BEST PRACTICES
A Planned Approach to Developing a Sustainable Aboriginal Tourism Industry in Mistissini

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Interest in Aboriginal tourism is growing. As developments based on natural resource extraction such as mining, forestry and hydro-electricity continue to destroy the land and threaten the traditional way of life, communities are looking for alternative economic development opportunities to diversify their economies, create employment for their members and improve the overall community situation. In Mistissini, tourism development is viewed as one such opportunity. One researcher suggests that "The development of tourism appears to represent one of the more promising strategies which northern people can use to achieve their economic, socio-cultural and environmental goals in a sustainable context" (Hinch, 1995).

The Cree Nation of Mistissini (CNM) is one of the largest Cree communities in Eeyou Istchee, the traditional territory of the James Bay Cree situated in northern Quebec. The community is located on the southern tip of Mistassini Lake, the largest, natural, freshwater lake in the province. Its territory is adjacent to the Assinica and Albanel, Mistassini and Waconichi Lakes wildlife reserve managed by the Société de l'environnement du plein air de Québec (SEPAQ). Accessible by road, air, water and snowmobile,

Mistissini's natural environment and central location create a significant opportunity for tourism development. The CNM administration recognizes this opportunity and has been committed to developing a sustainable tourism industry for several years. As a result, it has become a leader in the industry.

Mistissini, although involved to some degree in tourism since the 1950s, began a planned approach in 1994 that has resulted in significant growth and development in the recent years. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the Tourism Sector of the Cree Nation of Mistissini (CNM) and to examine the key strategies used to achieve the current level of success, such as the use of a strategic approach to development and the use of co-operative marketing initiatives. The specific objectives of this paper are to provide: an overview of the organizational structure and operations of Mistissini's Tourism Sector; a discussion about the implementation of the recommendations presented in the tourism planning literature; and the identification of key initiatives and actions that have helped Mistissini achieve its tourism goals. The research is based on a literature review of tourism planning theory and informal interviews with

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the staff of the Economic Development Department and the Tourism Sector of the Cree Nation of Mistissini to determine the actions and subsequent outcomes that have contributed to growth of the local tourism industry. The different elements of the research combined with work experience were integrated to identify and explain the key activities.

This paper is written from the community perspective, the author is a member of the Cree Nation of Mistissini; and it is this perspective that has helped the author integrate the theory with the community reality. The reality is that members of the community must be able to determine the type and the appropriate level of tourism development prior to any development initiative. A quote taken from the research recognizes the importance of local community involvement — an approach that Mistissini has clearly demonstrated.

> Northern Native people are the best mediators between southern visitors and their homeland — not as a last frontier, not as an untouched wilderness, but as a homeland which has shaped and sustained their communities, their culture, and their economy (Notzke, 1999).

It is hoped that this paper will provide insights and concrete tools for communities interested in exploring the opportunities available in the Aboriginal tourism industry and that it will highlight the importance of a planned, community-driven approach to tourism development.

The information presented in the initial section of this paper is drawn from the tourism literature and is aimed at providing an overview of the current thinking surrounding Aboriginal tourism development and planning. The second section is designed to focus the discussion on a particular community context, the Cree Nation of Mistissini (CNM) and more specifically on the *Mistissini Tourism Working Document* (*MTWD*). The third section examines the on-going implementation process and aims to provide concrete examples for the reader. The paper concludes with a summary of the key actions and opportunities for future development.

Although there is a limited amount of literature that takes an in-depth look at Aboriginal tourism planning, interest in this area is increasing. For example, one volume of the *Journal Téoros*, published by the University of Quebec focused exclusively on Aboriginal tourism, primarily in Quebec. Different authors presented case studies from around the province (Bedard and Comtois, 1998; Noel, 1998; Girouard, 1998), the role of the Société Touristique des Autochtones du Quebec was discussed (Gill, 1998) and other issues relating to Aboriginal tourism such as sustainable cultural tourism planning were included (Jamieson and Galloway-Cosijn, 1998). However, while a few articles are written by community members, a significant gap exists because the majority of the articles are written from an external, non-native perspective and while they recommend what communities ought to do, they lack a community perspective that understands the day-to-day reality. Certain authors acknowledge and support the need for a Native perspective (Hinch & Butler, 1996; Getz, Jamieson, Cosijn and Zorilla, 1999). It is hoped that the following discussions will begin to broaden the reader's understanding of the issues by relating them to the Mistissini context and discussing them from a community perspective.

Native tourism has been viewed by supporters as an opportunity to develop local economies and by critics as a commodification of culture. Different communities and even members within a community, such as Mistissini, have different opinions about how tourism should be developed in their community. These opinions must be considered because an Aboriginal tourism product relies on and impacts the whole community. A community's culture, a community-owned land base and a positive community experience are important factors affecting the success of any tourism project. Therefore, the community ought to be involved in the planning process to determine the appropriate level of tourism development for their community. According to researchers "Planning is the basic tool by which a community can best assess needs and available resources and determine its own course of action to reach these goals" (Johnson and Thompson, 1984 in Wolfe, 1988). One result of this planning process in terms of tourism is the development of a community tourism plan that includes a process to facilitate community participation (Murphy, 1985 in Hinch 1995; INAC, 1993). Community participation is crucial because it helps to close the gap between traditional mainstream practices and traditional Native decision-making processes (Wolfe, 1988).

Tourism depends on both community assets and the market demand. The importance of these two factors is constantly being compared

and juggled in the planning process in order to balance economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts. The literature best summarizes the relationship as follows:

> The challenge of community-level planning is to work out with and find ways to direct powerful sets of outside interests, which include the tourism industry and government economic development staff, and to work not only with local interests which benefit economically but also with those which suffer from its impacts (Wolfe-Keddie, 1993).

Wolfe-Keddie recognizes the players and the potential power struggle that is created by tourism development not only between the external and internal environment but also between the various community stakeholders. It is these community stakeholders that must be involved in the planning and development of tourism if it is to be a success. Some of the reasons for opposition are discussed below to highlight the various community views that must be considered.

When a community does not have the power to control tourism development it is at risk of upsetting the balance and becoming exploited by outside interests looking for an economic opportunity. This has been the experience of some communities as described in the following statement. "Aboriginal and traditional cultures have often been exploited through tourism development, and until the early 1990s there were few examples of aboriginal people acting as entrepreneurs or owners of tourism enterprises" (Getz and Jamieson, 1997). As a result, "Many indigenous peoples have come to view tourism as a new form of exploitation by external forces" (Hinch and Butler, 1996). The external forces include companies such as "tour operators, travel agents and airlines, who control and benefit from tourist expenditures through their direct dealings with clients" (Grekin and Milne, 1996). Consequently, this negative view of tourism that is based on experience is very difficult to change. It may make community leaders wary of tourism as a means to develop the local economy and subsequently ignore an opportunity to create benefits such as employment and cultural awareness. Or in the worst case scenario; "A negative experience with non-native or external tourism operators may prompt a community to deny an opportunity to one of their own (interview with the Chairman of the Inuvik Hunter's and Trapper's Committee)" (Notzke, 1995).

In more recent times, planning practice has evolved to include Aboriginal community members in the process. The following United Nations statement exemplifies this: "[It is] important to involve indigenous peoples in the planning, implementation and evaluation of projects affecting them" (United Nations 1992:17 in Sofield and Birtles, 1996). Hinch takes the notion of community involvement one step further by saying "Tourism development is not something that happens to communities but rather it is something that happens within them" (Hinch, 1995). Finally, this statement begins to imply local control and it is the key factor that has enabled the Cree Nation of Mistissini to focus its resources, involve the community and develop a sustainable tourism industry.

Eeyou Istchee, the traditional homeland of the Cree, is located in the James Bay region of northern Quebec. Since 1975, when the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) was signed, tourism has been recognized as a key economic opportunity. Section 28.6 made it clear that tourism and outfitting were viewed as key components of the emerging economy. This section defines the creation of the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) in the same section as the Cree Trapper's Association and the Cree Arts and Crafts Association and guarantees Cree participation. Since 1975, both Cree and non-Cree governments and organizations have recognized the untapped tourism potential of Eeyou Istchee. The Cree, Quebec and Federal governments have since published several reports (Enviroscope, 1995; Desy, 1992; CTC, 1996) to name a few, outlining the tourism goals and potential of the region. The Grand Council of the Cree of Eeyou Istchee (GCCEI) and the Cree Regional Authority (CRA) have committed a significant amount of resources to establish a viable tourism industry in Eeyou Istchee. One example is the incorporation of COTA in December of 2000.

As a result of the JBNQA, the Cree are able to exert a certain amount of control over the tourism development process. Some of the communities have developed their tourism industry faster than other communities, and those that have involved the community and taken a planned approach have been quite successful. Mistissini is one such community and its participatory approach to tourism development has led to the current success and acceptance of tourism in Mistissini. The earliest Mistassini Cree

involvement in the tourism industry began during the 1950s when Cree guides worked at various fishing camps in the surrounding region. The Cree Nation of Mistissini (CNM) became actively involved in the operations aspect in 1980 when the fishing camps on Mistassini Lake were transferred to the CNM as per the JBNQA. Then in 1993, the CNM underwent a strategic planning exercise to determine the direction of the local tourism industry. The result was the preparation of the *Mistissini Tourism Working Document* (*MTWD*) and the creation of a local Tourism Sector within the Economic Development Department. It was these two key steps and the investment and commitment of resources that laid the foundation for the current success.

As stated earlier, many documents recommend developing a community tourism plan as an initial step in the tourism development process (Hinch, 1994; Jamieson, 1997, INAC 1993). The definition used in this context is as follows:

> A tourism action plan defines the who, what, where, when and how of making tourism happen. It provides a framework for businesses, local government and other organizations to analyze tourism resources and concerns, and to encourage development and promotion within your community (INAC, 1993).

When a community tourism plan, such as the *Mistissini Tourism Working Document*, is developed by the community, and approved by the members, it becomes a powerful tool to assist with the implementation of community goals. It is designed to establish a clear direction and to focus local resources. It provides guidelines for developing both community projects and individual projects. It also helps to prioritize any proposed actions. The discussion of Mistissini's plan will highlight in more detail the key factors and considerations.

Mistissini has committed a lot of time, energy and resources to strategic planning, within the Economic Development Department and more specifically within the Tourism Sector. *The Mistissini Tourism Working Document* (1994) is an excellent example of sustainable tourism development at the community level; it provides a clear framework for product development and evaluation. A participatory process involving the various stakeholders was used to prepare the document. The Mistissini Tourism Steering Committee was established to guide the development of the plan and was comprised of representatives from the CNM administration, local operators, environmental organizations, the Cree Trapper's Association (CTA), and other interested community members. The final document received approval by resolution from the Council of the CNM and the public at the Local Annual General Assembly. The document is a planning tool that establishes the essential goals and guides the activities ensuring respect for not only "development" but also "sustainability"; see Figure 1. The

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FIGURE 1
Mistissini's Tourism Goals (MTWD, 1994)

Mission Statement
"To provide social and environmental tourism at a profit through sustainable tourism."

Where sustainable tourism development is envisaged as leading to proper management of all resources in such a way that we can fulfill economic, social, and aesthetic needs and demands while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems for future generations.

Goal # 1	Plan and Implement Sustainable Economic Development
Goal # 2	Encourage Community and Regional Participation and Involvement
Goal # 3	Preserve Sustainable Livelihoods
Goal # 4	Promote Appropriate Tourism Activities to Enhance Community Identity
Goal # 5	Reflect the Respect for the Full Values of the Environment
Goal # 6	Improve the Quality of Life in the Host Community

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experience gained from this process is an organizational/planning capacity that can be applied to other areas of development as well as to future tourism projects.

It is important to note that the success of the MTWD is linked to the fact that the Tourism Sector was given the mandate from the Council of the CNM to write the plan with the guidance of the Tourism Steering Committee that was made up of the various stakeholders. As a result of the first-hand experience, the document is user-friendly and is referred to often in the day-to-day work at the Tourism Sector. This may not have been the case if an outside firm was hired to simply prepare a generic Tourism Plan for the Cree Nation of Mistissini. These plans are often costly and remain on the shelf once completed because those who must implement the plan were not actively involved. This has been the experience for not only tourism plans but also for numerous community-planning initiatives as described by Wolfe:

> Plans were prepared by Department officials or consultants. Community understanding of and commitment to the resulting plans was non-existent, and the planning efforts made had little impact on the economic and social problems of the communities (Wolfe, 1988).

Therefore, it is hoped that Mistissini's positive experience will encourage other communities to not only include their members in the development of tourism plans but to control and participate in the entire process.

Although the MTWD laid the necessary foundation for tourism development in Mistissini, the real work began with the implementation of the proposed actions. From the beginning, one of the key factors in the implementation of the plan was the support from the local administration. This support takes a variety of forms including financial support for the operations of the Tourism Sector, an organizational structure that reflects the role of tourism, the allocation of resources to sponsor special projects proposed by the Sector, technical support and advice from the Economic Development Department, and support for the re-opening of the local tourism association. It is the continued support that enables the Tourism Sector to continue its operations and pursue a strategic direction.

The importance of tourism to overall community development is apparent in the organizational structure of the CNM's administration. The Tourism Sector is nested in the Economic Development Department that falls under the control of the Director of Community Development. This structure highlights the direct relationship between the three departments/sectors and supports the inclusion of broad community development goals in the implementation of tourism projects. It also illustrates the important role that tourism development plays with regards to the expansion and diversification of the local economy. This link to local economic development can also be seen in the MTWD.

Although noted earlier, the MTWD established a clear mandate for the Tourism Sector. The general goals were identified and enabled the Tourism Sector to develop more specific activities. These include the following:

- Planning and researching the local tourism industry in order to distribute the information to the Council of the Cree Nation of Mistissini and to the present and future local tourism related companies and businesses;
- Implementing or helping to implement marketing strategy, tourism products, and infrastructure that are needed for the local tourism industry and tourism related companies and businesses;
- Controlling (in the sense of monitoring and regulating) the implementation of marketing strategy, tourism products, and infrastructure for their feasibility or objective;
- Evaluating the implementation of marketing strategy, tourism products, and infrastructure every six months by updating the Mistissini Tourism Working Document in order to transfer this information to the Mistissini Band Council and the present & future local tourism related companies and businesses; and
- Hosting tourists for Mistissini when local tour operators can not or are not responsible to do so.

These activities were the first step towards implementing the plan. The following paragraphs will briefly outline several projects that Mistissini has or is currently undertaking to illustrate the practical implications of the planning process and the MTWD.

Because tourism relies on outside markets, the marketing aspect becomes an integral factor affecting the success of the industry. Furthermore, marketing can be very costly, particularly for small independent operators. Therefore, the

Tourism Sector has been actively promoting the local operators by using a co-operative marketing strategy that maximizes the local resources. This strategy includes a variety of tools such as a community pamphlet, a tourism booth, a website, and the identification of additional marketing initiatives that will position and promote the entire community.

For example, the Tourism Sector produces a community pamphlet that can easily accommodate the needs of the community and individual operators. It is a high quality, glossy four-page pocket folder that provides general information about the community via text and images, including a map. It includes two interior pockets that can accommodate 8.5 × 11 sheets with additional information or pamphlets from specific operators. There are also two slots designed for business cards. These multi-purpose pamphlets are an ideal means to present a variety of companies to a variety of users. The information included can be modified or updated as required by simply changing the inserts. Most significantly they help to reduce the overall marketing costs of the operators by pooling community resources allocated to tourism development.

A second initiative that the Tourism Sector undertook was the purchase of a multi-purpose booth to be used to promote Mistissini and its local operators. The booth consists of five panels joined together, each approximately 10 feet high. The booth can be set up in a variety of formats and therefore, can be used for numerous occasions including trade shows, local assemblies, community displays and much more. The information is simply laminated and affixed to the carpeted panels with velcro. This further increases the number of uses for the booth. Often the booth is brought to trade shows and each operator is given the uses of one panel and the centre one is used to provide community information. By sharing the booth, exhibiting costs are reduced and because the operators often travel together, travel costs are shared. This reduction in costs allows the independent operators to attend many more shows than would be possible on their own. This increases the effectiveness of the marketing initiative because the owner is ultimately the best spokesperson for the tourism experience offered by their company.

A third aspect of the co-operative marketing strategy was the development of a website (http://www.nation.mistissini.qc.ca). The Tourism Sector took the lead in developing a website that includes not only a tourism section but also general community information such as geography, culture and history, nature, and the Council. The tourism section includes information about each operator and provides links to individual sites once they are developed. Interested parties are able to request information on-line using the pamphlet request form. Each request is either answered directly by the staff or forwarded to individual operators. The website has proved to be an effective marketing tool and several operators have noted the increase in the number of clients as a result of the site.

The three examples above illustrate how creativity and a co-operative approach to tourism development, in particular marketing, can yield positive results. The following project illustrates how the Tourism Sector is applying the sustainable development principles outlined in the MTWD. The Tourism Sector is actively involved in researching and monitoring the impacts of the principle tourism activity — fishing camps — by partnering with Laval University and the Cree Regional Authority. The result is the Mistissini Lake Fish Project.

The goal of the project is "to develop a management plan for the 'sportsfish' species in Mistassini Lake to ensure the conservation of this resource for future generations". The first stage of the project consists of a genetic survey of brook trout in Mistassini Lake to determine the movement patterns, health of the stocks and other key information. The study is aimed at increasing the level of support for sustainable practices and conservation of the existing stocks. A combination of ecological and biological knowledge is designed to complement the existing traditional knowledge of the Mistassini Cree. Future plans involve similar studies with regard to lake trout, walleye and northern pike. The success of the project is due in part to the large scale, collaborative effort of the parties involved. This project is directly related to the goals of the Tourism Sector and is a concrete example of how a community can undertake projects and implement their tourism plans.

Finally, there is one future co-operative initiative planned that warrants noting. Space has been allocated in the design of the new Tourism lodge to house a tourist information centre and a local tourism association. These offices will be located on the mezzanine level of the new Tourism Lodge expected to be built during the sum-

mer of 2002. This initiative will provide local operators with shared office space and office services. Their resources will be pooled to purchase the necessary office equipment, develop marketing programs and hire a secretary / tourism agent to manage information requests. The Association will improve the capacity of local businesses to meet the needs of outside visitors while at the same time cutting down on their overhead costs. It will also provide a professional business environment in which to operate. In the future, a representative from the Association could represent local Mistissini operators at the regional level by participating in the activities of the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA).

In conclusion, the main points are that a community must determine if it wishes to participate in tourism development, and once it decides to pursue tourism as part of a diversified economy it ought to proceed in a planned and systematic fashion. A community's culture and heritage needs to be respected and sustainable development principles ought to be included to ensure that future generations will benefit from the community's tourism assets. By applying a long-term, participatory planning approach controlled and developed by the local community, the probability of establishing a sustainable tourism industry increases. The primary example in this report is the MTWD that clearly identifies Mistissini's tourism mission and objectives. Sustainable development principles appear in the plan and are also apparent in practice.

By working together with local operators, a community tourism sector can facilitate key co-operative activities such as marketing and research that will enhance the overall tourism industry and local economic development. It can create an environment that will help new tourism businesses develop.

Potential actions in the future may include an evaluation mechanism that would begin to measure the effectiveness of the co-operative marketing efforts and other community tourism initiatives. This system would include the collection and analysis of visitor statistics and the development of a tourism database to store the information. By measuring the impact of marketing initiatives given certain established benchmarks, the Sector would be able to allocate the necessary resources in the appropriate areas and modify its approach where required. The information could be used to determine the overall growth of the local tourism industry and its impact on the local economy. This would lead to additional strategies to increase the overall benefit to community members.

With regards to Aboriginal tourism research, there are many resources currently available that explain the early steps in the tourism planning process; there is however, a need to further the literature surrounding product development and plan implementation. Hinch (1994) also noted this need in his research, when Native communities in Alberta identified product development as their top priority. For example, a community could have the most comprehensive tourism plan, detailing the opportunities available, but if it lacks the support programs to help local businesses provide the tourism services, the plan will not bring the intended results. This brings to light the fact that a plan is only a small part of the process and that it must be integrated with other aspects of community development. It is hoped that the few concrete examples presented in this case study may trigger other communities to develop tourism plans focused on implementation and concrete action. The plan provides the roadmap for the actions necessary to make sustainable tourism a reality in the community; however, it will only materialize if the community is able to take ownership of the plan and use it as one tool to develop their local economy. Meegwetch.

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