



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

An exploration of formal tourism development in Quebec's Indigenous Cree community of Waskaganish

Item Type	event;event
Authors	Blueboy, Jonathan;Ibrahim, Zainub
Download date	2024-10-04 23:26:33
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49520

An exploration of formal tourism development in Quebec's Indigenous Cree community of Waskaganish

Jonathan Blueboy* and Zainub Ibrahim*

*Algonquin College, Ottawa, Canada

Short Abstract

The Cree community of Waskaganish is an Indigenous community situated on the James Bay in Northern Quebec. Waskaganish is in an early stage of tourism development and currently encounters a relatively limited number of visitors who participate in a variety of informal activities including traditional cultural Cree activities including fishing, hunting, and trapping. Current legislation restricts cultural practices such as fishing and hunting to members of the Cree Nation. However, locals informally involve visitors in these activities, which while illegal, is unenforceable. A recent Cree Nation Governance Agreement was passed in 2017 enabling the Cree Nation government to pass laws and regulations that supersede federal or provincial laws in designated category 1A lands. The Cree Nation now has the opportunity to consider modifying these regulations to allow for formal tourism opportunities which could benefit the local economy and protect and showcase local culture and environment. This study explores the preparedness and potential for legal changes that support formalized tourism in Waskaganish.

Extended Abstract

Waskaganish, a Cree community with a population of 2500, is situated on the James Bay in northern Quebec. Waskaganish is a community of historical importance as it was one of the trading posts during the fur trade and has recently celebrated its 350th anniversary. The Crees of Northern Quebec are among the few Indigenous peoples in North America that still have their native language as their mother tongue and practice traditional hunting and harvesting. Waskaganish has many tourism opportunities that showcase its history, customs, and natural beauty. Visitors can learn about traditional Cree culture, language, and heritage, explore the natural beauty of the region, participate in fishing, hunting, boating, and wildlife viewing, or attend events and powwows. Despite the variety of unique offerings of this region, formal tourism development in Waskaganish is limited. This is due largely to the remoteness of this region, and legislation that limits tourism development. The region was made more accessible in 2009 when the Rupert River was diverted as a result of an agreement between the Quebec Government and the Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec that was originally made in 2001. The river diversion has resulted in improved access to Waskaganish, which is now accessible by road year-round.

On July 18, 2017, the Crees of Northern Quebec signed an agreement with the Federal Government of Canada increasing the autonomy of the Cree First Nations of Northern Quebec. This agreement enables the now Cree Nation Government to make laws enforceable under

designated Cree Category 1A lands. Category 1A lands are where the reservations are situated and the Cree Nation Government has jurisdiction over this territory along with individual communities. With the power of self-governance, the Cree Nation Government can pass laws that encourage community-based tourism development that maximizes economic benefits while preserving their traditions and environment.

Current laws and regulations prohibit outsiders from participating in cultural and traditional practices. These laws aim to protect Cree culture, language, and territory particularly as the Cree people of Northern Quebec have endured a history of tribulations with outsiders. However, these same laws also hinder the ability of local entrepreneurs to formally benefit from tourism opportunities. For instance, laws prohibit outsiders from fishing and hunting. Consequently, local tourism businesses are limited in the services they can legally offer beyond accommodations, thus limiting the scope of their operations. Hence, much of the tourism offerings in Waskaganish are informal, where visitors hire locals to take them on different excursions and there have been a host of negative consequences on guests and locals. For instance, visitors who lack knowledge of the land must rely on locals who may themselves not be equipped to undertake lengthy excursions to remote wilderness regions thus risking the lives of both the visitors and the locals. In the past, community members have had to rescue informal tour groups. Further, there have been instances where visitors have fished for pike during spawning seasons, which is contrary to local traditions and may affect the fish count. While illegal, it is not enforceable and without consequence. This reinforces the importance of having knowledgeable locals accompany visitors on excursions.

As a result of limited tourism development in Waskaganish, outside communities reportedly benefit from tourism based out of Waskaganish. One example of this is an air service that is provided to tourists to a fishing camp that is not locally owned and the air service is operated on an Indigenous trap line; a trap line is an area in which a family group sets their traps and hunt along a route or within an area. These trap lines are considered private property and great respect is afforded to the people that hunt and care for a trap line. At times, when a moose or big game is hunted on a trap line, some meat is offered to the tallyman (caretaker) as a sign of respect. The air service operates seasonally during the summer and their landing area is on Lac du Poisson Blanc near the campsite of the local hunters. The air service adds disturbance to locals and wildlife in addition to noise pollution to an otherwise quiet and secluded area. The company also stores its fuel in the open in barrels which can lead to pollution and spills. As there is no enforcement of safety standards, the company can continue operating in a careless manner. The lake is known for its pike fishing but there are concerns about the careless storage of fuel. Some of the visitors arriving at these camps come from the United States to fish. They park their vehicles by the pier to access the float plane and trespass through local hunters' camp a few hundred meters from the pier.

Local tourism businesses

Despite the unfavorable regulations that hinder tourism development in Indigenous communities in Canada, some tourism ventures within Cree territory have experienced relative success and thus there is reason to believe that with adequate supporting legislation further tourism

development would be successful. An example of this is the Cree Village Eco Lodge in northern Ontario, located in Moose Factory, around 133 kilometers west of Waskaganish, which was awarded the Air Canada Business of the Year Award – Single-Unit in 2005. The lodge itself did not formally offer tourism-related activities and services but served an important role in providing accommodation for visitors, which the local community benefited from by providing services to visitors.

Another example of a successful tourism venture is the Cabbage Willows hunting camp that operated 30 km west of Waskaganish and has experienced much success in the 1940s onward, particularly among European and American hunters (Young, 1955). It operated within the seasonal migration of Snow and Canadian geese and provided income for the local community. It was originally owned by Tom Wheeler and Wheeler Airlines and was eventually bought by the local Cree community of Waskaganish. It ended its operations in the late 80s and some locals attribute the closure to mismanagement by the local government. Many local Cree hunting guides benefited by working at the hunting camp and were highly praised for their ingenuity in using traditional methods to attract geese and calling the geese using nothing but their mouths rather than the more common practice of using man-made goose calls.

Unfortunately, both of these once-successful businesses are no longer in operation as they struggled financially after years of successful operation. Although there are differing perspectives on the reasons behind this, they are likely exacerbated by the lack of supporting growth poles to generate regular demand for such formal tourism operations with the high costs of operating in a remote region.

The informal sector

The locals of Waskaganish are warm and inviting people, open to sharing their culture with visitors. For instance, it is not uncommon for local families to invite outsiders for a fishing trip or to the local heritage site where dressing and cooking game meat is a common practice. Some local residents have developed their trap lines into fishing or hunting camps, but these camps are not officially licensed and cater to the local and regional population. Although invitations are afforded to outsiders and it is common practice to allow outsiders to hunt and fish within these camps, laws are often overlooked as the jurisdiction can be somewhat confusing. Further, the geographic remoteness of Waskaganish, as is the case in many northern Cree communities, also plays a role in the lack of enforcement of any regulations or laws.

A formal enterprise would have trouble disregarding laws and regulations and thus could not operate a business that enables visitors to participate in Cree cultural activities in the way that individuals do. The Cree Nation Governance Agreement can enforce laws that support tourism development in a formalized manner, enabling registered businesses to expand their operations to include currently-restricted cultural practices.

Potential benefits of formal tourism development

In addition to generating direct business opportunities for locals, formal tourism development in Waskaganish could have many indirect and induced effects. For instance, local craftspeople,

known for their unique traditional crafts such as hand-made traditional tamarack decoys and other traditional handicrafts including moose hide mittens and moccasins, moose and caribou antler carvings, and beaded earrings, struggle to access a market. With a formalized tourism sector, local artists could have market access through linkages with other businesses thus providing income opportunities and supporting the overall tourism experience.

Another restriction affecting businesses is food inspection regulations, which prohibit local restaurants from serving traditional foods. Under the new legislation, restaurants could be allowed to incorporate local ingredients and serve traditional foods. This would further enhance the visitor experience as they would have the opportunity to experience seasonal traditional Cree cuisines such as bannock, wild herbs and berries, moose, wild goose, and a variety of fish species including trout, whitefish, walleye, and northern pike. Further, visitors could participate in the catching, gathering, and preparation of food, which are activities that already take place informally due to visitor demand. This would add to the induced economic benefits of tourism and empower the local people to continue to pursue their traditional food gathering and preparation practices. The Cree people of Northern Quebec believe in sustainable hunting and they have programs in place to keep track of the local wildlife population. Sustainability is a core belief of the Cree people, and they fish, hunt, and forage with that principle in mind, offering an opportunity to educate visitors on these sustainable practices.

Additionally, provincial and federal governments have focused on developing infrastructure to support the extractive industries of forestry and mining within Cree Nation. Tourism could act as a form of buffer to protect further development close to Cree territories.

Methodology

Waskaganish is chosen as a case study location due to the strong Cree language, culture and tradition, its location along the James Bay, its historical significance, and thus its potential for tourism development. Gathering data for this study will rely on unstructured interviews of key participants, analyzing historical documents, laws, and legislation, and observation of tourism activities. Local elders, hunters, and two local band office councilors were already interviewed about plans for tourism and the future development of this sector within the Cree Nation of Northern Quebec. Further interviews are planned to include local restaurant and business owners, artists, and tourists. Finally, the local DMO, Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) has agreed to provide researchers with supporting data and access to tourism participants in the region.

Conclusion

There have been tribulations for the Indigenous people of Canada; not only in the historical past but in recent memory as well. These memories are still fresh in the minds of the Indigenous population who still live with the fallout of the suffering they endured. The Cree Nation Government of the Cree people of Northern Quebec is in a unique position to not only protect their identity, culture, and practices but to share them with the world. With growing interest in Indigenous culture, can the Cree Nation Government take advantage and develop a sustainable tourism industry that can strengthen the Crees' resolve to protect their culture and preserve it for

future generations? The Indigenous people of Canada are the fastest-growing population within Canada, and the importance of culture and identity is important as they can become diluted with each passing generation without intentional practice and protection. Tourism may be well-positioned to support the preservation of the environment, culture, and identity while offering economic opportunities in Waskaganish and other Indigenous communities.

References

Lemelin, R. H., Koster, R., & Youroukos, N. (2014). Tangible and intangible indicators of successful Aboriginal Tourism Initiatives: A case study of two successful Aboriginal Tourism Lodges in Northern Canada. *Tourism Management, 47*, 318-328.

White, E. (2020). New \$8M hotel to open in Moosonee, while Moose Factory Ecolodge struggles to break even. Retrieved from CBC:
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/moosonee-hotel-james-bay-coast-far-north-1.5406552>

Young, S. (1955). Where the Wild Goose Waits. Retrieved from Vault:
<https://vault.si.com/vault/1955/09/19/where-the-wild-goose-waits>