

INDIGENOUS CULTURAL ADVENTURE TOURISM NEEDS LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

As the federal government announced \$1.5-billion in relief funds to help BC restart its economy, north coast First Nations tourism operators say more help is needed to keep Indigenous businesses afloat until their communities can safely reopen.

Sk'aal Ts'iid James Cowpar, owner/operator of [Haida Style Expeditions](#), says advocacy for stimulus packages is needed to support Haida Gwaii and other regions where tourism businesses are the bread and butter of local economies.

"There's literally no season for most of us because the prime booking season is past. We lost 70 per cent of our business and due to the uncertainties, we don't know when we plan to open again on Haida Gwaii," says Cowpar.

Cowpar understands protecting the community health of Haida Gwaii is a number one priority right now. For the future, he's anxious to see support for ecotourism businesses that have helped the transition from a resource extraction-based model to a local sustainable economy. "This is the perfect opportunity to prioritize this issue," he points out. "First Nations communities have small businesses. They take risks. They hire. Yet there's never any support."

The company received Canadian Emergency Business Account (CEBA) funds, but Cowpar says loans are not enough. "The message still needs to be clear to Ottawa that small business needs help or we may not have an industry going forward. Borrowing more money, taking on more debt, is not the answer. We need an economic plan, we need advocacy, we need a bail-out."

Haida Style Expeditions first began offering cultural adventure tours in 2013 and is now the only Haida-owned business that operates in Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, which remains closed under federal COVID-19 restrictions.

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Photo Courtesy of Haida Style Expeditions



INDIGENOUS CULTURAL ADVENTURE TOURISM NEEDS LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS *(cont'd)*



"A little company like ours hires a dozen people," Cowpar says. "We put in over \$150,000 in wages to the community for a short season. We buy local gas and our bill is well over \$100,000. Our little business alone came in at close to \$1.5 million dollars."

As British Columbia reviews where \$1.5-billion in new federal "restart" funds will be spent, Cowpar says the future of his business and other Island tourism operators is uncertain.

"If there's no certainty established now for 2021, we'll be in a financial crunch. We're struggling to hold on until then," he explains. "A long-term, multi-year emergency program may be required at this point. It's kind of hard to comprehend."

In late May, after announcing an earlier closure of its summer season, [Spirit Bear Lodge](#) in Kitasoo/Xai'xais territory has said it will shut down for the entire 2020 season.

"Thankfully we have the majority of our guests transferring to next year," says general manager John Czornobaj. "Fingers crossed we can operate in 2021. Now we're looking at whatever we will need to build guest confidence and keep staff safe in what everyone's calling the 'new normal'."

With many future bookings dependent on international travel, the Lodge plans to work with tourism marketing agencies to grow its domestic market. The social enterprise has applied for federal emergency funds and a \$25,000 loan from Canada's Indigenous tourism association. A federal 75 per cent wage subsidy is helping to maintain a core management team and to allow for online and in-person staff training, and trail-cutting programs in August.

Czornobaj says more provincial support is needed for Indigenous tourism in the region. "The biggest funding shortcoming is for those businesses in desperate situations that have to pay rent and need to weather this storm until they can begin bringing in some revenue. That's the most important place to put it right now."

In Gitga'at territory, Marven Robinson, owner/operator of Spirit Bear Tours has cancelled all bookings for his upcoming season. He says concerns about the health of his community and guests, and uncertainty about border closures prompted the decision.

The closure will have economic ripple effects in Hartley Bay where Spirit Bear Tours provided income for eight employees,



Photo Courtesy of Haida Style Expeditions

boat charter operators, and other suppliers and services. "I can't think about myself, I just think, what am I going to do about the staff who depended on this?" Robinson says. "It was two months of work, but they were being paid pretty good."

He's also concerned about private wildlife tour companies that are still operating in the territory. "I'll have staff going out to the rivers to monitor that. I don't want people going up these rivers on their own."

With an accommodations sector hard-hit by COVID-19, the Bella Guest Cabins owned by Cliff and Ramona Starr in **Haítzaq** (Heiltsuk) territory are closing permanently. Opened in 2014, the popular tourist cabins were a small business success story, often operating at peak capacity during the spring and summer seasons. With borders closed worldwide, Cliff Starr says he could see no recovery in sight for the next two seasons.

"We had a look at a couple of the programs under emergency response and basically, they are just more loans," he says. "So we'd have to make more money to pay them back and that would set us back four or five years."

While a sale is being negotiated, the business will no longer operate as tourist cabins, which Starr considers a loss for Bella Bella. "We really need more accommodations here. There was a steady increase in tourism over the past few years since we opened," he says. "We don't have a fishing and forestry economy here as much anymore, so we have tried to move on toward something else."

FOCUS ON INDIGENOUS TOURISM - COVID-19 STRIKING AT THE HEART OF FIRST NATIONS' COMMUNITY ECONOMIES



Thousands of Indigenous tourism jobs have been lost, and hundreds of Indigenous tourism businesses face permanent closure due to COVID-19 impacts, according to a new report by The Conference Board of Canada.

The [results of a survey](#) of almost 600 Indigenous businesses, released June 12, reveal Indigenous arts and heritage, and recreation and outdoor activities, are the most vulnerable sectors. An estimated 21,400 jobs have been lost and 714 Indigenous tourism businesses may never re-open.

Ontario, British Columbia and the North are reported to be the most affected.

Federal and provincial government recovery funds, in the form of small grants and loans, are not keeping pace with the demands of one of the economy's hardest hit sectors. On June 11, the federal government announced a further [\\$16 million in stimulus grants](#) to be administered by the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) in the form of \$25,000 non-repayable grants to businesses of all sizes. ITAC Development Coordinator Genevieve Huneault says the funds will be enough to cover 600 applications already received in April, although a second intake may be considered.

Lucy Martin, an Indigenous Tourism Specialist with Northern BC Tourism and [Indigenous Tourism BC](#) (ITBC), says ITBC has received a further \$500,000 in funding from Western Economic Diversification with guidelines to be announced by the end of June. A first round of \$300,000 was handed out in the form of emergency relief grants of \$5,000.

April Moi, Industry Development Specialist with [Northern BC Tourism](#), says regional tourism associations are meeting weekly with the Province to advocate for business owners. "We're hearing that businesses are hesitant to go further in debt. That's what we continue to hear," she confirms.

Moi is encouraging Indigenous operators to register with the agency's [tourism resiliency program](#). She says participating businesses will be provided with a program advisor, business consultation, and development of a support plan to identify available funds and programs.

"We're trying to ensure that businesses can survive this and are going to be on the ground and viable when the doors open up again," she says.

Despite the fatigue they may be feeling, Moi urges Indigenous business owners to participate in [tourism impact surveys](#) to give feedback on their situation. "We're here to support business. But it's really important for businesses to continue to voice their concerns because that's how we can document and report their concerns to government."

Indigenous tourism has been hit harder than other tourism sectors, reported Adam Fiser, who led the study for The Conference Board. In an ITAC webinar releasing the results June 12, Fiser said the recovery timeframe for First Nations needed to be understood.

Many Indigenous businesses operate in communities with deep concerns about protecting their people from COVID-19, he acknowledged. A recovery plan for Indigenous tourism needs to have "a tailored, flexible, adaptive approach" to address these concerns.



Photo Credit: Doug Neasloss

INDIGENOUS ARTS AND CULTURAL TOURISM SECTOR IS FACING A TOUGH RECOVERY



Photo Credit: Rolf Bettner, courtesy Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay

COVID-19 closures of Indigenous social enterprises are having far-reaching impacts on local economies and communities on the North and Central Coast and Haida Gwaii.

The [Haida Heritage Centre](#) at Kay Llnagaay closed its doors on March 17 just before the Haida Nation took swift action to declare a State of Emergency to protect the community from a COVID-19 outbreak.

Gid Uuwans Dana Moraes, from the Kay'aahl Laanas of the Haida Nation, is the Haida Heritage Centre's Executive Director. With the majority of its income generated through tours, admissions and rentals, she says, the Centre has lost 100 per cent of its revenue, laid off nine staff members, including summer students, and is faced with having to refund tours booked a year in advance.

Moraes say heritage and cultural centres provide far-reaching social and economic benefits to communities and yet many aren't eligible for federal recovery funds.

"The Haida Heritage Centre is really a hub for our community," says Moraes. "There's a lot of tourist organizations that do tours or operate from the Centre. Local artists sell their jewellery and exhibit their artwork. We host community events, weddings, meetings and cultural celebrations."

The Centre received federal and provincial emergency business loans, but Moraes says they're not enough. "Even if we do not open, we need \$30,000 to \$50,000 just to stay above water. We're hoping for money coming down the line for heritage and cultural facilities."

"I think a lot of Indigenous tourism businesses are going to need grants to survive."

While the next two years will be challenging for the heritage centre, Moraes says the COVID-19 State of Emergency measures are in place to protect Haida language and culture. "A healthy financial economy has healthy humanity," she says. "And a healthy economy is contingent on healthy language, arts and culture."

Jisgang Nika Collison from the Kay'aahl Laanas of the Haida Nation is the Executive Director of the [Haida Gwaii Museum](#)

based in the Haida Heritage Centre. When the Museum closed its doors, she says it was forced to cut its budget by \$300,000 and lay off two full-time and one part-time employees.

The Museum has been operating since 1976 and Collison is grateful for arts funder support during these uncertain times. "All that grant-writing has culminated in someone having our back. We have to really celebrate the arts and culture world."

While cultural funders have been adaptive and flexible, she says more action is needed by government to support a tourism and culture sector that contributes billions to the Canadian economy.

"The Indigenous community funding, and the tourism and arts and culture funding, is the last to roll out. I think it still mirrors the societal constructs. It's not lost on us," Collison points out.

More than 85 per cent of the Museum's budget – about \$800,000 – goes directly back into the local economy. "We have Trading House for artists, we hire locals and local contractors, artists get fees from exhibitions, and we buy and invest locally wherever we can," she explains. "That's a lot of money to put back into the community."

The Museum is adapting to the current crisis by upgrading to e-commerce for its [Trading House gift shop](#) sales, exploring online programming, and focussing on a plan for the timing and messaging around economic recovery.

"No one knows what the future's going to look like," she says. "Anyone who thinks we're going back to pre-March 17 is going to have to be very patient. We need to do lobbying around what is going to work best for northern tourism businesses and the arts and culture community."

"A huge part of Haida culture is hosting. We love having guests," Collison adds. "But obviously, the safety of our elders and of the islands people and Haida art and culture is paramount. That's what has to happen right now."

"We look forward to when we can invite our guests back when the time is right."



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