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Introduction

Eskasoni First Nation is the largest Mi'kmaq-speaking community in the world. With a population of more than 4300, Eskasoni is one of the five Mi'kmaq communities located on Unama'ki (Cape Breton Island), Canada. The community has been engaged in tourism development for decades, with varying degrees of success, until a new approach was considered – that being the community-led product of Eskasoni Cultural Journeys (ECJ). Eskasoni Cultural Journeys started at a grassroots level with Elder buy-in and initial Elder training in tourism. Today Eskasoni Cultural Journeys offers boat tours on the Bras d'Or Lake and authentic interpretive programming along the trails of Goat Island.

This research examined the development of Eskasoni Cultural Journeys, now a successful and award-winning program, which developed through a gradual community-led process and highlights an example of a community-led Aboriginal tourism project that has been successful in its development stages. Successes and challenges of the project related to four aspects of sustainability (social, cultural, economic and environmental) are outlined and recommendations offered for future development as well as considerations to ensure the project continues well in to the future.

Literature Review

Key areas of literature that were reviewed during this research processed were in the areas of a) Community-Based Tourism, b) Sustainable Tourism, c) Mi'kmaw Cultural Tourism and d) Eskasoni Cultural Journeys documentation.

Strong correlations exist between the key areas researched from the perspective of economic, social, environmental and cultural foundations, definitions and requirements for success in developing tourism products and experiences. Aboriginal (Mi'kmaw) tourism offerings are steeped in the foundations of community-based and sustainable tourism. Cultural tourism, particularly community-based tourism (CBT), plays an important role in community development for Indigenous communities. As identified by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2001) and also academic scholars (see Manyara & Jones, 2007), CBT when grounded in culture can substantially empower communities and make tremendous headway in the areas of development and poverty reduction. Many people treat sustainable cultural tourism as synonymous with CBT when it involves local people.

Lynch et al. (2010, p. 540), in reference to Colton and Harris' (2007) work, state that "in the context of Mi'kmaw cultural tourism, properly developed community based tourism that allows community members to be directly involved in decision-making is essential to its success and sustainability." Lynch et al. (2010) identify Mi'kmaw cultural tourism, using a community-based approach, as contingent on certain values, notably the Mi'kmaw worldview of interconnectedness.

A full list of references can be found at the end of this submission.

Methods

This study is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with key participants from the community, regional tourism industry, partners, and government organizations. The research team devised a list of research participant categories based upon those who might be able to provide valuable data regarding the development of Eskasoni Cultural Journeys. The identified individuals were invited to participate in the research project, with eight interviews conducted over a 3-month period in 2015. Although all

research participants were asked the same suite of questions; additional directed questions were asked of partner organizations and past/present employees.

Results and Discussion

Given the many parallels between sustainable tourism and community-based tourism, the results and discussion will be reported in relation to the pillars of these concepts (economic, social, cultural, and environmental)

Successes & Challenges

Social & Cultural: The Elders who have been working on the project shared that they have learned critical professional skills, gained confidence and self-esteem and aided in raising awareness about Mi'kmaw culture and history in the local community (Elders personal communications, April 8, 2015). The walking trails at Goat Island are maintained and available for use by the community and general public at no cost. The partnership and collaboration with the Highland Village Museum showcase distinctly different cultures, but partner to show the relationship between the Gaels and Mi'kmaq.

There are some challenges with engaging the community to its fullest potential and there are varying degrees of support among community members for the project.   There is little balance in community members taking full ownership and leadership of ECJ and a lack of succession planning. There are also human resource recruitment challenges and social dynamics to consider. Another key challenge is finding the balance between an authentic cultural experience and the "staged" presentation of culture.

Economic: Eskasoni Cultural Journeys is a source of jobs, job creation, and revenue for the community. The success to date has spurred collaboration and partnership, resulting in the formation of the Unama'ki Tourism Association, which has a mandate to develop and promote Mi'kmaw tourism products in Cape Breton (Carroll, personal communication, March 23, 2015).

With sustainable tourism related businesses, it is critical to think past the economic benefits and factor in economic challenges together with the positive and negative social, environmental, and cultural impacts of the business. With Eskasoni Cultural Journeys, there is an overdependence on government funding and evidence of a "boom and bust" model for business, which is not sustainable.

Environmental: Goat Island is located on the coastline of the Bras d'Or Lake, Canada's largest in-land sea and one of the world's 580 designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (Destination Cape Breton, 2014). This renowned designation and the Mi'kmaw people's respect for and spiritual connection to the land should instill the mindset that the environment in which Eskasoni Cultural Journey's operates should be preserved to its fullest; however, the environment and the need to protect and preserve it was not mentioned in any of our interviews.

Conclusion

To date, Eskasoni Cultural Journeys has been the most successful attempt at tourism development in Eskasoni First Nation. Based on the components of community-based tourism and pillars of sustainability and sustainable tourism development, Eskasoni Cultural Journeys can be positioned to enjoy continued success and further development in the long-term. By addressing the challenges presented and taking future recommendations into account, Eskasoni Cultural Journeys can strive to be an economically viable, socially and culturally respectful, and environmentally responsible community-led business, which continues to authentically showcase the Mi'kmaw culture of Eskasoni, further adding to the growing body of Aboriginal cultural tourism offerings in Canada.

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