

How businesses and conservationists are working together to preserve the Great Bear Rainforest

For Spirit Bear Lodge, finding solutions to conflict between business and conservationists is key to long-term survival and economic success



It's been said that if you want to get within 20 feet of a grizzly bear, Doug Neasloss is your man. A founding member of ecotourism and wildlife viewing operation Spirit Bear Lodge in the coastal community of Klemtu, B.C., Neasloss affirms the rumour is true, tracing it back to when he also acted as guide for the venture. Today, the "bear whisperer" juggles various hats including chief of Kitsoo/Xai'xais First Nation and stewardship director, while still overseeing capacity building and training at the Lodge.

The community-owned enterprise, launched in 2000 to provide local employment opportunities and economic sustainability, helped put Klemtu on the map, attracting tourists worldwide to one of the most remote parts of Canada to view bears (Grizzlies, Black bears and the rarest of them all — Spirit Bears) in their natural habitat. The venture didn't initially find unanimous approval, Neasloss said, adding some people were concerned that tourists would deplete the limited resources of the 350-person community and others were convinced no one would schlep to an isolated island in the middle of nowhere.

Turns out they would. Hailed by National Geographic as a must-see-and-stay-at destination, today Spirit Bear Lodge employs 45 and stands as the second largest industry in the region, recently surpassing six figures in revenue.

"We had a belief that you can create long-term sustainable employment in a community without cutting down a tree, taking out a fish, and that there's people all around the world that would pay to view what we have in the Great Bear Rainforest," Neasloss said.

One of the largest coastal temperate rainforests in the world, Great Bear was the focus of an unprecedented agreement between the province, First Nations and forest companies on Feb 1. The culmination of years of negotiations, its terms include the commitment to protect 85 per cent of the lands from industrial logging and ensure First Nations in the region act as co-decision-makers. “In years past, we sat on the outside looking in, watching all these forest companies come through our region and log with very little or no benefits coming back to the community,” said Neasloss, who played a part in negotiations on behalf of Kitasoo/Xai’xais First Nation. “The agreement helps secure our place as a community and as a business, to make sure we can continue to survive.”



The agreement saw various social entrepreneurs playing a part directly or indirectly in its outcome. Nicole Rycroft, founder of Canopy, works with more than 750 customers including H&M, Penguin-Random House and Stella McCartney to find conservation-friendly alternatives to forest products. “Landscapes like the Great Bear Rainforest are why we get up in the morning,” she said.

“The market played a very nuanced role in the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement, and that’s where Canopy’s contributions were focused,” Rycroft said, explaining that when customers voiced their environmental concerns, they motivated the forest industry and government to take action. By engaging companies, Canopy helped shift the tide from conflict to solutions.

Neasloss contends finding solutions is key to long-term survival and business success. And he said it’s why he negotiated for a ban on commercial trophy hunting of grizzlies and for the protection of the Green Inlet Watershed. “It’s huge to get that off the chopping block, to make sure it was protected and secure for our tourism business.”

Things are looking good for Spirit Bear Lodge. “I don’t even think we’ve tapped into the full potential, there are lots of opportunities; we made huge strides but there’s more that we can do,” said Neasloss, acknowledging the invaluable support of his marketing-guru-cum-general-manager and funder Coast Funds. A \$116 million initiative of the B.C. and Canadian governments and six private foundations, the fund has two streams: Conservation, promoting the sustainability of the Great Bear Rainforest and Economic Development, and job creation, promoting First Nation businesses and community-based employment opportunities.

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“You can’t protect the forest without also making sure there’s well-being in communities,” said Brodie Guy, the fund’s interim executive director. Since 2008, close to \$62 million has been invested in 188 and 134 projects, respectively. But the total magnitude of investment the fund attracted to the region is closer to \$208 million, Guy said.

The fund helped Spirit Bear Lodge build its current accommodations, tripling its capacity, Neasloss said. As a key facilitator of the fund and one of its initial funders, Ross McMillan, CEO of Tides Canada, is proud of its impact on First Nations communities, some of whom faced high rates of unemployment and poverty because of their reliance on fishing and logging. The fund is seen as a fundamental ally of First Nations on the coast, he said, in terms of economic opportunities and their ongoing role in managing their territories.



Its reach (and the many discussions underpinning it) goes as far as the Great Bear Rainforest agreement, he said, creating as it did a new body of resources and expertise to support the aspirations of First Nations. “I honestly don’t believe the deal would have come together without it,” he said.

And with its ratification, the agreement has established a new paradigm for those working and living in the area. “We understand that people are going to be in our territories looking at different opportunities but I think there’s a way we can do it together and a way we can do it sustainably and respectfully,” Neasloss said. “The agreement sets the tone for that.”



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