

What is shared? Gitga’at community perspectives on ecologically supported cultural tourism development in Hartley Bay, British Columbia

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Introduction:

The lands and waters of the Gitga’at First Nation’s coastal territory provide essential foods and other resources that support the Gitga’at way of life. The Gitga’at continue to maintain their connection with their lands and waters, harvesting resources to support both contemporary and traditional economic interests. Throughout the year the Gitga’at make seasonal rounds within their territory to take advantage of the resources available in different locations. In May, several weeks to a month are spent at a seasonal camp at Kiel on Prince Royal Island to harvest seaweed, halibut, spring salmon, and shellfish. In September, a similar seasonal round is made to the fall camp at Kitkiata Inlet, also known as “Old Town”, where sockeye, chum, coho and pink salmon, ducks and geese, and wild berries are harvested (Turner & Clifton 2006).

In recent years, however, internal and external pressures, including school and employment demands, lack of suitable housing at the camps, the high costs of fuel and difficulty finding transportation, have begun to make wide community participation in the marine food harvests that take place at the camps more challenging. Some even fear that the continuation of the camps may be in jeopardy. In recognition of decreased participation in the camps over the last few decades, the community is exploring ways to ensure that the seasonal camps and the opportunities they provide remain a central part of the Gitga’at way of life. Establishing a community-owned, ecologically supported cultural tourism¹ enterprise to help subsidize the camps is an option that is being considered. The Gitga’at First Nation already has experience with tourism² and has been

¹ Ecologically supported cultural tourism refers to tourism products that focus primarily on cultural sharing, but also offers ecological components. Kutzner, Wright and Stark (2009) describe this as a ‘dual-track’ approach that takes advantage of both ecological and cultural tourism niche markets.

² Wildlife viewing tours, a small inn, a bed and breakfast, a pizzeria, other outdoor recreational activities and cultural tours of the village are examples of the activities and infrastructure already available to tourists visiting Hartley Bay. In addition, the Gitga’at First Nation also has protocol agreements in place with

considering building the industry for several years (Gitga'at Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2003).

Objectives and Study Methods

The present project seeks to explore community member responses to the cultural tourism enterprise proposal. What kinds of tourism would provide lasting benefits to the community? And, how does the community define those benefits? Unpacking questions of “appropriateness” in setting up the cultural tourism enterprise is a key objective in this research. What are considered appropriate ways to use the natural, intellectual, and cultural resource endowments of the Gitga'at First Nation to meet their evolving needs? And does ecologically supported cultural tourism fit within those parameters? Rather than concentrating on different opinions encountered while conducting this research, we propose that areas of cross-community agreement may help to reveal an acceptable metric for evaluating areas of discord.

The focus of this qualitative research project was established through consultation and collaboration with members of the Gitga'at First Nation, particularly the Gitga'at Marine Use Planning Committee. This consultation period included an introductory visit to the community in February 2009. The data were gathered during May, June, and September of 2009. Semi-structured interviews with elders and key informants, participant observation, and community discussion sessions were the data gathering instruments employed.

Results

As can be expected in any community, these questions generated a variety of responses reflecting individual attitudes, perspectives, and priorities. Some generalizations, however, can be made about participant responses. For example, maintaining the vitality of marine and terrestrial resources was considered to be of the utmost importance. Similarly, the harvest camps were highly valued by all the research participants. By contrast, there were divergent responses concerning the desirability of

fishing and wilderness lodges and other tourism operators within the Gitga'at Territory. Tourism is now a major seasonal employer (FERENCE Weicher & Co. 1999).

tourism development connected with the harvest camps. Other key findings are summarized in Table 1.

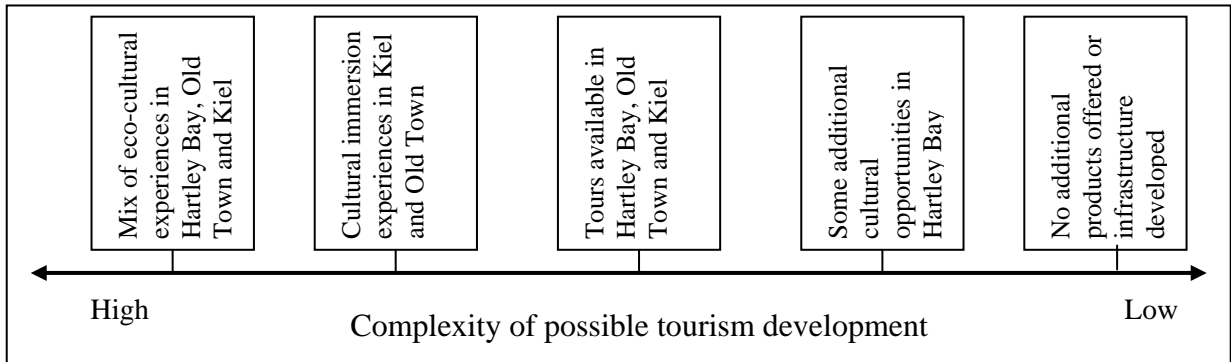
Table 1: General areas of community agreement and disagreement with respect to Gitga’at tourism development

Agreement	Disagreement
Generally positive attitude towards tourism development, if it is done right Desired low environmental impact Necessity of diligent monitored Product offered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deep experiences, including meaningful interactions and learning Increased tourism would provide many spin-off opportunities The harvest camps are very special places (food, culture, family, community) Comfort with sharing and building a tourism product based on traditional knowledge Desire for Gitga’at control over resources within their territory	Product offered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Length of stay (hours to days) - Location of stay (Kiel, Old Town, Hartley Bay, and other areas in the territory) Level of comfort with community-owned model The value and desirability of partnerships

Discussion and Conclusions

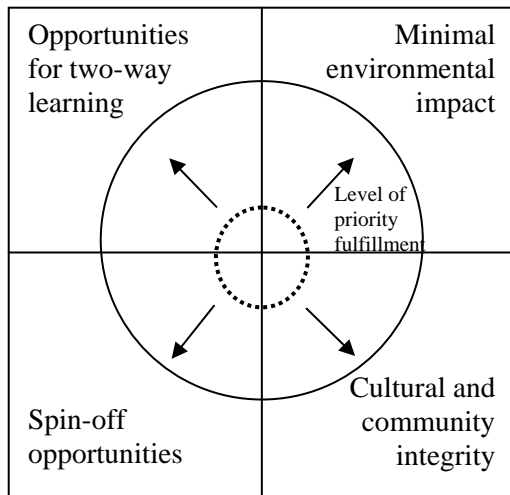
The preliminary findings show areas of general consensus within the participant group and other areas of disagreement. Examples of agreement include the importance of environmental sustainability and the desire to continue providing opportunities for cultural practice and transmission, many of which are intimately linked with the harvesting and processing of marine foods, for members of the Gitga’at First Nation. The harvest camps at Kiel and Old Town were universally recognized as hubs for these types of activities. The future of the camps, the value and desirability of tourism, and the evaluation of thresholds, such as acceptable locations for guests to visit and the length of time they should stay, generated much more diverse responses. Rather than concentrating on differences, we propose that areas of cross-community agreement may reflect community priorities that could be used to evaluate the many tourism development options available to the community (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Eco-cultural tourism products the Gitga’at First Nation could offer visitors to their territory based on participant responses



The priorities that fall from the areas of agreement are: environmental sustainability; ensuring and enhancing opportunities for cultural transmission and the building of culturally relevant skills, including those connected to marine food harvest, and understanding of the Gitga’at cultural landscape for community members through interactions with guests; dispersed benefit through spin-offs; and, ensuring community and cultural integrity. We propose that the tourism options be assessed with these priorities in mind.

Figure 2: Community priorities for tourism development



There are two types of decisions that need to be made surrounding the product options. One is a coarser choice between the options, or combinations thereof. The other is a finer level of decision-making to define the characteristics of each product option. We propose that a metric based on community priorities can help at both scales of decision-making. A picture of the most desirable configuration for each possible product can be built and clarified by asking

what could be done to maximize the products potential to fulfill the community’s priority set (Figure 2). If this type of analysis is performed for each product option, some options may emerge as superior to others in their potential to optimize community priorities.

A community-based enterprise may fit the needs of Gitga'at Nation, if the development is controlled by them. This paper does not suggest what the results of the decision-making process should be, but rather seeks to build a diagnostic tool that could help explore and assess the options. However, many of these choices will be contentious and difficult. Should the community decide to move forward with ecologically supported cultural tourism development, such decisions will be necessary. The more explicit and deliberate the trade-offs and decisions surrounding the “if and how” to move forward with tourism development are, the more positive the outcomes will be and the more successful the community-owned enterprise will be in meeting community needs.

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