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## **Preserving Inuit Cultural Traditions Through Tourism in Arviat, Nunavut, Canada**

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Donor (7<sup>th</sup> Generation Fund)**

### **Background**

I have worked as a professional tourism consultant for 30+ years, for many years with large multi-disciplinary consulting firms that provided the perfect training ground to learn the skills. Following my entrepreneurial spirit I decided to open my own firm in 1994 -- <sup>the</sup> Tourism Company.

With an educational background in environmental planning and resource management it was natural for me to gravitate towards more sustainable models of tourism development. In the early 1980's I had my first opportunity to work with Aboriginal clients doing some of the first community-based tourism planning in Canada's eastern Arctic. I began to realize then that Canada's native peoples do not separate their social issues from the land. They did not need convincing that tourism could assist in natural heritage conservation and cultural heritage preservation. Of all my assignments as a consultant I have found working with Aboriginal clients the most rewarding.

In 2003 I decided to set up my own philanthropic initiative to see if I could have more influence in developing a few successful models for Aboriginal cultural tourism in Canada. Initially I considered the idea to set up my own foundation. Following discussions with several mentors I decided instead to set up the 7<sup>th</sup> Generation Fund (as a donor directed fund) through a public Foundation, TIDES Canada. Each year since then, and going forward until my philanthropic funds are depleted, I make annual donations to a select number of Aboriginal cultural and ecotourism initiatives.

In 2008 <sup>the</sup> Tourism Company was fortunate to win a contract with Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (the Inuit land claims organization) to develop an implementation plan for a sum of land claims money earmarked for tourism development in Inuit communities situated adjacent to federal wildlife preserves and bird sanctuaries. Our initial recommendation was to focus the limited resources on a few communities that offered the best tourism potential – 'the low hanging fruit'. Arviat was one of those communities.

Arviat, located in Nunavut Canada, and the Arviat Community Ecotourism (ACE) initiative is one project where I am applying both my professional skills and my philanthropic interests.

## **Nunavut “Our Land”**

Inuit refers to Canada’s indigenous peoples who inhabit the arctic and subarctic regions (in Inuktitut Inuit means ‘the people’). Along with their descendants the Thule and Dorset cultures Inuit have inhabited these areas since 900 AD. Until the 1950’s many of these people were still living a traditional nomadic lifestyle. Today Canada’s Inuit, numbering approximately 30,000, have been settled into 25 remote communities spread across a vast arctic region, the size of Western Europe (population density of 0.1-persons/sq km. Some of the socio-demographic characteristics of the Inuit society paint a troubled picture:

- Median age of 20 (Canada – 40 yrs)
- Unemployment in 20%+ range
- 25% High School graduation rate
- High youth suicide rate (began in 80’s)

Nunavut is Canada’s newest territory having been established in 1999 under a federal statute. In Inuktitut Nunavut means ‘our land’. In total the territory comprises 20% of the Canadian land mass.

With creation of Nunavut came the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement which provides the Inuit with:

- Collective ownership of 18% of land (referred to as Inuit Owned Lands where they may have surface and subsurface rights or just surface rights);
- Co-management rights;
- Harvesting rights.

The land claim agreement also stipulated the Inuit would retain a share of all resource royalties collected by the federal government in Nunavut, although they receive no direct royalty from development on Crown Lands. At some point in the future the expectation is that responsibility over mineral and other resources will be devolved to the Government of Nunavut, but not within the foreseeable future.

Separate Inuit impact and benefit agreements are prepared when Parks or Conservation Areas are created. Arviat being situated adjacent the McConnell River Bird Sanctuary was one of the communities benefitting from one such agreement.

Traditionally the worldview of the Inuit saw the land and the people as intertwined. Today with many more competing pressures for the land and resources conservation planning as a concept is in its infancy. There are huge resource development pressures throughout Nunavut and within the Kivalliq Region, the political region within which Arviat is situated. In 2010 there were 7 active diamond exploration camps, 6 gold with 1 operating gold mine, 3 nickel/copper/platinum, 1 rare earth metals and 5 uranium exploration camps.

### **The Hamlet of Arviat**

The Hamlet of Arviat is one of the southernmost communities in Nunavut and with the extensive mining activity in the area there are conceptual plans being discussed to run a road from northern Manitoba. Arviat is located on the western shores of Hudson Bay 163 miles north of Churchill Manitoba, a community with the reputation as the 'Polar bear capital of the world'. The predominantly Inuit community, of just over 2,300 is a very traditional community with Inuktitut still being used as the primary language. Formerly known as Eskimo Point, Arviat's name was derived from the Inuktitut name arviq because the nearby coastal landscape resembles the shape of a bowhead whale. The Hudson's Bay Company established a post here in 1921, bringing Inuit seasonal campsites into the vicinity as trapping became increasingly profitable. The Roman Catholic mission established a presence in 1924. But it was not until the 1950's that the government began formally settling the surrounding Inuit groups into a community. The community's Federal Day School opened in 1959, marking the beginning of the permanent settlement. By the 1960s, a nursing station was in operation and many new services were established drawing Inuit from further afield.

The people in Arviat are a mix of two distinct cultures, the inland Caribou Inuit and the coastal Inuit more dependent for survival on the sea. Located in an extremely rich area for wildlife, people in Arviat continue to actively harvest and hunt and typically as much as 80% of the local diet comes from country foods.

Arviat was selected as one of the primary beneficiaries for the land claim funds for a variety of reasons as follows:

- Strong interest in tourism;
- Just north of established international destination, Churchill;
- Strong traditional culture;
- Entrepreneurial community;
- Some past experience with tourism;
- Excellent wildlife viewing opportunities;

- Relatively accessible community with alternative flight options; and
- Strong market demand that is now being met primarily in Churchill where some of the 20,000 annual visitors have an expressed desire to travel north across the border to an Inuit community.

The Arviat Community Ecotourism (ACE) initiative is being funded for five years through land claim moneys provided by Nunavut Tunngavik. In scale and scope it is a tourism initiative unprecedented in Nunavut with the much-needed sustained support for capacity development.

### **The ACE Initiative**

The Arviat Community Ecotourism (ACE) initiative is a grassroots project involving many individuals and several small businesses in Arviat with a vision to establish a sustainable community-based tourism enterprise.

Over the past two years significant application of Inuit land claims funding has been dedicated to the ACE initiative for training, product development and marketing.

We began our work in Arviat back in 2008 and 2009 by listening and learning. Each time we came to the community (in all four seasons) we would participate in a wide range of consultation activities ranging from radio talkback shows, formal group meetings, drop-in sessions, workshop sessions, placing informational posters around the community, and through individual meetings. We always hired a local interpreter and assistant for practical reasons such as interpretation and introductions, but also to begin the process of knowledge transfer. Each time we stayed in the community longer than government or business travellers to help differentiate us, and we participated in community events and travelled on the land with local families every weekend. Over time people began opening up and we found the community to be very interested in tourism. We:

- Determined what the community would be comfortable sharing with visitors;
- Learned about existing and past tourism business ventures;
- Offered open involvement for community residents and businesses.

The intent with ACE is to establish a sustainable community ecotourism business that will continue on when we complete our work in 2013/14. ACE actively promotes and encourages sustainable use of natural and cultural heritage resources. Existing licensed sports hunting outfitters in the community are now beginning to switch from sports hunting, a declining market, to wildlife viewing programs. Ecoguide training is being offered to all existing sport hunting guides. The program

is being designed to help sustain the Inuit culture and traditions that are at risk of being lost with the passing of the elder generations.

The objectives for the ACE program are as follows:

- Foster new economic development;
- Capitalize on known market demand;
- Establish a sustainable community tourism business model;
- Capacity development;
- Act as a catalyst for small, related businesses;
- Stimulate interest & understanding of Inuit culture among visitors;
- Provide training to develop a pool of Arviamit (Arviat residents) with tourism skills;
- Promote pride for residents of Arviat;
- Enable broad community involvement from youth to elders;
- Spread benefits throughout the community.

The Tourism Company team of experts have, and will continue to arrange and offer grassroots training using workshops, one-on-one training sessions, land-based training programs, and internet-based training in the following areas:

- Storytelling;
- Cultural performance;
- Business entrepreneurship;
- Basic hospitality;
- Cooking and caring for visitors;
- Basic bookkeeping;
- Web presence marketing;
- Heritage interpretation;
- Commercial boat operations;
- Event planning

At the heart of Arviat's tourism product is the community's strong cultural heritage. Demonstrations and performances featuring Inuit skills and traditions, story-telling, music and dance are offered in various combinations to provide anything from a half-day to a three-day program for visitors. This may include:

- Visits to a traditional tupik (skin tent) and/or an iglu;
- Dog-sled rides, boat excursions to a National Historic Site;
- Mini-expeditions out on the land by snowmobile or ATV;

- Demonstrations of Inuit survival skills;
- Visits with artists and story-tellers;
- Opportunities to buy local arts and crafts (soapstone carvings, jewellery, sealskin mitts, etc.);
- Films and lectures on Inuit history;
- Throat-singing and drum-dancing spectacles;
- Participation in high school cultural programs;
- A chance to sit down over tea with local Inuit elders;
- Plus dining on caribou, musk-ox and Arctic char.

This is cultural tourism that will begin to set new quality experience standards in Nunavut.

While Inuit culture is the heart of ACE, the big drawing cards sure to bring tourists to Arviat are polar bears and caribou. In early May the spectacle of one of the only remaining mass migrations (caribou) in North America is undeveloped from a tourism perspective, and yet accessible from Arviat. Each year the cows and yearlings begin their annual migration from the tree line to the calving grounds on the barrens NW of Arviat. According to the Nunavut caribou biologist this migration is one of the most predictable and accessible caribou migrations in the world, and for visitors “it is a life changing experience”.

Every October and November the annual procession of polar bears travelling north up the coast along ‘polar bear alley’ takes place between Churchill and Arviat, as the bears await the formation of sea ice to resume their seal hunting.

### **Progress to-date**

Much has been achieved over the past 2.5 years:

- A database of over 70 people has been compiled for residents with an interest to get involved identifying their relevant skills and levels of training accomplished;
- A community tourism map has been produced;
- A tourism signage program has been initiated;
- The Visitor Centre is undergoing renovations including new exhibitry;
- An integrated web presence has been set up;
- Our team has influenced the design and layout for the newest commercial tourism accommodation, setting a new benchmark in quality;
- The Arviat Cultural Performance Troupe has been formed comprised of both elders and youth;

- Assistance has been provided to develop and incorporate a new heritage Society;
- Three new private tourism businesses have been assisted with their business plans and funding applications, and are in start-up mode:
- The first tour operator FAM trip was successfully staged and partnerships with tour operators (both domestic and international) are developing;
- The first tour groups have started to arrive in Arviat.

The next 2.5 years will see a continuation of training for a full range of tourism skills, continued product development and refinement, and marketing. The team will also continue to mentor new tourism businesses as well as a Community Tourism Coordinator to run the full community-based program. Work will continue on realizing the following opportunities:

- Inuit owned and operated wildlife viewing lodge on the coast between Arviat and Churchill;
- Day-use wildlife viewing facility;
- Nunavut Territorial Park;
- Walking trails in and around the community featuring cultural and natural heritage sites of interest.

By 2013/14 the objective is to have a sustainable program and business model in place.

### **Adding Philanthropy**

We realized early on in the process that the monies set aside from the Conservation Areas land claim tourism fund (\$1 million over 5 years) would not cover all elements of this complex community-based tourism initiative. Success by 2013/14, in meeting the goals and objectives for the program would require an ability to leverage a wide range of support, both in-kind and financial. After 2.5 years of work in the community combined with some strategic media exposure the ACE initiative had gained broad awareness and support with critical territorial and federal tourism and economic development agencies as well as the regional airlines. More recently the team has begun to employ a philanthropic strategy comprised of the following components:

- The newly formed Arviat Heritage Society will seek charitable status to enable guest donations towards cultural preservation initiatives;
- A \$5 per guest heritage fund fee is included in all tour operator cost quotations;

- A Heritage Fund is being set up to support heritage preservation activities;
- Several team members have been providing advice to TIDES Canada as they define the directions for their new Arctic initiative;
- Working through TIDES Canada we are seeking private donors to set up a Tourism Fund (to be administered by the Hamlet) that will be used to offer short term working capital loans and insurance subsidies to cover the gap for budding entrepreneurs struggling to meet the equity contributions required from government funding agencies.

We are open to other ideas and anxious to learn from the experience of others in other jurisdictions dealing with similar issues and hurdles.