

Cultural Tourism in Nunavut

There has been much talk of late in Canada regarding the “management” of economic development among our Aboriginal people. As a society, we seem to be inching toward an understanding that we can genuinely accomplish this goal only if the management of new projects is rooted in the Aboriginal communities themselves. This is empowerment. The old model of management, i.e., control, not just advice, by southern consultants, is the colonial approach, which over and over again has been shown to fail.

In 1992, Iyola Kingwatsiak, a Cape Dorset soapstone carver, was among the participants at a conference on Inuit art held at the McMichael gallery in Ontario. Shortly afterwards, when asked “What did you think about your trip to the McMichael conference?” he replied:

I enjoyed being there, but the problem was that we sat there like pieces of art in a showcase display. The non-Inuit at the conference spoke as much as they pleased about their own lives and how they lived like Inuit. But they never gave us a chance to speak or asked us questions about our work. The white people dominated as usual. They think they are the experts and know everything about Inuit. This goes on all the time. I myself felt that the white people should be asking us Inuit what we think rather than encouraging the non-Inuit to talk The only contribution I made while I was there was to do a bit of printmaking, but again, the people who organized the conference didn't give us a chance to speak or respond to questions people might have had.

Asked further, “Did you think that you were just there for people to look at you?” he answered: “You're very right about that. We're just like part of the show pieces; they treat us like carvings” (Goo-Doyle and Mitchell, 1992).

This story illustrates how easily well-meaning non-Inuit people can go wrong in developing a program that is intended to display or celebrate Inuit culture.

If tourists who arrive in a northern community are offered an experience that is essentially no more than a “demonstration” of Inuit culture, the satisfaction level of both demonstrators and viewers will be limited. Such a program treats the Inuit participants as little more than artifacts of the culture, as Kingwatsiak noted. In the end, the program will not be sustainable—both sides will lose interest.

How can such failures be avoided? The answer is subtle but straightforward when seen from the community's perspective. The cultural experience offered to visitors must be a genuine reflection of the community's life, with Inuit participants doing what they really do and visitors invited to share in that experience. What this means is simply that the cultural programs must be developed for the community's sake, not just for the tourists. For example, drum-dancers and *pisiq*-singers must be engaged to involve community members in a program designed to serve their desire to preserve and celebrate these traditional activities. That is genuine cultural activity. The visitor who is invited to share in the experience, even as a detached observer, is witnessing a living part of the community's cultural reality. If the cultural programs are real, are alive, then the “cultural tourism” will be sustainable.

Cultural components that are not truly alive on their own merit, as a community-based function, will ultimately wither and die. Inuit cultural performers ought not to be treated like a jukebox, where the tourist drops a coin into the nickelodeon, presses the start button, and the show begins.

The colonial era is over. No modern archaeologist would undertake a project without conferring with the knowledge-keepers in the community, involving them in an ongoing way, and even seeking their direction. Cultural tourism needs to seek the same blessing and the same benefits. In reality, the benefits flow both ways. Community control over the interpretation and use of culture and heritage builds awareness and pride, creates links between elders and youth, empowers the community, and fosters a sense of self-determination.

If the first key to a sustainable cultural tourism program is that the individual elements must be “alive” as cultural entities within the community, the second key is that all of the cultural components of the program benefit if they are coordinated and supportive of one another as a network within the community. They are best off singing from the same songbook, some would say. To be effective, the “cultural network” must have a central coordinator (whether individual or organization) to act as a nexus, a focal point within the community. This goal can be achieved in a number of ways, but by one means or another, the cultural elements of the program should be drawn together as a community network for the cultural tourism program to be sustainable. For that to happen, cultural leadership from within the community must be identified and empowered in a coordinating role for the longer term.

In short:

- Cultural programming must be real. It must be a living function in the community.
- A cultural network must exist in the community to keep these cohesive parts alive.

This scenario avoids treating participants in a cultural tourism program as little more than part of the display. It empowers the community to sustain a cultural tourism initiative on its own, not only by allowing it to seek the funding necessary to nourish the community's chosen cultural programs, but equally by fostering continued cultural growth in the community. It amounts to empowerment, and empowerment will lead directly to sustainability.

REFERENCE

Goo-Doyle, O., and Mitchell, M. 1992. The artists speak – Iyola Kingwatsiak: On being patronized. *Inuit Art Quarterly* 7(2):26–29.

David F. Pelly
Writer, Researcher, Oral Historian, Cultural Advisor
www.davidpelly.com