

Bamfield, BC: Wonderful Things Can Happen at the End of the Road

The town of Bamfield is perched on the southwestern coast of Vancouver Island, a beautiful spot at the end of a gravel road. A day's journey from Vancouver, the town of 500 lies in a paradise setting of ocean, rock and lush forest. Paradise has its price; the coastline around Bamfield is called the Graveyard of the Pacific because of the number of ships lost in fog or heavy seas, or smashed by rocky outcroppings. Residents share the location with a 150-person Huu-ay-aht First Nation community five minutes away. Writers and artists have been attracted by the area's beauty and isolation, and the odd pirate has found his way there too.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) created the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) in 1996, in order to encourage innovative, technology-based learning. HRDC staff and representatives from the (then) British Columbia Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, in cooperation with community leaders, tailored an OECD model to incorporate lifelong learning concepts and lessons from the learning cities work carried out in the UK. This Caledon series of community stories profiles several communities in BC that secured OLT funds in order to strengthen and extend their community capacities to deal with socioeconomic challenges.

In 1998, a newcomer came to Bamfield and began buying up local businesses, including the marina, the airport, waterfront property and the community's meeting place and bottomless coffee pot location – Ostrom's Machine Shop. The investor was later caught in an RCMP/FBI sting operation that resulted in drug trafficking and money laundering charges. As a result of the owner's subsequent prolonged absence, several of his newly-purchased businesses in Bamfield closed and others failed to thrive. These and other stresses on the local economy were threatening the community's survival, but the town of Bamfield's more recent history is a hopeful testament to the power of creative thinking spurred by a fortuitous government decision.

Getting organized

The year before the newcomer arrived, BC's Ministry for Children and Family Development had given the town's school a community school designation, which meant that its 80 kindergarten to Grade 12 students were considered to be at high risk for poor health, education and economic outcomes. The Ministry granted funds to improve the situation and a nonprofit board of directors was

established to oversee the Ministry's \$75,000 annual disbursement. Known as the Bamfield Community School Association (BCSA), its members were drawn from the wider community and include parents, grandparents and people without children. The relationship between Bamfield's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members is a cooperative, constructive one. About 150 members of the Huu-ay-aht nation – part of the Nuu-Chal-Nulth Tribal Council – live on the nearby reserve and a few more live in town. All of their children attend Bamfield Community School.

One of the board's first actions was to hire Community School Coordinator, Linda Myres. Linda came to the Island with her husband on a holiday in 1982. They loved the small town setting and Larry Myres' home-based business was easy to relocate. After taking the job in 1998, Linda studied part time and earned a Master's degree in Education in Rural Studies from James Cook University in Queensland, Australia, in partnership with Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo. Her educational philosophy is rooted in experiential learning which places the student's location and history at the centre of study. Says Linda: "Traditional curricula tend to institutionalize learners, making it difficult to see any connection between life and the world. A school might teach students about the ancient people of Mesopotamia and expect them to make connections with the present, but my feeling is that students should learn about the equally ancient people of BC and bring that information forward into their understanding of their own region and then the wider world."

Linda's philosophy meshes extremely well with the community's history and current economic situation. "Coastal communities are innovative and motivated," says Linda. "We have learned to examine every part of our physical and cultural community with a view to how it could

be used to create employment and to help root and educate our children."

Discovering riches

Since 1997, a wide array of projects have begun which reflect these attitudes and build on Bamfield's past. The town's economic base has changed dramatically over the last 100 years. From the early 1920s through the late 1970s, Bamfield was a hub of the west coast fisheries and supported a processing plant. From 1903 to 1960, it was also the Pacific terminus of the Pacific Cable Station – a submarine telegraph that connected member nations of the British Empire. Advances in technology made Bamfield's facility obsolete and a newer centre was established in Port Alberni, 100 kilometres away. After the cable station closed, five BC and Alberta universities formed a consortium and opened the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre (BMSC) in the abandoned cable station buildings and others that had housed military personnel during the World Wars.

After yet another ship was lost in the coastal graveyard in 1906, a coast guard station and lifesaving trail were established in Bamfield. The trail was the beginning of the West Coast Trail – now prized as a recreational and ecological jewel. Today, the federally funded Coast Guard operates one rescue boat and two 25-foot rigid hull inflatable boats. Each winter, people come to Bamfield from all over Canada and the northern United States for Rigid Hull Inflatable Officers Training courses.

In 2001, BCSA, Huu-ay-aht First Nations and BMSC came together and applied for a five-year Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) grant to re-establish the Coldwater Pinto Abalone. This most expensive of seafoods has been on the endangered species list since 1990 and a harvesting ban has been in place since



Abalone growing tanks.

that time. The Bamfield-Huu-ay-aht Abalone Society's funding application was the culmination of research into the possible causes of the abalone's decline – whether environmental, disease or poaching pressures were responsible – and a spawning and growing operation is now under way.

Coldwater Pinto Abalone take five years to mature in the natural environment, and it remains to be seen how well they will fare in their six feet square by four feet deep tanks. Spawning first took place in 2001, and the Society and DFO are working closely on all aspects of the project. About one million larvae successfully hatched and settled in 2003; 150,000 survived from 2002; and 75,000 abalone remain from the initial 2001 spawning. Project manager Guy Whyte was conducting research on abalone before they were put on the endangered species list, and his experience will help ensure that the harvesting decision is well founded.

Bamfield is also fortunate to have control of the Bamfield Huu-ay-aht Community Forest, a 430-hectare strip of land which surrounds the

town and separates it from a commercial forest. The province of British Columbia established 11 community forest pilot projects in 1999, and Bamfield's is managed by a nonprofit organization with a board of directors composed of Native and non-Native members. The board oversees forest operations, maintains an office and pays a manager.

“Harvesting is far down the list of what the board wants to do,” says Linda Myres. “Research, education, recreation, artistic expression and non-timber forest products [NTFPs] come before tree removal.” In the spring of 2003, the board hosted a symposium to draw people in to discuss the possibilities of NTFPs, including mushroom harvesting, salal harvesting (salal is a shiny-leaved bush whose foliage is prized in the florist industry), medicinal products and artistic creation using forest materials.

“Our reasons for undertaking the abalone and community forest work are twofold,” says Linda Myres. “We need more employment in town and what we have done provides a wonderful role model for students who grow up here. In a

lot of isolated communities, kids want to leave because they see no future. By putting these things in place, we establish future possibilities for academic research and marketing work.”

Members of the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre (BMSC) staff usher thousands of elementary and high school students from BC and Alberta through the abalone growing facility each year. Groups come for up to several days and receive a hands-on, high-quality educational experience. In addition, BMSC’s undergraduate program operates five full marine biology courses in the fall. From May until the end of winter, three terms of undergraduate and postgraduate courses are offered. Ongoing integrated research is conducted at BMSC through a program called Aqua-net. Professional researchers from a number of universities hire students to carry out research projects to examine the abalone project from a pure science perspective.

The abalone project also has spawned a large public education project called Coast Watch. Coast Watch informs visitors and boaters

that abalone cannot be harvested legally and encourages them to observe, record and report abalone gathering activities to the RCMP. Students visiting BMSC learn abalone physiology and life cycles to gain a better understanding of why conservation is necessary.

In November 2002, Bamfield’s successful submission to the Office of Learning Technologies focused on three community goals: 1) to contribute to Bamfield’s growth and sustainability and to build a network of like-minded communities along Vancouver Island’s central coast; 2) to develop entrepreneurial activity that would support the area’s economic and social health; and 3) to contribute to the health and sustainability of settlements on the west coast of Vancouver Island by building on existing community capacity.

“We began the OLT work from the premise that we would build on what was already in the community,” says Linda. “We weren’t re-inventing the wheel, just realigning it.” The first and third OLT goals concentrate on building a West Coast Learning Network among the communities of



Forest Fairy Umily's hair and wand are examples of Non-Timber Forestry Products.

Bamfield, Port Renfrew, Uclulet and Tofino, but this work has been limited by high transportation costs. Linda is hopeful that more funds can be made available to advance this portion of the project. Work to develop entrepreneurial activity is well under way.

Expanding the economic base

The abalone and community forest initiatives are part of at least four economies that will support Bamfield's future. The four that are currently being developed are the new resource economy, arts and culture, tourism and hospitality, and science and technology. The new resource economy – represented by the abalone and forest work – seeks to use natural resources differently.

Arts and culture offer many possibilities for growth. The Bamfield-Huu-ay-aht Community Society has supported two local galleries over the last seven years, offering local studio and retail space to local artists. The success of this venture has encouraged artists from an ever-widening area to use Bamfield's facilities to promote their work. Unfortunately, funds for next year's season are now at risk and the community is looking for other organizations to sponsor this work.

The Huu-ay-aht have partnered with the West Coast Learning Network and another funding agency to produce a series of children's language instruction programs. Using a Sesame Street presentation style, these programs have been garnering enthusiastic reviews from both adults and children.

A national historical site near Bamfield received official recognition in 2001. Archaeologists estimate that the well-preserved village of Kiixen was established some 8,000 years ago, and that it likely was one of the area's original

villages. The educational and cultural opportunities offered by this resource are not lost on the enterprising minds in Bamfield. The community forest association, in collaboration with Huu-ay-aht First Nations, currently is clearing a road to the Kiixen National Historic Site through the forest, which had been accessible only by water.

Bamfield's tourism and hospitality industry continues to evolve. When the local sports fishery experienced a decline in the 1990s, attention turned to ecotourism and, more recently, to educational or learning tourism. Groups now visit the town, for example, to take courses in painting and to learn about the area and its biology. Annual celebrations attract new visitors and help keep the community vibrant. Inner tidal golf tournaments, dances and slow-pitch ball tournaments are aimed primarily at local residents, but the September Kayak Festival and this year's inaugural Mushroom Picking Festival attracted visitors from as far as California.

Because most of the region currently is not wired for broadband Internet access, most of the science and technology enterprises now operate from the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre. Plans are in the works to extend broadband service first into the Bamfield Community School and then the whole community. The benefits of offering Internet-based information to an isolated area are innumerable. For example, the Red Cross outpost hospital in Bamfield is staffed only by a well-trained Registered Nurse; video-conferencing would extend the services she now provides.

Improved access to Internet technology will also have a positive impact on learning. Currently, many visitors are daunted by the 100-km gravel road that separates Bamfield from Port Alberni. As a result, the Bamfield Community School Association often acts as a conduit for information

provided by other organizations, such as the BC Council for Families. Currently, the association provides and supports many of the town's social services, including parks and recreation programming, preschool programs, women's services, adult and family education, health education, the publication of community and school newspapers, and the operation of a local television and radio station. All of these undertakings can be enriched and extended by having access to the resources of the Internet.

BCSA established a Community Access Program site at the library in 1998 and kept it going after Industry Canada funds dwindled. The community volunteer librarian, Diane Crosby, recently was invited to share her successes in operating a rural library at the Raise a Reader program celebration event in Victoria. While there, she also accepted a grant to buy books for Bamfield's library, thanks to the *Victoria Times Columnist*, the program sponsor.

The Bamfield Community School library houses three collections of resource material – the regional library, a community-donated collection and the school library. In the evenings, people often come to the school to play ball in the gym, take a book out of the library or use the computer facilities. The school has become a place where everyone in town can come to learn and socialize, fulfilling its mandate to be available to the community day and night.

The BCSA supports distance learning through online courses. Building learning supports in partnership with the local school district is important to area residents. The community dialogue sponsored by the BCSA in April 2003 underlined the value community members place on education.

Blowing their own horn

Being the town at the end of the road in an outlying district means that self-promotion has become a way of life for local leaders. Bamfield is a small part of a regional government district and residents decided that they needed a more professional approach to grow beyond their one person, one vote regional representation. Accordingly, the Bamfield Community Affairs Society was created in 2001. The society gave the organization letterhead and a legal presence, and though the town's profile changed little at the regional level, a community affairs committee used the incorporation status in its bid to attract the attention of the province's Education Minister, Christie Clark. Her October 9, 2003, visit to Bamfield was spent, in part, reviewing a concept paper co-authored by Linda, the Director of BMSC and other local representatives. The document explores their vision of what a community school could do under optimum conditions.

One of the ideas suggested for achieving excellence includes turning Bamfield Community School into an international learning centre for children and adults, similar in operation to the Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific. The school's enrollment has dipped to 36 kindergarten to Grade 12 students, but the adult learning population increases that number to 50. Life-long learning could hold the key to Bamfield's success as an educational hub.

When Minister of Education Clark toured the community in October, she observed an undersea submersible with scientists and students, ate lunch with the children and staff at Bamfield Community School and was interviewed by students on the community news telecast. She also pledged to support an innovative learning

symposium in January 2004 which will bring together experts in knowledge architecture to give structure to Bamfield's plan to become an international learning centre. Minister Clark expressed the view that Bamfield might be the only community in the province with the appropriate resources and relationships to support learning in this manner. Despite her kind words and support, several obstacles must still be overcome.

Part of Bamfield Community School's mandate is to ensure that the facility is in use seven days a week all year long. Unfortunately, the 'super' Ministry for Children and Family Development which was established in 1998 lately has devolved responsibility for some of its projects to local school boards and Bamfield's school board has chosen to cut funding to community schools. From 1997 to 2001, Bamfield received \$75,000 for its community school programming. Funding was cut to \$50,910 in 2002 and \$46,000 in 2003. Unless the school board reverses its stand on community schools, funds will cease in 2004. Bamfield's challenge lies not in communicating its value to the government – ministers and bureaucrats already have acknowledged their support – but in securing the funding that will ensure a smooth community transition to asset-based self-sufficiency.

In addition to supporting efforts to establish a West Coast Learning Network and develop entrepreneurial activities, Office of Learning Technologies project funds were used to pay a portion of Linda's community coordinator salary. When the OLT contract expires, a combined loss of federal and provincial contributions will mean that her position is no longer funded.

Envisioning a rich future

Despite immediate financial concerns, projects continue to move ahead. Says Linda:

“Using broadband access, we hope to offer people online undergraduate programming and training programs that use video feed. We'd like to become known as a forestry learning centre, and we have local interest in becoming a First Nations Study Centre. There are only 16 Huu-ay-aht speakers left in this area, and our objective is to have whole Native families absorb the language.”

Already a local film-maker is interested in the project and a script is in development, funded by a partnership with The Learning Network. Cultural educator Rob Dennis Jr. is developing the stories and songs that are being woven into a community play, based largely on the stories Rob's grandfather told him as a child. “Vignettes can be tacked on within the story's timeline,” says Rob. “The pride in this project and skill level of the community are already evident.”

Besides appealing to the provincial government for funds, the community is making a concerted effort to find partners that are interested in helping the school expand its horizons. Through Linda's connection with Dr. Jim Montgomery from Malaspina University-College's Faculty of Education, Bamfield is now twinned with Larvik, Norway, in a community development partnership project. Both are looking at the kinds of programs rural schools can offer to encourage interaction. Says Linda: “The Norwegians have the same dedication and commitment, but their projects tend to be more curriculum-based. Where they might simply visit a forest to teach a lesson, our deeper relationship with the forest community might see members of the forest society teach the materials themselves, or they might ask for our help in mapping a trail using Geographic Information Systems technology. Hopefully, this type of deeper involvement will help us to secure the funding we need to move ahead.”

Identifying partners with similar goals was what led to the successful abalone operation. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) was accepting proposals from groups willing to establish hatcheries and growing operations. Linda was quick to appreciate the strengths that the community association, the Huu-ay-aht and the marine centre could bring to such a project. The Bamfield Community School Association spearheaded the development of an incorporated society that would extend the DFO research. The combined membership of the society brought a richness of perspective to the work now under way.

In June 2003, Linda spoke at the International Rural Network's conference in Scotland and was pleased to find that the Bamfield work was held up internationally as a model of success. Linda reports: "The one piece that the British have that we are lacking is a regional mandate to undertake development projects. We have approached economic development officers in the region but, so far, they are waiting for us to come up with the ideas and the plans."

Fortunately, there appears to be no limit to the ideas Bamfield residents can generate. Recently, the community association partnered with the Clayoquot Alliance for Research Education and Training to host a citizens' science and community health symposium. This four-day gathering will look at the issue from a social and educational perspective, appointing an artist-in-residence to paint what she sees as community health. Later, it is hoped that the artist will visit other communities to capture their impressions of community health and encourage other local artists to form new networks based on this type of work. The children in Bamfield will be encouraged to think about the subject and see it as something they also can express.

Taking and giving

Says Linda: "We need to keep blowing our own horn and letting people know what we're about. People live here because they want to see their community maintained. We recognize that the outside world exists and that we have to have access to it so that we can continue to grow. We want everyone to share the notion that we have to give and take with that world."

Linda is doing her fair share of promoting the community to the outside world. Bamfield Community School will be one of ten schools documented by the Association for Community Education in BC. Funds provided by the Ministry of Children and Family Development will be used to share information about successful community and partnership development approaches.

Linda is also the past president of BCTF's Rural Teachers' Association. One of her rural studies professors is working with the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and the Canadian International Development Agency to enhance rural teacher training in Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China. As part of this project, Sichuan's Minister of Education, Mr. He Shaoyong, and Mr. Zhu Xue Qiang of Chengdu Electromechanical College visited Bamfield in October. A continued exchange has been established, and Linda has been invited to return to Sichuan in 2004 to help them set up a rural teachers' association.

Linda Myers is a leader who fully understands and personifies the cooperation and creativity that lie at the heart of community. Bamfield is not looking for a hand out, but without ongoing, coordinated support from federal and provincial agencies, well-laid plans may founder. In the

meantime, Linda continues to leave no stone unturned. Bamfield may be at the end of the road, but it is by no means in the middle of nowhere. Its spirit is undaunted and fully alive.

Anne Makhoul

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The website for the Sichuan province project is at: <http://bisd.hollandc.pe.ca/imm2003/ertt/>

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