

Spirit of enterprise

Tourism on 'the rez' is helping native bands wean themselves from welfare and preserve their culture

By Karen Mazurkewich for the Financial Post

Anti-logging protests were a normal part of life for Gisele Martin. As a kid growing up in Clayoquot Sound, she watched her father, a leader from the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations tribe, participate in blockades with his handmade cedar dugout canoe. Predictably, the protests attracted journalists from far and wide. But unexpectedly, all that media coverage attracted tourists, too.

"After the 1993 blockades, people started coming and asking to see the big trees," says Ms. Martin. Her father, who skippered a whale-watching boat, recruited his young daughter as an interpretive guide. Now 29, Ms. Martin has taken that experience and turned it into an eco-tourism operation of her own, using her father's handmade dugout boats for excursions to old-growth forests. "I don't want to sell my culture, but I want to share it," she says.

Having helped save the land, the Martin family is now making a living off it. Ms. Martin is one of the new breed of aboriginal business leaders who view tourism as both a viable enterprise and a way of preserving a unique lifestyle. According to the National Study on Aboriginal Tourism released in 2003, there are more than 1,500 First Nation businesses catering to tourists.

Traditionally relying on government subsidies and casino revenues, there is "enough expertise and business entities to take it to the next level," says Daniel-Paul Bork, CEO, Aboriginal Tourism Canada, the organization that commissioned the 2003 study. As more aboriginal students graduate university with degrees in commerce and marketing, "more First Nations communities are stepping up to the plate," he says. "They realize that they no longer need to lease out their resources -- they can run the operations themselves."

While tourism will not solve all the social and political problems facing aboriginal bands across Canada -- as highlighted in the wave of First Nations protests Canada Day long weekend -- it has become a successful strategy for some leaders across the country.

Chief Sophie Pierre of the Ktunaxa Kinbasket Tribal Council in B.C.'s Kootenay region is a trailblazer. Chief Pierre had the moxie to turn a hated symbol, a residential school -- the St. Eugene Mission School --and its accompanying buildings into a golf course, resort, casino and conference centre. The mission school sat empty --like a scab -- for 20 years. Some argued for its conversion to a health or social welfare centre, but that meant turning to the federal government for money, says Chief Pierre.

"I wanted something revenue-generating," she says. A playground for Calgary's weekend warriors since its launch in 2003, the residential school-turned-resort brings in an estimated \$13.6-million in annual revenue for the Ktunaxa Kinbasket band. The tribe is still in treaty negotiations with the government, but tourism has helped the band move forward, away from its cycle of government dependency. "Everyone's realized we need interim solutions," she says.

Self-reliance is a theme that permeates many of these First Nations start-ups. Chief Clarence Louie, leader of Osoyoos band in the Okanagan, is weaning his formerly bankrupt band off welfare subsidies with various tourism-related projects that bring in an estimated \$13-million annually. A maverick leader in the First Nations community, Chief Louie weathered opposition on "the rez," and turned the band's wilting vineyard operation into the award-winning Nk'Mip winery through a partnership with Vincor International. The band also built the Nk'Mip Desert and First Nations Heritage Centre, and has just completed the Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort and Spa, a four-star property on reserve territory, with Calgary-based partner Bellstar Hotels & Resorts.

The 47-year-old chief has no time for talk about broken treaty promises -- "I don't have any faith in the Queen" -- and dismisses concerns that a winery might encourage drinking. For Chief Louie the winery is simply good business and good business practices alleviate poverty, the root of social problems like alcoholism. He's a pragmatic man: "We are in a wine-growing region. Your region dictates to a large extent what you do economically -- whether you are white or native."

While Chief Louie says his band embarked in the tourism sector for the same reasons white people do -- to create jobs and

make money -- he says the band's business model is not only about the bottom line.

"We have our social and environmental responsibilities, cultural responsibilities and we put a lot of our profits back into the community," he says. He's confident the sector has future potential because the Aboriginal brand is unique in Canada: "If you want to learn about Scottish culture you go to Scotland. If you want to learn about French culture you go to France. But if you want to learn about Mohawk culture, you have to go to Mohawk territory."

Chief Louie's tourism model, while criticized by some native leaders who consider it a sell-out, has become the template for many bands across the country. At least four new interpretive centres will open in 2007-2008, including Metepenagiag Heritage Park in New Brunswick, the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park in Alberta, the Haida Heritage Centre at Qay'llnagaay in Haida Gwaii along the coast of British Columbia and the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre in Whistler, B.C. Other new ventures include the Wei Wai Kum Cruise Ship terminal, which was officially opened in June by the Campbell River Indian band in B. C., and the new Wendake museum and hotel complex on the Hurons-Wendat reserve along the Okiawenrakh River to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Quebec City.

These are adding to established tourist-related native businesses, such as First Air, the airline that was purchased by Makivik Corp. of Kuujuaq. The corporation was created on behalf of the Inuit of northern Quebec.

While many of the new ventures are developed by band councils, an increasing number of aboriginal entrepreneurs have struck out on their own, bypassing band politics. Doug Green runs Cariboo Chitcotin Jetboat Adventures near William's Lake in the Interior of B.C. The only aboriginal-run jet boat tour company in the province, and operating in a remote part of the province, he promises such idyllic experiences as watching the salmon spawn and grizzlies feast. Mr. Green didn't grow up on a reservation, but he received valuable life lessons from his father, who once made him crawl into a den to touch a sleeping bear.

Mr. Green, who is of Tsilhqot'in and Cree heritage, chose not to go to his band for financial support. Instead, the former tree feller relied on his own credit rating, plus blood, sweat and tears to launch his operation. He travelled to see how other aboriginal groups marketed tourism, and checked out his competition in the province. Bookings are growing but, "it's a struggle," he admits. Despite the financial uncertainty, he's convinced tourism will be "front and centre" of the B.C. economy as the forestry industry declines. "The province should be promoting aboriginal people, not non-native companies hiring token Indians as guides," he says. Tourists, he says, want an authentic experience.

One of the biggest challenges for small operators like Mr. Green, is tapping into the network of international tour groups. The greatest interest in aboriginal cultural packages is from outside Canada, particularly Europe, according to Audrey Lochrie who runs Talking Totem Tours, a company that organizes native cultural and eco-tourism packages throughout British Columbia. She knits together tours by entrepreneurs like Willie Charlie, who created Sasquatch Tours three years ago. As a former cultural worker hired by the Chehalis First Nations band, Mr. Charlie found himself frequently "wining and dining" visitors interested in learning more about native people. "There was so much interest, I thought this could be a living," he says. Leveraging talent as storytellers, drummers and bark weavers, his family opened its longhouse to visitors and began running boat trips along the Harrison River and Harrison Lake in the southern mountain region of B.C., to view ancient pictographs painted on the rocks. Mr. Charlie has a story at every bend in the river. He believes that he and others like him are helping fuel a revival of traditional ways.

It wasn't long ago when the government banned potlatches, says Mr. Charlie. "So our elders stayed quiet about our songs and dances and then didn't teach their children because they were afraid that they'd be punished," he says. "Now the elders say it's OK to pass it on now -- it's time to share these stories again." Better still, it's providing employment for the youth.

Tourism has kept Mr. Charlie's sons -- in their 20s -- on the land, for now. It also afforded Ms. Martin the opportunity to quit her dead-end waitress job and reconnect with her native roots. Tourists are always throwing Ms. Martin curveballs, asking her such tough questions as: What is the traditional use of jellyfish? "It makes me think about my culture every single day," she says.

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