



Aboriginal tourism in northern Canada: how collaborative research can improve community engagement in tourism projects

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Key Words

Mapping, The Wheel, The Roman Carousel, Causal Dynamics, Rainbow (Igloo), Time Line, Levels of Support, Forum, First Nations, Aboriginal People, Cree, Canada, Tourism, Quebec, natural resource management, land claims, marketing, consulting

Context

- Eeyou Istchee is the traditional territory and homeland of the Cree of northern Quebec. Situated in the James Bay area, the Cree Nation is comprised of 15,000 people in nine communities spread out over 350,000 square kilometers.
- The Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) was established by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) in 1975, one of Canada's first modern land claims settlements. COTA's mission is to implement a vision for a world-class sustainable tourism industry and support high quality tourism products and services.
- Community engagement in tourism has remained limited and few market-ready tours have been developed, despite considerable investment in training and marketing, development of a set of quality standards, and creation of a website www.creetourism.ca and a Geoportal www.creegeoportal.ca.
- Workshops were held thanks to the *Footsteps and Paddle Strokes* project supported by Tourism Québec. The project's goal is to position Eeyou Istchee as a Cree tourism destination for external markets.

Objectives

- The general goals of the workshops were to co-design theme routes and packages with local groups, and to assess market readiness for existing and potential packages.
- The process was seen as a way to engage local Cree operators in tourism projects and at the same time to learn how to design projects in a collaborative way.

Research Questions

- What are the factors influencing the lack of community engagement and how can we improve the situation?
- What are the main theme routes that will position Eeyou Istchee as a new destination?
- What kind of showcase of market-ready products can we improve or develop for 2009 and how will we proceed?

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- Can we test and adapt SAS² techniques to an aboriginal context and develop a tool kit or manual specific to Cree tourism operators?

Techniques

- Participatory mapping on the floor
- The Wheel with free listing and pile sorting
- The Roman Carousel
- Causal Dynamics
- Rainbow (Igloo) and Time Line
- Level of Support

Participants

15 to 37 participants attended each workshop (2 to 3 days each), including Community Tourism Officers, Economic Development Officers, COTA staff and managers, Tourism Québec, Hydro-Québec, a journalist from Destinations (Air-Creebec's in-flight magazine), local tourism operators, trappers, tallymen, local guides, Cree leadership, and consultants.

Results

Mapping potential tourism sites and thematic routes (floor map)

The routes chosen by workshop participants are Cree trails used in the past and today for trading (fur), travelling (family visits), and healing purposes (with a focus on youth). They link the five coastal and four inland communities of the Cree homeland. They also connect festivals and traditional gatherings.



Assessing market readiness and identifying showcase packages (The wheel)

The market readiness criteria developed by participants included:

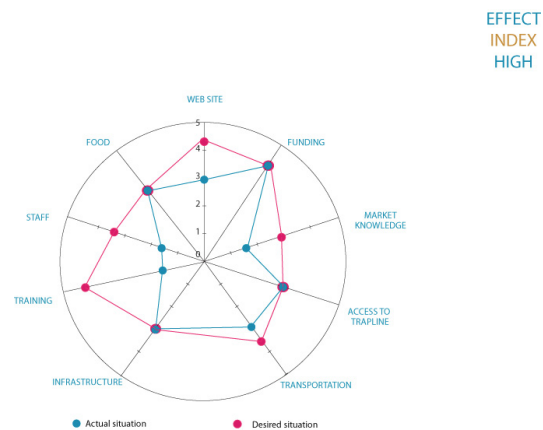
- Ability to answer client requests promptly

- Hotels and restaurants with regular hours and easily available off-hours assistance
- Trained and experienced staff
- Good accommodation, equipment, and maintenance
- Community support and involvement
- Liability insurance, good security, and safety measures
- Good communication, effective marketing
- Have a Plan B, or back-up plans and equipment in case of bad weather.

The participants decided which packages were ready to go in 2009 and where to focus on improvements for others. The showcase packages they selected were rated high because they are based on:

- existing knowledge (living on the land),
- infrastructure (cabins, tent frames, cultural centers, community hotels),
- easy access to the land (traplines), and
- knowledgeable guides (trappers).

They were considered market-ready, except for market knowledge (which clients to contact) and marketing plans. Further preparations to ensure safety are also needed.



Identifying the stakeholders (the Igloo/Rainbow and Timeline)

- By constructing a Timeline of past tourism activities, participants identified many stakeholders including tallymen, tour operators, air carriers, the gas stations, the web master, the Band Council, and others.
- Different stakeholders are affected to different degrees and have varying levels of influence on future tourism. (The Igloo)
- A decision was made to invite the tour operators to Eeyou Istchee to assess the existing packages and improve their market readiness.
- Strategies to engage other stakeholders were also discussed.



Outcomes of the process

- Helped clarify the goals, the steps, and the methodology of the whole project.
- Created a sense of ownership. *“It will help support and defend the project.”*
- Gave people a chance to share knowledge, build bridges, develop links between communities and operators, and work together at the regional level.
- Highlighted the fact that the Cree want to develop small scale, culturally and land-based experiences, rather than lodges and community hotels.
- Gave Community Tourism Officers a set of tools they can use independently at the community level and for other meetings (Band Council).

Contributions of SAS²

Quotes from workshop evaluations:

- “I am now a facilitator. Techniques are easy and well structured. Even a kid can do this. It is a lot of fun!”
- “Everything is visual which is good for a Cree.”
- “I found the participation level very high compared to other meetings.”
- “I will apply the info and method when doing community consultations...for community planning, with the board of directors...at the Band Council level.”
- “What I like best is the Wheel, the Floor Map, the Igloo and to have all the exercises available on the floor at all times.”