

EXPLORING NUNAVUT: EXTREME TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT

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***Executive Summary.** When Nunavut acquired territorial independence from the Northwest Territories, the future of E.D. appeared promising. The territory, now in a transitional state of development with tourism at the reins, is reconciling traditional customs with hospitality development to fully realize its commercial appeal. The growth of Canada's youngest territory is not only intriguing, but relevant to other rural communities hoping to use tourism as a springboard for E.D.*



Tourism is a cornerstone for many communities' E.D. efforts, and perfecting tourism is a difficult task that professionals encounter on a daily basis. That being said, how does one take one of the most remote territories in North America and begin a mass campaign of tourism? Well, for the Canadian territory Nunavut, very carefully. Nunavut is a fascinating terrain for locals, economic developers, and tourists alike; the territory has a rare opportunity to plan carefully for tourism development and strategies. The use of tourism as a springboard for more E.D. is unraveling in the pristine environment of Nunavut. After their transformation from a Northern Canadian Archipelago to a quasi-independent territory, the Nunavut territory

still lacks full Provincial status and cannot tax industry for resource revenues. The Canadian government still holds dominion over the resources and provides Nunavut with net transfer payments to govern the newest territory. Its government and people continue to advance and celebrate their community as a distinguished tourist destination.

What is Nunavut?

On April 1st, 1999, Nunavut gained territorial independence from the Northwest Territories and thrust itself onto the international scene. The challenges concerning E.D., however, are similar to other rural areas around the world. Nunavut is Canada's youngest territory, which will celebrate its ten year anniversary next year. The name for the territory Nunavut is an Inuktitut word meaning "our land." Despite its age, the territory boasts a rich culture and heritage. A continuous population has inhabited Nunavut for the past 4,000 years, as described in Norse sagas. Onset

of exploration during the 16th century led to various encounters between explorers and the native Inuit.

During the 1950s, questions of Canada's sovereignty over the Northern boundaries set the basis for a government forced relocation of the Inuit people to occupy some of the more northerly area of the land in question. The Inuit adapted to the surrounding environment and learned local wildlife, particularly the local beluga whale migration routes. Reconciliation came later with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which published *The High Arctic Relocation: A Report on the 1953-55 Relocation*. Resulting from the Commission, the Canadian government paid \$10 million CAD to the survivors and their families, but has yet to formally apologize.

Current situation

Nunavut faces unique economic challenges that give the newly independent territory a crash course in E.D. basics: from the lack of piers for tourist access, to gourmet lunches of seal caught and cleaned while unsuspecting day tourists stared in shock. As the former premier, Paul Okalik, expressed his concerns over Nunavut's economy in an interview with *The Economist* in 2007. "It's not as if we can take up farming." Common issues of infrastructure, workforce development, transportation, and finance institutions also frame Nunavut's efforts in development barriers. As the Dept. of E.D. and Transportation states on its homepage, "There are many opportunities for our people in mining, tourism, fishing, and the cultural industries. Sustainable economic growth depends on many things—protecting our land—and resources, educating and training for our people, strengthening our communities, and building essential infrastructure."

The concerns about Nunavut's economy extend to issues for global climate change and the livelihood of its inhabitants. The world now has to worry about environmental concerns, but the changes are more noticeable when ice is the backdrop. Nunavut

hosted a historical call for the world's attention of global climate change through the Arctic Wisdom campaign, which included celebrities Jake Gyllenhaal and Selma Hayek (Arctic Wisdom 2005). The victims of climate change vastly differ from international concern and local Nunavut populations, however. Mary Simon, head of the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which represents Canada's 45,000 Inuit, claims "It's about people." A 2007 *Economist* article illustrated local concerns about the price of living in Nunavut continually increases with warmer temperatures, including longer snowmobile trips and foundation repair needed for buildings when permafrost melts. A similar example occurred when the local council of Kuujjuaq, an Inuit village in Quebec, felt obliged to buy ten air conditioners last summer after temperatures reached 31°C. In an interview for MSNBC, Will Steger, a 62-year-old Minnesotan who has been traveling the region for 43 years, stated hunters he meets on Baffin Island are describing to him creatures they have no words for in their language, Inuktitut—robins, finches and dolphins (Duff-Brown 2007).

Other issues affecting Nunavut are international skepticism of its hunting tourism sector and its remote location, which is expensive and not easily accessible. The U.S., for example, recently ruled to prohibit travelers from bringing polar bear skins back into the country. The economic niche of polar bear hunters usually boasts an average income of \$600,000, which affects a large portion of the territory's tourism base. In addition to discrepancies between foreign states' import restrictions and local traditions, tourism in Nunavut focuses on the same themes as other regions, including industry leakage of profits due to import dependency, workforce development funding, basic infrastructure, and financing for startup businesses.

The Community Economic Development Division of Nunavut's government echoes plans similar to other regions that suffer from a large import/export gap. Nunavut's government website states, "The division

works in partnership with communities, third party program delivery agencies, territorial and federal governments, and Inuit organizations, to build community capacity, capital accumulation, to promote import replacement and export development.” (Dept. of E. D. and Transportation 2008)

Nunavut’s policies for incremental but effective E.D. can perhaps give insight into vital strategies for any community, no matter the size, place, or resources. For example, Nunavut’s Small Community Initiatives Program “targets communities where the population is less than 1,000 people” and “focuses on large scale economic projects, training, and development.” The Initiative consists of two funds: the Small Communities Initiatives Fund and the Small Communities Development Fund. The programs help finance vital E.D. programs, studies, strategic plans, infrastructure, training, and economic diversification projects (Dept. of E.D. and Transportation 2008). Workforce training is a definite issue in Nunavut, with one-third of government jobs being vacant (CBCNews. CA 2008). Beyond the surface of the problem, however, illustrates the booming growth of the area.

Trials of tourism

The location of Nunavut makes marketing and tourism campaigns difficult, but the rare culture of the Inuit helps the territory. “We have been working with communities to improve products because word-of-mouth is the best form of marketing,” Olivia Brown explained in a phone interview. She continued, “We also have been making sure we include people in images we use. We have to make sure potential customers know that our remote territory is accessible.” The struggle between marketing a pristine nature preserve and still seeming hospitable is delicate. The territory is indeed remote, but it also seems inaccessible to tourists on moderate budgets. The Nunavut Tourism website describes its vision: “to facilitate the development of an environmentally responsible and economically viable tourism industry in Nunavut,

characterized by professionalism and operating in harmony with Inuit culture and tradition” (Nunavut tourism).

Visitors are not always prepared for the *entire* Nunavut experience. A group of visitors on a “build your own kayak” adventure became slightly squeamish when the tours guide, keeping with common practice, proceeded to hunt and skin a seal for the unsuspecting tourists’ lunches in 2002.

The issue of transportation is another concern for Nunavut tourism. Nunavut’s largest tourism season, according to the Director of Community Economic Development Division for Nunavut, Steve Hannah, is during the summer months of June through August, with the popular hunting tourism season in March, April, and May. Since the ice melts during the summer months, however, boats are the primary means of transportation. The lack of pier and port facilities make visiting Nunavut a more difficult venture than tourism officials would ideally like. An effort to advance transportation would benefit the locals and the tourists alike. During the winter months the days are short, but the opposite season of summer allows visitors more day light for activities and exploration. During the winter, however, the cold does not stop communities from having art, oyster, and Christmas festivals. Another popular festival season is the spring, where Toonoonik Times in the Baffin Region, Caribou Carnival in the Kitikmeot, and others in various communities. The festivals serve to attract new visitors, as well as promote community collaboration.

Nunavut is a particularly interesting territory to study because of its relevance to other rural areas with tourism initiatives. Tourism reportedly produced annual revenue of \$30 million in 2003, making it one of the territory’s largest economic sectors (NNSL.com 2003). The “brand” of Nunavut is successfully marketed as a pristine environmental sanctuary. Steve Hannah explains that Nunavut’s amenities help advertise outdoor sports, such as cross-country skiing and snow mobiling

during the winter and hiking in the summer months. Most tourism amenities experience little competition, which contributes to high prices and inconsistent conditions. The perk of twenty-four hour daylight in the summer months only adds to its outdoor appeal.

Conclusions

The efforts to reconcile traditional life with a contemporary way of living are working well for the region, with tourism growing rapidly each year. Cruise ship passengers, ecotourists, and outdoor adventurers are just the tip of the iceberg for growth in Nunavut tourism. As Nunavut has shown, towns, states, and regions across the world can successfully operate tourism campaigns that promote unique strengths. Any shortcomings Nunavut encounters are carefully acknowledged and solved to the greatest of its ability, thus not hampering any development. However, hospitality training is required for those tourists not familiar with Inuit customs, because if we are catering to tourism for the outside world, there may be expectations that are not being met by these communities. Therefore, a community training initiative must be implemented for those impacted by tourism. Nunavut must have the whole community for tourism, with the nucleus of support at the community level. Nunavut is currently evolving into a developed community; the significant dynamic, however, the growth is on *their* terms.

Continued research of Nunavut tourism could be expanded by exploring non-consumptive aspects, such as natural resources and national parks. A study of the territory's overall growth, especially progress in accommodation, employment, and the territory's youth, would also benefit a complete study of Nunavut tourism.

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