation with the Lil'wat Nation on managing tourism in the region, especially when new projects are proposed, but that doesn't happen to the same degree with smaller surrounding St'át'imc communities—something she's eager to change.

"If we think that there's a conversation and there's not, then let's have that conversation," Raymond says. "How can we support them, and how can we bring those dollars, and how can we share [the benefits of tourism]?"

Walt Judas, CEO of the Tourism Industry Association of BC, says that building relationships with Indigenous communities is key to the overall success of the industry across the province, and there is a vested interest in growing the sub-sector.

"It's vital for our sector to succeed that communities and businesses that are non-Indigenous in nature, particularly the businesses, have to have relationships with First Nations. With all of the bands and individuals that are decision-makers within First Nations, it's vital that those relationships are cemented and nurtured and ongoing for the success of our sector now and into the foreseeable future," he says.

"I think just from a social licence perspective and opportunity perspective, to partner with First Nations, those relationships are vital. I wouldn't suggest, though, that they've necessarily been cemented across the board within every community or every business in every part of the province. We still have a way to go." ■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