Aboriginal Cultural Tourism

- Land Of The Fog -

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[ABSTRACT]

Cape Breton Island, is located off the eastern most portion of mainland Canada at roughly 47°N, 60°W (Brown, 2006). The indigenous peoples, the Mi’kmaq, have lived in the region for approximately 11,000 years and have had contact with Europeans for 400 hundred years. They call Cape Breton Island, Unama’ki, Land of the Fog (Milburn, 2004).

Aboriginal cultural tourism and the importance of product authenticity is discussed. The paper provides a case narrative of Aboriginal cultural tourism involving five First Nations communities on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada. The island contains five reserves of the Mi’kmaq Nation, these being: Eskasoni, Membertou, Wagmatcook, We’kopaq/Waycobah, and Potlotek/Chapel Island. The combined population of these five communities is 7149, approximately 7% of the island’s population (INAC, 2007).

Key Words: Aboriginal Cultural Tourism, Cape Breton Island, Mi’Kmaq First Nation

The authors of this paper have taken an inverted pyramid approach to discuss an emerging and distinctive approach to cultural tourism development within the context of North American First Nations. At the outset, the dynamic of Aboriginal cultural tourism is presented. The research then takes a more focused approach and presents how recent developments in Aboriginal cultural tourism are illustrative of a special elaboration in sustainable cultural tourism policy and programming, and how Canada’s First Nations communities are asserting control and direction in this unique niche development for a variety of economic, social and cultural goals. According to the Aboriginal Tourism in Canada, Part 1: Economic Impact Analysis (2003), while Aboriginal tourism was previously sought mostly by a small niche market, mainstream tourists are now showing a keen interest in participating in Aboriginal tourism experiences. An internationally renowned tourist destination, Cape Breton Island, is highlighted as a case narrative and a review of its Aboriginal cultural tourism opportunities.

The Government of Nova Scotia established the Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage in 1971. In 1975, revenue from tourism for the
entire province was $380 million. In 2004 revenue topped $1.3 billion. Tourism officials in Nova Scotia are predicting a 100% increase in revenue by 2012 to $2.6 billion (Province of Nova Scotia, 2005b, p.21). Cape Breton Island tourism revenues reached $150 million per year by the late 1980s and was approximately $213 million in 2006 (N.S. Tourism, Culture and Heritage, 2006).

In 2004 Condé Nast named Cape Breton one of the greatest island vacation destinations in North America. Cape Breton has also won similar accolades from other international travel magazines such as National Geographic Traveler in 2004. In its own tourism promotional material, the Government of Nova Scotia refers to Cape Breton as “Nova Scotia’s Masterpiece”. This island, deemed a premier tourist destination by such travel guide magazines as Gentlemen’s Quarterly (August, 2007) which ranks Cape Breton as the number two summer escape with Pueblo, Mexico as number one and Livingston, Montana ranked as number three. Travel & Leisure magazine (August, 2007) under World’s Best Islands, ranks Cape Breton as number two in the islands, “Continental US and Canada category.” In 2007, Cape Breton was first in the Island category for Continental US and Canada and fourth overall in the world (Tourism Research, E-marketing, New Media, 2008).

The paper concludes with a critical appraisal of Aboriginal cultural tourism initiatives within Cape Breton, and a reassessment of the importance of Aboriginal cultural tourism to the broader concept of cultural tourism.

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As the cultural tourism niche market is associated with the importance of history, heritage, art, music, crafts, cultural attachments to geography and place, and the search for cultural identity, meaning and affirmation, it is no surprise that as this aspect of the tourism industry has developed over the past two decades, such development has attracted growing interest amongst members of Canada’s First Nations.

This interest is part of a broader renaissance in how Aboriginal Canadians view their place in this country, how they perceive the socio-economic challenges and opportunities their peoples face and how First Nations can assert control and direction of their own economic futures through the advent of self-government. As Aboriginal authors such as Diabo (2003), Hager (2003), Mather-Simard (2003), and O’Neil (2003) have all asserted, First Nations’ self-government is integral to improving economic sustainability in First Nations and, as First Nations governments seek the ways and means of promoting economic development opportunities for their peoples, they will be carefully addressing the social and economic environment of cultural tourism operations for their peoples.

According to Barry Parker (2004), a member of the Okanagan First Nation and a national tourism advisor for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, “[t]here is significant market demand for cultural tourism, and this can be translated into real business opportunities for Aboriginal people in Canada and Indigenous people around the world”. “At the same time”, he continued, “it is a platform for which people can enhance, sustain, strengthen and protect their cultures” so long as Aboriginal tourism initiatives are undertaken “with dignity and respect for cultures, communities and the environment” (Canada World View, 2004, p. 8).

This twin concern for reaping the economic benefits of commercially successful Aboriginal