

Communities in Transition: Changing Views On Tourism Development as a Vehicle For Economic Diversification In Northern Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

In recent years, an increasing number of protected areas have been established as an attempt to preserve the biodiversity of coastal and terrestrial ecosystems. In Canada, government agencies have set a goal to increase the number of protected areas by establishing more national/provincial parks, marine protected areas (MPAs), national wildlife areas, marine wildlife areas, and migratory bird sanctuaries. Many of these protected areas are being created in rural areas where there is a heavy dependence on natural resources for survival. Recently in Ontario the first National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA) was established on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Due to recent global changes that have affected the resource-based economy in Canada, many rural communities have turned to developing their tourism attributes to diversify their economy. The purpose of this case study is to examine how community stakeholders' views toward tourism have changed over the course of the development of the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area (LSNMCA). Findings indicated that since the LSNMCA initiative was first introduced, local attitudes have positively changed toward the potential of tourism development in the area; such shifts coincide with the decline and restructuring of the region's resource-based industries.

Keywords: protected areas, tourism, rural and resource-based communities, Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area (LSNMCA)

1.0 Introduction

The number of protected areas has increased during the 20th century due to pressure from various groups and individuals to protect the environment. The Canadian government alone has promised to protect 12% of its natural areas by creating protected areas, including coastal zones (Dearden & Rollins, 1993;

Environment Canada, 1990). In the past, protected-area development strategies often did not include community stakeholders in the establishment of parks, and management strategies sought to keep both tourists and members of local communities away. Such practices often created conflict between park management and local communities (McCleave, Booth, & Espiner, 2004), though this has changed, with government decision makers now realizing that local people are an integral part of protected areas (Owen, 2002). One initiative that intended to use this revised approach to the creation of protected areas is Parks Canada's National Marine Conservation Area Program.

The LSNMCA is situated on the North Shore of Lake Superior, adjacent to a number of communities, including Nipigon, Red Rock, and Lake Helen First Nation. Historically these communities have been heavily dependent on forestry-based employment, resulting in an economy that was driven by an externally managed single industry with little decision making residing in the communities. This situation has radically changed with the downturn in the forestry industry in the last decade, resulting in significant loss of employment in the last 5 years. The establishment of the LSNMCA in October 2007 (Parks Canada, 2008) has provided these proximal communities an opportunity to diversify their economies based on protected-area tourism. The choice to pursue such a strategy is left in the hands of community members, based on the recognition of unique elements of their region and the opportunities afforded by the LSNMCA mandate for sustainable development. The purpose of this case study is to illustrate how community residents' attitudes have transitioned from one focused on their resource-based economy to one that is diversified and includes tourism.

2.0 Case Study

2.1 Resource-Based Economy in Northern Ontario

In rural Canada many communities are economically dependent on various forms of natural resource extraction. It is estimated that more than 300 First Nation and non-First Nations communities depend on the forest industry for as much as 50% of their economic function (Natural Resources Canada, 2008). Canada's forestry sector directly or indirectly employs approximately 800,000 people in rural and remote areas, comprising about 5% of all jobs in Canada (Natural Resources Canada, 2008); however, in the past 5 years more than 22,000 jobs have been lost at 184 lumber mills within Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec alone (Natural Resources Canada, 2008). In northwestern Ontario, these closures have negatively affected many communities, including those in this case study (Nipigon, Red Rock, and Lake Helen First Nation; see Figure 1).

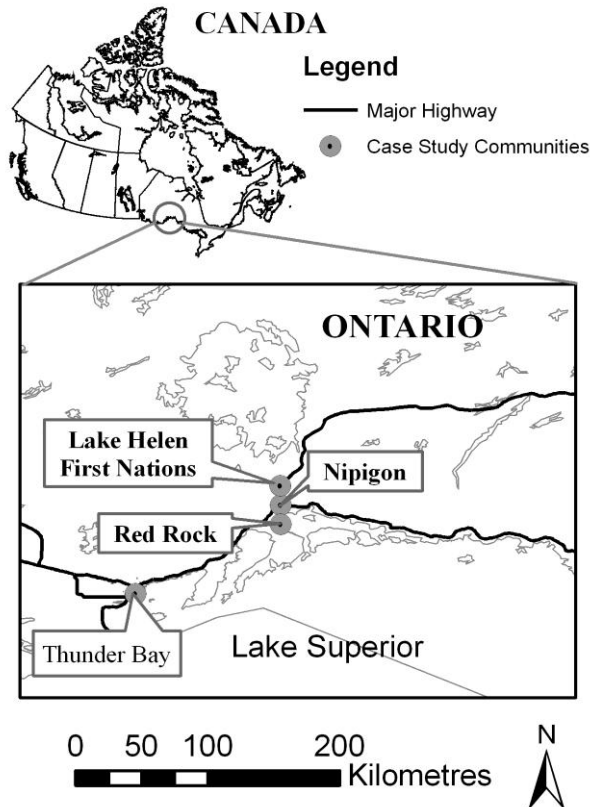


Figure 1. Map of the region.

Until the early 19th century, boreal forest covered the area and supported a rich fur trade. Over the past 100 years, the mining, forestry, hydroelectric development, and commercial fishing industries have exploited the natural resources (Johnston, 1995). In Northern Ontario, there are 28 mines; in 2006 Northern Ontario generated as much as \$7 billion worth of minerals. It is estimated that mining in Northern Ontario employs about 14,000 people, with an additional 1,800 involved in exploration activities (Northern Development and Mines, 2008b). Older mining reserves are slowly declining in Northern Ontario, but new discoveries create the promise of a strong future for mining in the region (Northern Development and Mines, 2008b).

Ontario's forest sector in 2005 was worth \$10.1 billion, the majority of which represented pulp and paper products. Logging activities in Ontario in 2005 were estimated to be valued at \$2 billion (Northern Development and Mines, 2008b). However, this situation has changed for several reasons, including the cost of energy, the higher value of the Canadian dollar, and shifts in the global market (Northern Development and Mines, 2008b). Each of the communities in this case study has been affected by these larger regional changes.

Nipigon has a long history dating back to the 1600s, making it the oldest community on the North Shore of Lake Superior. The major employer in Nipigon was the plywood mill; it was the third largest employer in the region, with 125 employees in 2005, down from 150 employees in 2002 (Nipigon Community Consultation, 2006). The mill was closed in February 2007 due to fire. The major employer now is the Ontario Provincial Police and the Ontario

Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) (Shelby, personal communication, March 22, 2007). As of 2006, Nipigon had a population of 1,752, a decrease of 10.8% since 2001. The labour participation rate is 64.2%, with an unemployment rate of 6.4% (Statistics Canada, 2007a).

Red Rock is located on the North Shore of Lake Superior and during the early 1900s was an isolated community with a largely agricultural focus (Township of Red Rock, 2008). By the 1950s the dominant industry was paper and pulp. The kraft/linerboard mill owned by Norampec in Red Rock was the largest employer within the two communities (Nipigon and Red Rock). It had 433 employees in 2005, but it was shut down in November 2006. Red Rock also experienced a significant population decrease, 13.8% between 2001 and 2006. The labour participation rate is 55.7%, with an unemployment rate of 5.4% (Statistics Canada, 2007b).

Although the populations of Red Rock and Nipigon decreased between 2001 and 2006, the population of Lake Helen First Nation increased by 3.3%. Currently the total population of the Lake Helen First Nation reserve is 285 people (Statistics Canada, 2007c), most of whom work in the adjacent communities of Nipigon and Red Rock. The band is actively participating in several economic development projects in the region, including wind farm, forest enhancement, and hydroelectric developments.

2.2 Tourism and Protected Areas in the North Shore Region of Lake Superior

Tourism has always existed in the region but has not been recognized as an important contributor to the regional economy. Historically, guided fishing tours attracted people to the region (Lemelin, Koster, Wozniczka, Metansinine, & Pelletier, 2010), and though this has continued, the range of tourism-related opportunities has expanded to include various outdoor and sporting activities, sightseeing, hunting, historic sites visitation, and visiting national and/or provincial parks. Currently, tourism plays an important role in the regional economy; in 2006 (the most recently available data) there were 925,000 person visits (overnight and same-day visitors) to the Thunder Bay District, with approximately 30% of these being international travelers (Ontario Ministry of Tourism, 2008). Visitors to the region spent approximately \$69.3 million and contributed \$33.7 million of labour income (i.e., 952 part-time, full-time, and seasonal jobs; Ontario Ministry of Tourism, 2008).

Despite the opportunities and positive economic contributions, the tourism industry in the region faces a number of challenges (Hinch & Butler, 1993; Payne, Twynam, & Johnston, 2001), including negative citizen attitudes toward tourism development, which have led to the industry's being "underdeveloped, underfunded ... and undervalued" as an economic contributor (Forrest Marketing and Communications, 2008, p.8). Certainly, during the period of a strong resource-based economy, local people had more concerns regarding protected-area tourism as an opportunity for diversification of their economy. Several studies (Payne et al., 2001; Socha & Potter, 2000) have examined the views of local residents toward tourism in the Lake Superior North Shore and Islands region, finding that residents were primarily concerned about the potential conflict between host and tourist interactions, environmental degradation due to an increase of tourists in the area, and the decision-making process regarding management of the development of

protected areas. The last concern is the most significant to this case study. The development of protected areas in this region, by various levels of government (provincial and federal), has often had a difficult past. The result has been a strong attitude of suspicion toward any protected-area creation, regardless of (and often not differentiating between) the level of government championing the development.

In Northern Ontario alone, there are 145 provincial parks managed by the OMNR (Northern Development and Mines, 2008a). The OMNR governs Ontario's Crown lands; the Ontario Parks branch is responsible for creating provincial parks, and part of its mandate is to increase the number of protected areas (OMNR, 1999). As such, the Lands for Life–Living Legacy (which later became Ontario's Living Legacy) was developed as an initiative to expand Ontario's park system. An important component of Ontario's Living Legacy was the establishment of the Great Lakes Heritage Coast, the purpose of which was to examine the requirements for natural resources protection, tourism development, and development of the coastal areas of the upper Great Lakes in Ontario (OMNR, 2002). This was to be undertaken in consultation with interested stakeholders, including First Nations, municipalities, and government agencies (O'Donoghue, 2002).

Despite the praise for the OMNR's initiative to consult with the communities (Craig, 2002), significant issues were brought forward by Hunter and Faught (2002). They questioned the amount of research that had been done on the roles and values of First Nations in the planning, management, and decision making, and how well the citizens understood the concepts of protected areas classification used in science, planning, management, and decision making of protected areas in the Great Lakes region. A good example of these concerns is the creation of Ruby Lake Provincial Park, located adjacent to the case-study communities. The park was created without any operational budget and with limited consultation with surrounding communities, which engendered a mindset of mistrust. Consequently community members in the park's vicinity were cautious toward the creation of protected areas within the region, including the LSMCA, which was established in October 2007 after more than a decade of research and consultations. The process of its creation is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Progress of LSMCA Establishment*

Year	Progress and Outcome
1986	The Canadian Marine Protected Area Program begins
1989	Lake Superior is recommended as a binational priority for restoration by the International Joint Committee
1991	The Lake Superior Binational Program is established
1993	A feasibility study is conducted
1994	A revised NMCA policy is released
2002	The Canadian National Marine Conservation Areas Act becomes law
2007	The NMCA on Lake Superior is ratified

Despite concerns and the negative downturn in the resource-based economy, the LSNMCA has generated much interest in the communities that border the protected area because they regard its establishment as an opportunity to benefit from increased tourism.

3.0 Methods

A case-study approach (Creswell, 2003; Neuman, 1994) was used to explore how the perceptions of the residents living in the three communities next to protected areas have shifted due to changing economic circumstances. Data collection occurred in two stages. The initial stage included the gathering and analysis (Mayring, 2000; Stemler, 2001) of documents, including protected-area development reports, especially those related to the LSNMCA, and local and regional newspapers. The second stage of data collection included conducting a total of eight interviews with key informants in the three communities (to preserve their anonymity, all study participants have been assigned pseudonyms and have not been associated with their positions). Participants were selected based upon their knowledge and contribution to the study; they were contacted through publicly accessible sources.

The key informants' perceptions were the focus of this investigation. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, who were chosen from different categories of groups: government officials, tourism development officers, recreational users, and business owners. Prior to the interviews, participants received an explanatory letter and verbal explanation regarding the purpose of the study, and consent was acquired by the researcher. The interviews were based on a structured questionnaire, conducted in person, and were carried out over the winter of 2007–2008. All interviews were transcribed within 48 hours and returned to the participants for verification of the completeness of the data. A qualitative content analysis of the transcripts and documents was conducted to determine patterns and themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neuman, 2006).

4.0 Findings

An analysis of both the documents and the interviews revealed a variety of changing attitudes toward tourism and protected-area development in the region. These were expressed through a variety of themes, which we have called (a) developing natural-area tourism, (b) increasing and promoting tourism-related developments, and (c) hopes and concerns associated with the LSNMCA. They are described below.

4.1 Developing Tourism in Natural Areas

The participants in the three case-study communities often mentioned the need for tourism-friendly development, including the provision of basic needs for tourists. Previously, the will to develop tourism was not evident. Study participant Agnes stated, "We have just never developed tourism at all." This attitude, however, is changing, and there is recognition that several areas need serious promotion and development. Further, Agnes said, "We need all sorts of tourism development. If you want to rent a kayak or canoe, you can't. There is no one that rents it... There are lots of things we can do, but people just have not [done them]." Although some participants indicated they want to see business development to serve tourists, others want to keep it as natural as possible and build on what is already available.

Almost all of the participants mentioned that the development of hiking trails could generate high interest for tourists. They were developed a long time ago by local community members, but they were never really promoted as a tourist attraction. Agnes said that even though the local hiking trails are extraordinary, they are not promoted outside the community.

Other potential opportunities that are being examined include how rail lines could transport tourists to the communities to enjoy a day, with a hike and meals included in the cost. Other developments include a small RV park and revitalization of the marina, though all development ideas are dependent on available financial resources.

The development of Ruby Lake Provincial Park into a functioning park (it has remained a protected area without a management plan since its establishment during the Great Lakes Heritage Coast initiative) is one of the areas where the participants said that development should be a priority. Almost all of the participants mentioned that infrastructure is needed, especially in beautiful places like Ruby Lake.

4.2 Increasing and Promoting Tourism-Related Developments

Many participants expressed their belief that the protected areas in the region have extraordinary natural beauty and that they could play a vital role in diversifying the regional economy through tourism. For example, Helen said, “It is the beauty of our area, to be able to see the beautiful landscapes and wildlife. I think we are blessed with this natural beauty and I think we can promote it more than we do to the [outsiders] who come to the area.” All participants stressed the physical attractions of the area and the need to promote it more aggressively.

The participants viewed tourism development as an investment in the future. April said, “I am 100% on board for promoting tourism because it’s going to help us in the future, no doubt.” On the other hand, John, who works directly and indirectly with many community members, mentioned that many of them remain concerned about their families’ safety and expanding tourism. John said, “Lots of people didn’t like the idea of tourism because ... in our community we know everybody... When you start bringing strangers to the community, people are leery of that.” He also added that for some people, change can be intimidating.

In addition to development associated with the LSNMCA, other tourism-related projects are being developed. These include the development of a park and the renewal of the downtown area in Nipigon, the development of the marina in Red Rock, and the development of an eco-friendly Lodge in Lake Helen First Nation. Partnerships and coordination were viewed as important to the process of developing tourism within the communities and region. Study participant Ronald said, “I believe it [tourism development] needs to have a lot of partnerships, and one of our goals ...[is] that we will partner with every motel, hotel because if we all promote it, together we will be successful.”

On the other hand, when it comes to tourism promotion and development, some community members suggested 10 years ago that small communities are not prepared to deal with the influx of tourists, because of the lack of development in even the most basic amenities, such as public washrooms, restaurants, and hotels. Many of these concerns remain. The challenge is to find ways to get people to come to the communities, stay in the communities, and return to the communities.

Ronald asserted, “We have 5.2 million people going past our door every year. We need only 1% of those people.” The participants acknowledged that other communities are developing their tourism potential and that this region could benefit from their developments. For instance, Helen is keenly aware of what other communities are doing. She commented,

“I think Thunder Bay has potential with the marina area and the promotion of the Sleeping Giant. The Old Fort is also a major attraction. Hopefully, visitors will be encouraged to come to the smaller communities if we come up with some innovative ideas. I visualize that Thunder Bay will attract more tourists in the future and [that] many of these tourists will take side trips to the outside communities to visit their attractions.”

4.3 Hopes and Concerns Associated with the LSNMCA

For all participants, the announcement of the LSNMCA was a significant event. However, the creation of a protected area has not always been seen as exciting news. The events associated with the establishment of provincial parks have reverberated deep within the three communities, especially Lake Helen First Nation. The initial decision to establish the LSNMCA was opposed by some First Nations groups and resulted in negative outcomes. For example, Agnes expressed her disappointment regarding how the provincial government dealt with First Nations in the past when creating protected areas, such as Quetico Provincial Park in 1913. She described the situation, in which First Nations people were expelled from the area, as a “serious problem.” She commented, “Quetico is one example ... [where] the ‘army’ came in, rounded them all up, and moved them out of the park.” She added,

“The First Nations of Quetico had lived there forever, and they lived a nomadic lifestyle. When Quetico was formed, they were still living a nomadic life in there, and it was determined that this was to be a park which was to be entirely wilderness. So the kinds of activities they were involved in were not allowed anymore. So they rounded them up, took them to over La Croix on the west side of Quetico park.... Well that was a real problem. And I have friends who remember, as kids, the soldiers arriving at their fishing camps and bundling them up and hauling them off.”

Consequently, past events have had a negative impact on relationships with the government. When the feasibility study was conducted in 1993 for the LSNMCA, some members of the communities were very concerned about it and were against its establishment because they were afraid that they would not be able to maintain their traditions. Agnes said, “We don’t want people coming in telling us we can’t go boating and fishing and hunting on Lake Superior. We don’t want people telling us we can’t have our camps on the lake, or our saunas built.” Participants in our

study thought that this protected area would not be different from other protected areas and that they had not been informed and consulted properly. Some of the participants expressed frustration and confusion when Parks Canada officials came to the communities to speak with them. Study participant Emma said,

“They were talking about taking over some areas and leaving some other areas alone. We just didn’t understand. It looked like everybody had a pick of the prize, except us. You know, like I mean, we weren’t consulted about it, or nothing, so we had some members there that were a little upset at the fact that we were not consulted. “

Community members were trying to get more clarification from these representatives regarding the federal government’s intentions but were not addressed. As Emma stated, “When we went to talk to those people, they were very vague in saying to us what was going on. All they were talking was jurisdiction.” Clearly, there were some unexplained issues, and the people thought that not enough had been done to make people aware of what the plan was.

Some community members said that the boundary negotiation of the LSMCA was an open process, commenting that “it was a transparent process, and everyone had the opportunity to speak.” Some people thought the LSMCA would prevent them from fishing, but April viewed the rules and regulations as a way to protect nature. For others, some of the regulations posed by federal or provincial government continue to be in conflict with their daily lives.

A situation that study participants remember vividly is the creation of Ruby Lake Provincial Park. Though it was created some time ago, nothing has been done since to develop it. Agnes said,

“Ruby Lake is just a beautiful deep canyon with a lake in it, fantastic vistas, [and] some of the greatest hiking trails around. The province declared it a provincial park and has never put a penny into it. They haven’t developed it, no trails, so they just made it a park so that nothing could be done with it.”

When Ruby Lake was created, the preliminary management plan (Ruby Lake Management Plan, 2004) suggested ongoing consultation with the Lake Helen First Nation regarding the Aboriginal history of the area as well as “related issues of concern during the implementation of this plan” (p. 3). This brief statement did not clearly state whether the issues of concern to the Lake Helen First Nation would be addressed. Also disappointing to the communities was that this park remains nonoperational. The fear among the participants that the LSMCA will be no different from other protected areas was expressed in a variety of ways. What is important to see here is that even though the LSMCA is being created by a federal government agency (Parks Canada) and not a provincial government agency (Ontario Parks), that fact did not seem to engender any more trust in the participants. To them, all government agencies are the same and have all the same intentions.

Some participants said they think LSNMCA is one of the best things for this area. Ronald commented, “It is the best thing since sliced cheese. It will be beneficial to our area. I just hope they don’t get too long getting going, because, you know, the forestry industry is on the downturn.” Having protected areas in the region also may boost the communities’ self-esteem and sense of unity, especially when there is little hope left. Ronald stated, “Protected areas will develop more community pride. People are at the point where they don’t think anything is going to happen.” Since the ratification of the LSNMCA, a lot of discussion has ensued, and some of the participants were hopeful that interpretive centres would be located in their communities, because they would create jobs for the locals.

Two of the participants noted that having the LSNMCA on the largest body of freshwater in the world will get people’s attention and world recognition. Agnes commented, “[LSNMCA]—you get instant international recognition as an ecotourism centre just by having that title. That label is a benefit because people ... say there must be something awfully special about here, let’s go and see it.” This provided the potential for nature-based tourism development in the region, as noted by one participant:

“Europeans and Asians are the people who are interested in ecotourism. They spend an awful lot more money than the North Americans when they go on trips. So the potential for economic development in that area is immense.”

However, Agnes also asserted that people are interested in protecting the land and creating a balance between the two. The future looks bright with the establishment of the LSNMCA, which is based on the principles of sustainable use, a paradigm that would motivate people to achieve this very balance.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The decline of a resource-based economy in northwestern Ontario, the establishment of the LSNMCA, and the positive shift in attitudes toward opportunities to diversify the local economy through protected-area tourism development was the primary focus of this study. As presented, the communities of Nipigon, Red Rock, and Lake Helen First Nation had a long history of wealth based on natural resources. The recent restructuring and decline of this economy has required the communities to examine other opportunities that would offer diversification. Compared to previous studies (Payne et al., 2001; Socha & Potter, 2000) that found local residents largely opposed to develop the tourism attributes of the region, our study has determined that despite some concern, residents are prepared to embrace the diversification opportunities that protected-area tourism may provide. Their recognition of the need for a variety of developments beyond the LSNMCA in order for the communities to become tourist friendly and for more aggressive marketing strategies are a further indication of changing attitudes.

In general, participants were optimistic about increased opportunities for tourism in the area and a future increase in visitation. There was recognition that such increases would have consequences, both positive (increased employment and business opportunities) and negative (environmental degradation). Another change

in attitude was the expressed willingness to work together, form partnerships, and address various (tourism and other economic development) issues.

Some negative attitudes from the past persist, most notably regarding the lack of or inadequate consultations with government officials regarding the development and management of protected areas in the region. As illustrated, these concerns emanate from a long history of protected-areas development by various levels of government. Despite significant changes to the process, memories have significant longevity and residents remain skeptical at best. Parks Canada's development of an interim management board comprising local and regional residents and experts, along with their objective of hiring locally for the positions within the LSNMCA, may result in creating a more positive relationship with local communities.

Our case study has illustrated a possible link between attitude and economic functioning, in that when the traditional economy (resource based) is strong, attitudes toward tourism are ambivalent and/or in opposition. Residents do not view tourism developments as a worthwhile investment, nor are they interested in sharing these recreational and leisure spaces. In contrast, when traditional resource economies are destabilized and communities are searching for ways to diversify their economies, attitudes toward tourism development are more positive. Residents begin to see the value of protecting their natural assets, developing infrastructure to support visitation, and sharing their area with tourists. Of course, the wider societal shift toward sustainable and diversified uses of our resource base has likely also supported the shift in attitude over the time period examined in this case study.

6.0 References

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