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Tangible and intangible indicators of successful aboriginal tourism initiatives: A case study of two successful aboriginal tourism lodges in Northern Canada

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HIGHLIGHTS

- An international overview of Aboriginal tourism initiatives and Aboriginal entrepreneurship is provided.
- Two Aboriginal ecolodges located in Northern Canada are compared.
- Indicators of successes and evaluations of success are evaluated.
- Success indicators should capture both tangible and intangible elements of Aboriginal tourism initiatives.
- Lessons acquired from these case studies can be applied to other peripheral regions.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines two successful Aboriginal-tourism initiatives in Northern Canada. First, we review the literature on successful tourism indicators; following this review, we provide a rationale for the development of our own indicators and their subsequent application to our case studies. The case studies include the Cree Village Eco Lodge in Northern Ontario and the Spirit Bear Lodge in British Columbia, Canada. Our framework focuses on both indicators for success and evaluations of success. The discussion and conclusion sections examine the value of developing success indicators that capture both tangible and intangible variables and standardizing case study descriptions. We also highlight how the lessons acquired from these case studies can be applied to Northern Canada specifically and peripheral regions generally.

Peripheral regions in Northern Canada can be defined as areas located substantive distances, both geographically and politically, from centres of major urban populations (Hall & Boyd, 2005). Hull (1999), Müller and Jannson (2007), and Müller and Pettersson (2001), among others, have documented the challenges of tourism for peripheral and primarily rural regions and have identified the following barriers: remoteness from the travel trade, weak internal economic links, selective depopulation and aging societies, lack of infrastructure, dependence on transfer payments, distrust, and a general lack of economic and political control over local resources. Constrained access to human and economic capital and information is also a major hindrance for tourism and other types of economic developments in peripheral regions (Boyd & Butler, 1999). Indeed, as Lundmark (2006) observes, the farther one gets from accessible areas, the more authentic rural and isolated destinations need to be if they are to attract and compete with more accessible locations. For Aboriginal[1] communities in Canada, issues of education, unemployment, a growing youth population, local capacity, and various other social issues also affect the development and subsequent operation of regional economic strategies like tourism (Lemelin, Dawson, Johnston, Stewart, & Mattina, 2012; Lemelin, Johnston, Dawson, Stewart, & Mattina, 2012).

Recreationists and tourists have been visiting Northern Canada since the 19th century; “gentleman anglers” for instance, visited the Nipigon River in Northern Ontario. Steamships, trains,

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[1] In Canada the term *Aboriginal* is a legal term used to designate Indian (First Nations), Inuit, and Métis people throughout this text.

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floatplanes, and, later, motor vehicles also facilitated an increase in the visitation of this region (Jasen, 1995; Osborne, 1998). Today, thousands of campers, canoeists, kayakers, hikers, and wildlife tourists continue to visit remote locations throughout northern Canada (Koster & Lemelin, 2013).

Tourism, especially in regions where extractive natural resourced based economies are thriving is often depicted as a minor industry, contributing little to local or regional economies (Schmallegger & Carson, 2010). Commensurately, tourism agencies tend to give less focus to peripheral regions. Such oversight is somewhat surprising considering the international reputation of certain tourist destinations like Churchill, Manitoba, for polar bear viewing (Lemelin & Smale, 2006), Quetico Provincial Park and Boundary Waters for canoeing (Killan, 1993), Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve in British Columbia (Thomlinson & Crouch, 2012) and Torngat Mountains National Park in Newfoundland and Labrador (Maher & Lemelin, 2011). Challenges aside, peripheral areas can, and have been, incorporated into marketing strategies for:

> Remoteness is one of the most important attributes to the resource-based tourism industry, whose clients seek a range of psychological benefits, such as solitude and escape, from a trip. Remoteness, or at least the absence of roads, also assists in shielding fish and wildlife populations from most recreation hunters and anglers. The greater abundance of fish and game in remote areas makes it easier for tourism operators to attract guests who are interested in hunting and fishing. Presumably, these guests should be willing to pay premiums for accessing more remote tourism sites. As a result, tourism operators should be interested in maintaining the remote experiences that provide a price premium. (Hunt, Boxall, Englin, & Haider, 2005).

Given the interest in Aboriginal tourism and the history of tourism in Northern Canada, we begin this article by defining *Aboriginal tourism* and examining the indicators used to describe and define the success of such enterprises. Following this discussion, a case study approach (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) combining personal experiences and discussions with managers is used to provide an overview of two Aboriginal-tourism enterprises located in Northern Canada. Our purpose is not to critically assess the enterprises themselves but rather to explore the usefulness of established success indicators in evaluating Aboriginal-tourism businesses. In so doing, we question the validity of the current discourse surrounding tourism success indicators and suggest that success for Aboriginal enterprises (and, perhaps, others) in the peripheral areas of northern Canada must be considered contextually—something that most of the current literature fails to do.

1. Aboriginal tourism

For this particular study, *Aboriginal tourism* is defined as including special events (dances, festivals, powwows), experiential tourism (guided hikes, cultural-interpretation programs, wildlife tourism, applied activities), arts and crafts, museums, historical recreations, restaurants, and accommodations, lodges, and resorts that celebrate Aboriginal culture and are offered by or located in indigenous communities (Getz & Jamieson, 1997). Various ownership strategies (partial or total) involving Aboriginal communities through private, public, or cooperative frameworks are an essential component of these enterprises (Butler & Hinch, 2007; Kapashesit, Lemelin, Bennett, & Williams, 2011).

The growth and diversification of Aboriginal tourism has been well documented, and various studies have been conducted regarding visitor preferences for Aboriginal tourism in Canada (Kutzner, Wright, & Stark, 2009; Williams & O'Neil, 2007). All have been unified in their findings about what tourists are looking for:

- heritage, outdoor adventures, festivals, handicrafts and art, cuisine, and sports related to an Aboriginal experience;
- unique destinations that allow for hands-on experiences and learning opportunities;
- pristine natural areas; and
- authentic opportunities to engage with local people to learn about their culture and way of life.

Researchers have also documented that Aboriginal tourism, when properly conducted, can provide communities with economic benefits and empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999, 2002), through the creation of operators and board members involved with the tourism experience (Kapashesit et al., 2011), access to and proprietorship of traditional lands (Colton & Whitney-Squire, 2010), protection for traditional territories, and a chance to incorporate local knowledge systems in conservation efforts (Gerberich, 2005; Butler & Menzies, 2007).

Socio-political challenges associated with the establishment of Aboriginal-tourism initiatives include the concentration of wealth and decision-making power with the ruling elite, resistance from the wider community, diverging management outlooks, poor communication, and concerns surrounding the commodification of culture (Higgins-Desbiolles, Trevorrow, & Sparrow, 2014; Honey, 1999; Smith, 1989). Economic challenges include the reliance on outside assistance for economic survival, staff turnover, and leakage of generated revenues out of the community (Honey, 1999). Environmental challenges include the potential degradation of local environments and loss of biodiversity if tourism developments are not carefully planned and managed (Bennett, Lemelin, Koster, & Budke, 2012). Despite these challenges, Aboriginal communities continue to pursue tourism as a means of development to better their socio-economic future and to diversify regional economies (Fuller, Caldicott, Cairncross, & Wilde, 2007). As we illustrate next, the ways of assessing the "success" of Aboriginal-tourism initiatives usually focus on economic gain (i.e., revenue, occupancy, employment), years in operation, cultural authenticity, and local level of control. As Koster and Randall (2005) state, evaluation indicators seldom include the qualitative and less tangible outcomes that can help contextualize the results of local initiatives, such as outcomes that relate to community pride and fostering of social linkages, rather than employment rates or retail sales. They argue that as a result, "as researchers, planners and policy makers, our measures of success must be broad enough to reflect the diversity of objectives within communities" (p. 56).

Although we acknowledge that the generation of employment opportunities and other "spinoff" economic activities in communities where unemployment is often over 50 percent is critical to these communities, we would suggest that empowerment and recovery strategies along with the creation of local community pride in communities recovering from colonialism is equally, if not more important (Simpson, 2004; Wilson, 2004). Hence, while our discussion includes quantitative indicators of "success," we are very much aware that local indicators of success are, indeed, required and subsequently address this limitation by incorporating qualitative comments from local stakeholders affiliated with the tourism operations in our analysis into the discussion section (i.e., they have been asked to review our analysis and conclusions).

2. Measurements of success in Aboriginal Tourism

There have been a variety of studies examining indicators of success for Aboriginal businesses in general and some that are more