

WALPOLE ISLAND FIRST NATION

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Ross Smith

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

Population in 1996: 1,525

Population in 1991: 1,370

% change 1991–1996: 11.3

Land area (square km): 143.8 5

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Introduction

The Walpole Island First Nation has developed a unique and participatory approach to dealing with community issues, including economic and social development, environmental conservation, and land claims. The Walpole Island Heritage Centre, or Nin.da.waab.jig, was founded in 1989 as the research arm of the First Nation. The Heritage Centre is an organization learning best and effective practices for research and implementation in the field of sustainable development, particularly around issues facing First Nation communities. The community has maintained a strong, community-based, decision-making approach sustaining its heritage, building upon traditional knowledge of the environment, and building partnerships with non-native communities.

Before the construction and development of the Heritage Centre, the government of the community had little corporate memory and many plans were aborted or repeated due to the lack of a comprehensive focus and little research or participation. Information available to decision makers was often out of date and had little relevance to the community. A lack of capacity within the government and within each of the departments led to an uneven decision-making process and little consultation with the community on issues relating to sustainable development and the environment.

The Heritage Centre has become a foundation and an information centre for the community to explore their own heritage and plan for the future. The First Nation is now working to educate its non-Aboriginal neighbours about the impact of pollution and development on the community. The general approach is to seek sharing of ideas and greater co-operation on projects.

Goals and Strategies

The Heritage Centre's goals support the efforts of Walpole Island's Council and community. Preserving and restoring the natural and cultural heritage of the community, restoring the rights and improving the capacity of the community to govern the First Nation and its traditional homelands, and the promotion of sustainable development are the overarching goals which guide the heritage centre through its research and project development.

The Centre is effective because of its successful process of community-driven research and

problem-solving skills. It has clear and defined goals and works to support the political system of the First Nation. The integration of traditional knowledge and contemporary science helps to mitigate the common disjunction between the two. Maintaining partnerships with neighbouring communities helps to build skill sets and cooperation for successful sustainable development. In this manner, capacity can be built and spread more evenly throughout the community, increasing the links with history and traditional culture.

Getting Started

The Centre had its origins back in 1973, when a four-year project to research land claims and Aboriginal treaty rights produced a wealth of information and prompted the organization of a historical research centre. The research centre has evolved over the years to serve and respond to the immediate needs of the community and Council, and serve an educational role for the community.

In 1983, the Centre expanded its scope to include research on the environment and resource management. It has published a history book on the Walpole First Nation and created a Web site for the community (<www.bkejwanong.com>). Based on the work of the research centre, the Walpole First Nation decided to officially establish the Walpole Island Heritage Centre in 1989 to house the research capacity of the community.

According to Dean Jacobs, executive director of the Centre, clear objectives have helped to keep the Centre focused on its overarching goals and implement projects complementing these long-term strategies. Conducting research on the environment, cultural heritage, and First Nation self-governance has advised the Council and the community on preservation, management, and development options for Walpole Island. The Centre monitors the internal and external activities that affect the environment, cultural heritage and the management of the First Nation. Through this process of continuous evaluation, a unique system of implementation, monitoring, and reflection allows for communication between the Centre and the Council, thereby informing the decision-making process with good research.

The Centre has four divisions: the Research and Development Division, the Communications Division, the Advocacy Support Division, and the Secretariat/Administration Division, with each

division mirroring the objectives of the Centre. The Communications Division has been successful in implementing and improving the communication capacity of the community. The installation of a broadband wireless network gives the community and the research teams fast Internet access and increases their ability to access up to date information. A GIS project is underway and together these communication improvements will build capacity within each of the departments in the Council and the Centre. The goal of the Centre is to spread out the capacity and the expertise in research and communications, rather than having one person specialized in each area.

The activities of the Heritage Centre have evolved over the years. Early work concentrated on land claim and historical research. Recent research in sustainable development and environmental management has benefited the entire region. A recent Global Action Plan resulted in research on recycling and pollution and a bi-weekly recycling project was started by an eco-team. The efforts of the Heritage Centre have resulted in their inclusion in the decision-making and planning efforts of local industry in the Sarnia area. The concern over pollution from these industries has been addressed in a very professional manner due the community-based research of the Centre. The Centre has also hosted workshops on environmental management and environmental policy in Canada, lending a training and educational aspect to the participatory research approach.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

There are still many challenges for the Heritage Centre, says Jacobs, and the efforts of the Centre require community support as the driving force. It is easy to overlook the unique role of the Centre and become reliant on its communication capacities and research support. There are not many communities that have such a Heritage Centre and it gives Walpole Island the opportunity to pursue economic and social development efforts in the community and in the region.

While the Heritage Centre is successful, there is still a long way to go in other socio-economic areas for the community. The challenge is to turn the opportunities presented by the employment, partnerships, and capacities built through the Centre into spin-off developments in the rest of the community.

The enormity of implementing and developing the research and project development capacity of the Heritage Centre has taught the First Nation many important lessons. Working incrementally with a building block approach allows for a methodical way of working over the long-term with long-term goals. By taking on tasks and projects one step at a time, funding can be secured in smaller portions, and each step is built upon the mistakes of the last. The process must also be community driven and, unless the community is onside, the benefits are often seen to be uneven and it can be difficult getting support over the full term of the project.

Jacobs suggests that communities have to build their own data and build upon their traditional knowledge to make a Heritage Centre relevant to community interests. There are also important lessons to be learned from other communities who have gone through similar situations and similar developments. Sharing what you're doing can be an important way to learn from other mistakes and should not be seen as a lack of ability or "needing help." Communication technologies such as Web sites can help in this sharing.

What Next?

The Walpole Island Heritage Centre is planning several projects in the future and is now putting their history book on CD in order to make it more widely available. A recent project, the Sustainable Communities Initiative, has the community as a pilot project with the Heritage Centre as its champion. Walpole Island welcomes others to visit the Heritage Centre and suggests that this is a good way of fact-finding for other communities that are planning a similar project. The next step for the community is the scaling up of the research and dissemination on a regional and national level. The mentoring of other communities and other research partners would help to expand the efforts of community-based research in sustainable development and traditional knowledge.

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