

Fostering Innovation in Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism development has been a topic of considerable research and policy reflection across Canada for the past two decades. Sustainability is especially important to people in rural areas, since tourism products often rely on sensitive natural and cultural resources. In order to encourage the adoption of sustainable tourism practices among operators, research was conducted by a collaboration of four tertiary institutions in the Fostering Innovation in Sustainable Tourism Project. The team conducted a study in the spring of 2009 to (a) determine attitudes of tourism operators toward sustainability; (b) assess the extent and type of sustainable tourism practices adopted by operators; (c) understand the influences on the adoption of sustainability practices, including motivators and barriers; and (d) determine ways to support the adoption of sustainability practices among tourism operators. An online survey was administered and interviews were conducted with rural operators throughout the Canadian province of British Columbia. Results showed an overall strong “pro-sustainability” attitude among respondents. Dominant barriers identified were lack of available money to invest, lack of incentive programs, other business priorities, and limited access to suppliers of sustainable products, with the most common recommendation being the need for incentive programs to encourage businesses to become more sustainable. The results also indicate differences in adoption behaviour among three groups of operators: those who have fully committed, those who have piloted a few strategies, and those who have not. Understanding differences in adoption of sustainable practices using innovation theory may help to support the development of programs and policies that can be used as incentives to create behaviour change among tourism operators, thereby furthering collective efforts toward sustainable tourism development.

1.0 Introduction

As awareness of the impacts that humans have on our planet has grown (Cottrell, van der Duim, Ankersmid, & Kelder, 2004; Gios, Goio, Notaro, & Raffaelli,

2006), so has the emergence of leaders across every industry who try to incorporate more sustainable practices into business operations (Collins, Lawrence, Pavlovich, & Ryan, 2007). Sustainability is gaining ground as a better way to do business, because it contributes to the triple bottom line, that is, economic, environmental, and social/cultural benefits (Graci & Dodds, 2008; Taylor, 2008).

Despite this trend, efforts to make sustainable practices mainstream have not yet taken root (Cottrell et al., 2004). Research shows this is due to a host of barriers, which include (a) uncertainty about the issue of sustainability, (b) lack of knowledge of how to change, (c) lack of supports or incentives to change, (d) concerns about costs of implementing new ideas, and (e) complexity of the issue and options available (Asproth & Nystrom, 2008; Biondi, Iraldo, & Meredith, 2002; Bramwell & Lane, 2007; Reid & Schwab, 2006).

The tourism industry has been one of the industries attempting to introduce more sustainable practices into the delivery of visitor experiences (Cottrell et al., 2004; Druce, 2007; Gilbert, 2003; Nistoreanu, 2007; Yeoman, 2008). Some of the more macro approaches have included (a) the development of certification programs to allow businesses to differentiate their products to consumers and (b) the development of sustainability task forces to influence policy development (Cottrell et al., 2004; Gios et al., 2006). At the micro or business level, all sorts of practices have been introduced, including the introduction of alternative energy sources and the contribution of staff time to volunteer at community events (Cottrell et al., 2004).

While the industry collectively wants to move forward, there is currently little empirical evidence about how businesses pursue sustainability practices. More knowledge is needed about what types of practices are being adopted, by whom, and with what level of success. Furthermore, a better understanding needs to be developed of what motivates the pursuit of sustainability, what impedes it, and what sorts of recommendations business operators have to improve further rates of adoption. Without this type of information, we are limited in our ability to design support systems that work.

2.0 Background

Despite often being deemed a nonextractive industry, tourism is nevertheless a resource-dependent industry (Ewert & Shultis, 1997; Nistoreanu, 2007). It relies on natural surroundings, communities, and the steady supply of products to create experiences for visitors (Ewert & Shultis, 1997; Nistoreanu, 2007). As long as tourism has been acknowledged as an industry, advocates have pushed forward tourism agendas, citing the benefits of economic growth without the same environmental impacts of resource extraction or manufacturing industries (Gartner, 2004). However, as the industry grew, it became apparent that tourism could in fact be unsustainable. Tourism, at its worst, can have a tendency to concentrate high volumes of people in sensitive ecosystems, place a population boom on communities without the infrastructure or development plans to handle it, and displace cultures in desirable destinations (Ewert & Shultis, 1997). Additionally, the industry is forever battling the indisputable fact that it is inherently linked to substantial fossil-fuel consumption.

As early as the 1970s the most basic principles of sustainable tourism were introduced in an attempt to mitigate or eliminate some of these impacts (Gartner, 2004). Key tenets of sustainable tourism are that “a sustainable tourism business

fulfills economic, environmental and socio-cultural obligations while generating income, contributing to employment, maintaining cultural integrity, and preserving essential ecological processes and biological diversity” (Tourism Industry Association of Canada, Canadian Tourism Commission and Parks Canada, 2008, p.1).

2.1 Canadian Context

The concept of sustainability is especially important for Canada’s rural areas since tourism products often rely on sensitive natural and cultural resources located in rural and remote areas of the country. According to Stats Canada (2002, as cited in Beshiri, 2005), predominantly rural areas receive almost half of all tourism. Many rural communities are hardest hit by economic shifts, and tourism development has become a common diversification strategy to assist in rural community survival.

The shifting economic base in rural areas is particularly pronounced in British Columbia, where dominant resource-based industries like fishing, forestry, and agriculture have undergone dramatic changes in the last two decades. These industries have shaped rural life in British Columbia, and the transition to diversify has not been an easy one. Many rural residents want to learn from previous reliance on a single industry. Tourism is often not fully understood in rural areas and can invoke concerns about a range of issues that are well covered in the literature of tourism impacts. As business operators and community leaders explore the potential of tourism, many want to ensure that it is developed in a sustainable manner.

When assisting rural areas in the development of sustainable tourism strategies, questions arise about the relevance of the current literature on the situation found in small and medium-sized rural businesses. While cases of sustainable tourism practices are emerging in the literature, many profile the efforts of large businesses operating in urban contexts and usually in the hospitality sector (Ayuso, 2006; Graci & Dodds, 2008; Schianetz & Kavanagh, 2008). What would be helpful to rural businesses is to understand what sorts of strategies are being used by others of a more comparable nature. How are rural tourism business operators approaching sustainability? Is it a business priority? If so, why? What specific strategies are being employed, and with what effect? How does the rural context impact the pursuit of sustainability? What do policy makers who encourage sustainable tourism need to understand about the rural context in order to devise policies and programs that work for rural operators?

2.2 Project Overview

This study was undertaken in the context of rural British Columbia during the spring of 2009. The purpose of this study was to

1. determine the attitudes of rural tourism operators toward sustainability;
2. assess the extent and type of sustainable tourism practices adopted by rural operators;
3. understand the forces that have influenced the adoption of sustainability practices in rural areas, including motivators and constraints; and
4. determine ways to support the adoption of sustainability practices among tourism operators in rural areas.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The diffusion of an innovation is the process of spreading a new idea, practice, or tool through a social system over a period of time (Rogers, 2003). This process includes information gathering, decision making, and adopting or not adopting something new (Rogers, 2003; Wejnert, 2002). Those involved in the process can be categorized into groups according to the time at which they adopt (Rogers 2003). For example, those that are the first to adopt are labelled innovators, the next group are early adopters, followed by early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003; Valente, 1996), as illustrated in Figure 1.

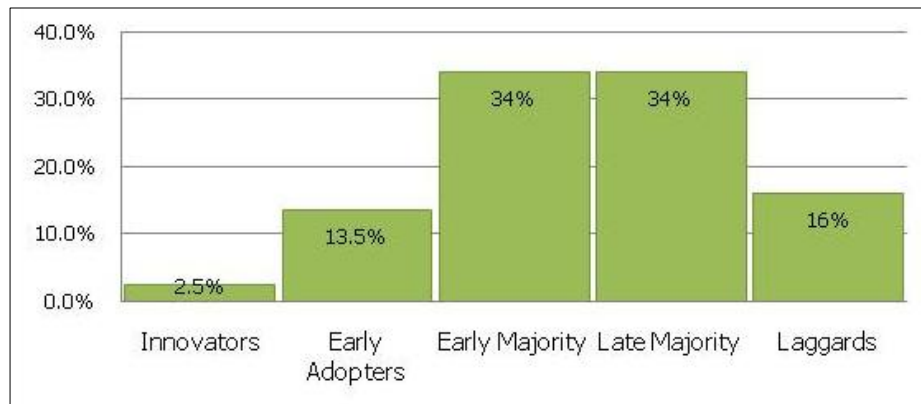


Figure 1. The process of the diffusion of innovation. Adapted from categories of innovativeness (Rogers, 2003, p. 281).

If the adoption of sustainable practices among rural tourism operators in British Columbia is viewed as the innovation, then the theory of the diffusion of innovations can be used to better understand the characteristics of those that have begun to adopt (innovators and early adopters) and the importance of supporting them during their decision-making processes. To overcome the threshold between early and late majority, an innovation has to reach what is called the critical mass, which is the point within the adoption process in which enough individuals have adopted the new practice so that its continued adoption becomes self-sustaining. Several strategies are required for that to happen, among which is the provision of support and benefits for innovators and early adopters of an innovation (Rogers, 2003; Wejnert, 2002). By gaining a better understanding of these groups, strategic measures can be planned to support the tourism industry in rural British Columbia in its move toward sustainability.

3.0 Methods

In order to achieve the study objectives, the research team utilized a mixed-methods approach, including a literature review, an online survey, and interviews with 20 rural tourism business operators who have adopted sustainable tourism practices.

The survey was developed collaboratively by researchers at Vancouver Island University and the University of Northern British Columbia. It was launched in March 2009 using Survey Monkey, an online data collection platform. The

invitation to participate was sent directly to a database of approximately 300 business operators' email addresses with a cover letter. This list was generated based on direct contact with businesses throughout the province from 2006 to 2009, and all were from rural British Columbia. A second invitation was sent to Destination Management Organizations and Chambers of Commerce contacts to encourage operator participation using a snowball sampling technique. The link was also provided on the website of the Fostering Innovation in Sustainable Tourism project (<http://web.viu.ca/sustainabletourism/>). The survey data were collected over a 4-week period after which time the data were analyzed using SPSS.

The survey was based on a review of current academic literature on sustainable tourism, sustainability in other industries, adoption behaviour, and innovation theory, as follows:

1. Attitudes should be included as a potential variable to explain the adoption of sustainable practices (Dewhurst & Thomas, 2003; Verbeek & Mommaas, 2008). A scale was developed listing a series of statements about sustainable tourism to assess overall attitude of the respondents.
2. Sustainability is about economic, environmental, and social responsibilities and moves beyond only environmental or green practices (Cottrell et al., 2004; Schianetz & Kavanagh, 2008). To that end, the measurement of sustainable practices included listings of activities in each domain.
3. Businesses are likely to incorporate sustainability for different reasons with potentially different success rates (Ayuso, 2006; Collins et al., 2007). Therefore, to understand adoption behaviour, motivations for pursuing sustainability were measured.
4. As sustainability is a new or emerging business practice and collective efforts are trying to encourage its expansion, it is important to understand decision-making behaviour (Collins et al., 2007). The study thus needed to measure how people pursued sustainability.
5. Barriers and constraints have been shown to impede business success and can include internal and external conditions (Kasim, 2007; Tzschentke, Kirk, & Lynch, 2008). As these are not yet fully understood in the BC tourism context, two questions were included to (a) measure level of support for those that are assumed to limit adoption rates and (b) allow for open-ended comments on the key challenges faced by businesses.

The survey concluded with an open-ended question to allow respondents to make recommendations to improve the BC business climate with respect to fostering sustainable practices.

The results of this study are not intended to be generalized to the entire tourism industry in British Columbia. While the results come from all regions, all sectors, and many types of businesses, they are largely gathered from rural operators who face unique business challenges. They likely over-represent the number of businesses that are pursuing sustainability and are therefore not intended to generalize about the overall level of adoption among businesses. Likely, those who are at later stages of adoption or have negative attitudes toward sustainability may not have taken the time to participate in the study. In summary, the results are useful for understanding businesses operating in rural British Columbia and give

valuable insights on rates of adoption, types of activities adopted, attitudes toward sustainability, and barriers and recommendations.

4.0 Survey Findings

The survey was completed by 208 respondents. About 40% of respondents have been in operation for 16 or more years. The remaining 60% were fairly evenly spread between 1 and 5, 6 and 10, and 11 and 15 years in business. The majority of respondents were small operations with between 1 and 5 employees (57%), whereas 15% had 6 to 10 employees, and the remaining 28% had more than 20 employees.

All sectors of the tourism industry were well represented, and the majority of operators indicated engagement with more than one sector. Therefore, the total numbers within all sectors represent more than 100%. Of the top five services provided, 43% operated accommodations facilities, 40% food and beverage, 38% tours or guiding, 36% adventure or nature-based services, and 30% recreation or entertainment experiences.

The six tourism regions of the province were not all equally represented by respondents. Vancouver Island made up 43% of the respondents, while the rest of the BC regions had an average of 12% representation each. This does not necessarily represent sustainable operators present in each region.

4.1 Attitudes Toward Sustainability

Attitudes toward sustainability were measured early in the survey. Figure 2 indicates that overall there were very strong pro-sustainability attitudes among the respondents. Leading the pack, and constituting a recurring theme throughout the study, 81% of business owners said that incentive programs should be developed to encourage businesses to become more sustainable. Approximately 96% of the business owners indicated that customers preferred businesses that made efforts toward sustainability. In keeping with pro-sustainability attitudes, there was strong disagreement to statements such as “there is not enough of a good business case for sustainability,” “the eco crisis has largely been exaggerated,” and “the costs to become sustainable outweigh the potential gains.”

4.2 Sustainability Practices Incorporated

Respondents were then asked about the types of sustainability practices that they had incorporated into their businesses. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that they had adopted some practices into their operations, with environmental practices being the most common form. Similarly, the most commonly incorporated practices included were no- to low-cost initiatives, such as recycling, recruiting local people, and buying locally. At the opposite end of the spectrum, initiatives that required significant financial, human, or intellectual capital were used by fewer respondents. These include the use of carbon offsets, green certification, green buildings, or alternative energy sources.

4.3 How People Incorporated Sustainability

In a question about the decision-making process of businesses pursuing sustainable practices, 64% of businesses were self-starters, meaning that they had made a decision to incorporate sustainable practices and then had figured it out as they

went. Further, 18% of respondents indicated they had borrowed ideas from other businesses and then modified them to fit their own.

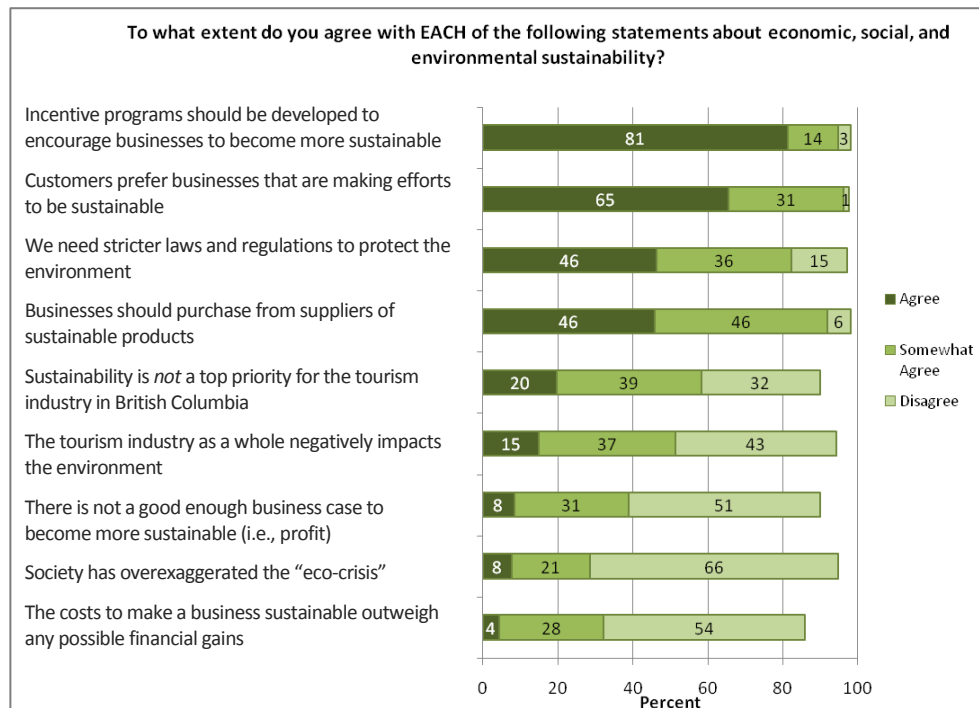


Figure 2. Attitudes toward sustainability.

4.4 Marketing of Sustainability Practices

Respondents were asked if and how they were publicizing their sustainability initiatives. Of those who communicate their practices, 24% use the Internet, 16% use other marketing materials, 15% profile their practices on-site, 14% have been profiled for their practices in the media, and 10% use social networking media.

In an effort to better understand the usage of Internet marketing, a small sample of websites from the operators who had incorporated sustainable practices was analyzed as well. A little more than half of the operators actually marketed those initiatives directly on their websites.

4.5 Motivations to Adopt Sustainable Practices

Business owners were asked why they had decided to adopt sustainable practices. Businesses were motivated in large part because of altruistic reasons, such as personal values regarding sustainability (65%) and wanting to protect natural and cultural resources (56%). Following this, the motivations switched to business reasons, including wanting to enhance the reputation of the business (34%), attracting new markets (21%), and saving money (19%). In keeping with the theme about the need for incentive programs, only 2% indicated they were motivated by an incentive program.

4.6 Barriers and Challenges

In an effort to understand what factors impeded the adoption of sustainability, respondents were asked about barriers and challenges they faced. Figure 3 shows that the most dominant barriers were lack of available money to invest, lack of incentive programs, other business priorities, and limited access to suppliers who sold sustainable products.

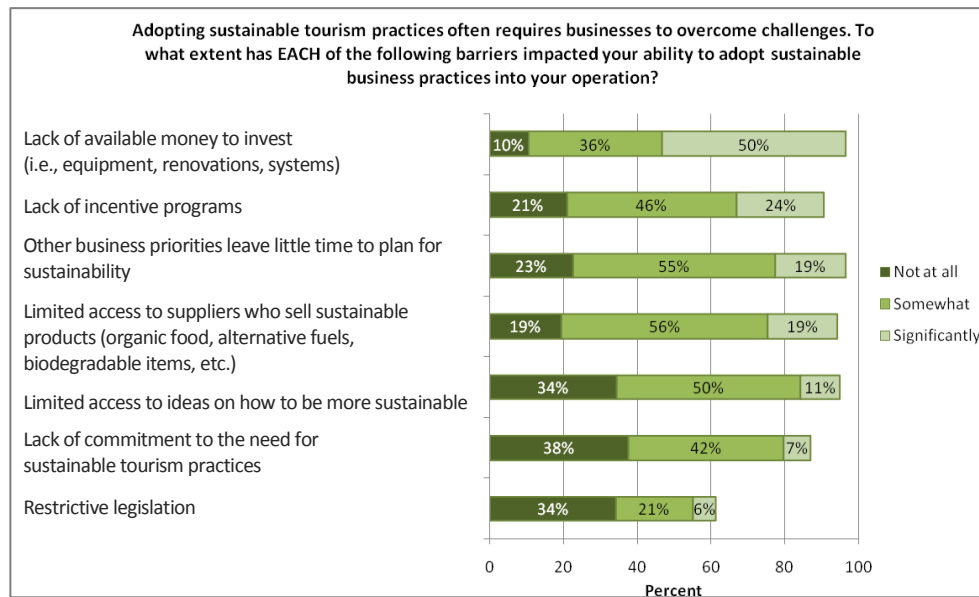


Figure 3. Barriers to sustainability.

4.7 Levels of Adoption

A deeper analysis of the findings revealed that operators could be distinguished into three different groups, according to their levels of adoption of sustainable tourism practices. These three groups are

1. those who are committed to sustainability practices at many levels in the organization,
2. those who have piloted a few or some sustainable practices and are potentially planning to initiate more, and
3. those who have not incorporated sustainable practices into their business operations.

These three groups were targeted for further analysis, including their attitudes, practices they had incorporated, and specific barriers and challenges they faced. The sample used in this analysis was a convenience sample and was therefore not suited to numerous statistical tests. To explore the data further however, chi-square tests were conducted ($p > .05$). However, further testing with random samples is needed to confirm the relationships among the variables reported.

The analysis indicated differences between businesses with respect to levels of adoption and attitudes toward sustainability. The overall trend suggests that those

who are further along in their commitment are more pro-sustainability in their attitudes than early adopters.

Differences were also noted between the types of sustainability practices incorporated and the level of overall adoption. Overall, those who are more committed to sustainability tend to be practicing more sustainability initiatives. Hiring local people, purchasing from local suppliers, and using low-energy lighting are practices used by all businesses regardless of their level of commitment to sustainability, whereas practices such as using low-impact techniques, donating funds, using low-water management systems, educating visitors, and even composting are more likely found in businesses further along the adoption path.

Overall, the barriers to adoption of sustainability practices were consistent among all levels of adopters with a few exceptions. Those less committed were more likely to cite other business priorities, lack of access to ideas, and lack of commitment as barriers. Those midstream were likely to cite lack of money and limited access to suppliers as barriers. Those who were fully committed found restrictive legislation to be a bigger barrier than did their counterparts.

Building on the barriers question, tourism operators were asked to identify ways that businesses could further their efforts on sustainability. The open-ended responses were counted and themed showing that the most prominent recommendations were about incentive programs, whereas the least common were about accreditation. Following incentives, a strong theme about the lack of available information emerged. Many operators commented that clear information in simple, layman terms and examples from other businesses would be helpful. Access to products and programs was a common theme as well, followed by educational opportunities, not just for businesses but for other tourism stakeholders. Comments about government legislation, and support and marketing of green initiatives, were made by a few individuals as well.

5.0 Interview Results

The results of the barriers and challenges section of the survey were corroborated with the results of interviews with innovators in tourism sustainability. For these innovators, the most common and largest barrier to the implementation of sustainability practices is viewed as, not surprisingly, cost. Many operators perceive initiatives with the potential to significantly reduce their carbon footprint as cost prohibitive. In the world of small rural tourism operators, investments are more likely if they can bring about immediate or short-term economic benefits. There is a general perception that sustainability costs money. This perception is also a reality, because many initiatives often come with a higher cost, be it buying goods from small local stores, purchasing organic foods, or buying higher-efficiency appliances. At the same time, it is important to point out that many sustainability practices are no to low cost and by reducing the inputs required in a business (e.g., water, energy), savings are possible as well.

While many interviewees indicated that they would sacrifice some economic benefit for the pursuit of sustainable initiatives, it was generally conceded that there is a breaking point for that ethic, and that economics are the driving force behind all business decisions. Quite simply, if an initiative makes no sense

economically, and a business cannot sustain itself by pursuing that initiative, then no rational business will pursue it.

Federal programs were cited as barriers because they were perceived as inaccessible. Rural operators have a difficult time cutting through the extensive red tape involved in accessing Canadian government programs, particularly energy-reduction programs.

Many companies that have approached sustainability with a high degree of conviction recognize the inherent amount of carbon associated with guest travel as the main barrier to true environmental sustainability. At this time few options are available, particularly on a mass scale, to reduce this aspect of the carbon footprint. A number of companies voluntarily turn toward carbon off-set programs to achieve sustainability, although many acknowledge that this is not the solution but rather a better-than-nothing approach. One barrier to the concept of carbon off-setting is that a detailed accounting system needs to be in place if businesses are to know the exact size of their carbon footprint, and few templates for this system exist.

The ability to source local products and services is also an issue. The obvious link here is organic food production, which is being sought by but not always found by the operators spoken with in this study. A common phrase in responses was “we source local organic produce, when it’s available.”

The availability of contractors with knowledge of sustainable initiatives, such as alternative energy generation, is still sparse. Some innovators indicated an interest in alternative energy generation but could not find tradespeople with adequate knowledge to consult with. An increased awareness of the importance of supporting local industry also poses challenges. Many times specialized manufactured products are only available from out-of-country suppliers, which prevents local purchasing.

Finally, many of the innovators interviewed provided examples of barriers that are situation or industry specific; therefore reduction and elimination of their impact may be difficult until they are better understood. For example, one organic brewery cited an inability to participate in brewing events because it does not bottle its beer, a practice it does not partake in for sustainability reasons. Another interesting issue was brought forward by a ski resort that cited lease agreement issues in its inability to use biodiesel fuel in its CAT skiing operation. As sustainability initiatives become ever more inventive, these types of barriers could become ever more prominent, with rental/mortgage, equipment, and previous agreements among stakeholders possibly coming into play.

6.0 Discussion

Trends show that the demand for tourism products found in rural settings is on the rise worldwide, and yet it is only recently “that rural tourism has become a special focus of study, dissimilar enough from urban tourism, to be a study subject unto itself” (Gartner, 2004 p. 151). Provinces implementing macro sustainable tourism programs need to know that rural context matters and creates advantages and disadvantages for operators.

People in rural areas of British Columbia are doing innovative things with sustainability and this likely transcends provincial boundaries. In fact, collective efforts to further sustainability may benefit from watching rural operators;

Huddart-Kennedy, Beckley, McFarlane, and Nadeau (2009) have found support that rural residents scored higher than urban residents on altruistic values, placed a higher priority on the environment, and reported higher participation in recycling and stewardship behaviours. Further research and projects designed to share rural operators' efforts in sustainability will assist others in rural and urban environments to find new ways forward. Finding out what others are doing in different contexts and profiling them will allow for a better understanding of the motivations and barriers and encourage further adoption. The results from this study suggest a few areas where policy makers and researchers can build upon the current situation, as follows:

1. *Incentive programs should be a priority to advance sustainable tourism practices.* Further research should be done to determine what types of incentive programs have worked to bring sustainable practices into other industries. Incentives may not be solely financial incentives but may include things like rewards and recognition, peer support programs, networking opportunities, and profiles of visitor markets (Huppé, Turgeon, Ryan, & Vanasse, 2006). It is important to get some feedback from operators in different contexts and from different levels of incorporation prior to piloting programs so they can give comment on the viability and attractiveness of incentive programs. Innovation theory posits that innovators pave the way and after they chart their course, borrowers or early adopters can follow their lead. This research suggests that early adopters were motivated by altruistic reasons; therefore it is important to note the specific role of incentives in bringing about behaviour change in the various stages in innovation theory. Incentives are perhaps better applied to businesses that have already made some level of commitment to sustainability.
2. *Strategies must emerge that recognize the differences between different levels of adoption of sustainable practices.* This study showed that there are differences between those who are fully committed, somewhat engaged in, and not incorporating sustainability into their businesses. These groups differed in many respects. In order to advance sustainability overall, their needs must be met in different ways. Coming up with strategies that eliminate or reduce barriers for those fully committed are not likely going to be as useful for those just starting out. Phasing in of all strategies is therefore recommended.
3. *Education and information sharing should be pursued in ways that meet the needs of rural operators.* As sustainability is a new topic for many operators, there is a strong need for education and information sharing among operators. This information must be communicated in simple ways and using mechanisms that are accessible to operators. One-to-one, face-to-face audits by experts are recommended so that specific feedback to operators can be provided. Innovation is known to spread most effectively when done in peer-to-peer networks, therefore facilitating opportunities for business owners to get together and learn from one another.
4. *A platform to help businesses become identified as and promoted as sustainable operators is needed.* This study and the insights from innovators suggest that the fear of eco-labelling is real for operators and may be impeding them from sharing their early successes. Having external, credible audiences profile operators as sustainability leaders, in a

platform that is accessible to consumers, would be a recognition feature for businesses, but it would also profile British Columbia and Canada as destinations that care about sustainability. This could come in many forms, such as social networking, a central sustainable-tourism organization, or a phased-in certification program.

5. *With regard to certification there was little evidence in this study that there is a strong appetite for a certification program.* Based on the interviews with operators, there is an overall lack of awareness about what certification is or how it would benefit a business. If a certification program is pursued, it is strongly recommended that ample input from all sizes and locations of businesses be factored into the program design, a phased-in approach be used, the needs of rural and remote operators be considered in the requirements, and opportunities for continued education be embedded within it.

7.0 Conclusion

The results of this study provide some empirical evidence from tourism business owners in British Columbia about their levels of adoption of sustainable practices. Overall, operators who participated have pro-sustainability attitudes, which translate into a variety of types of business practices being employed. While environmental practices were most dominant, operators also incorporate social and economic initiatives to impact their businesses' triple bottom line. The strongest motivators for pursuing sustainability were value based, followed by business reasons. Most business owners were self-starters who committed to sustainability and then found a way to make it work for them. To further advance sustainable tourism practices among businesses in British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada, developing incentive programs and creating more opportunities to get information and resources are recommended.

8.0 Acknowledgements

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