

## **Adventures BC Travel Cooperative**

(formerly Vancouver Island Adventures Co-operative)

**Date of Incorporation:** 2001

**Membership:** 9 members

**Area Served:** British Columbia

**Activity:** Shared Service Co-op/Tourism.

*The Co-operative brings together tourist providers across British Columbia to share marketing services, as well as to work together in creating tourism packages using the various services of the membership.*

### **Background**

The tourism market is currently one of the fastest growing economic sectors in British Columbia, and the trend on Vancouver Island is consistent with the province. According to a recent report from the Cowichan Valley Regional District, tourism provides approximately 20 percent of the region's employment. This has created new and expanded opportunities for small tourist operators, such as family or individually run businesses, particularly in niche markets such as eco-tourism, kayaking and cultural tourism. Yet these small operators usually work with limited financial resources, and often no support staff. The effort required to handle all of the business activity for their operation, such as marketing, planning and administration, is overwhelming.

The impetus for developing an association for tourist operators came from Vivian Johnston, a founding member of Vancouver Island Adventure Connections (VIAC). As a tourist package provider, Johnston worked closely with a number of other tourist operators in the region. Johnston felt that many of the various people she worked with would benefit from working with each other, instead of operating in isolation or competition. She also felt that it would be beneficial to all if they co-operated in developing joint packages and marketing plans for their businesses. Johnston brought these people together to discuss working jointly in a more formal capacity:

*"I talked to them about my need...to see if I was alone, or if others had identified the same need...My marketing cost and the energy and time that I put into it was so large and I couldn't tell how well it was doing for me. I just knew that I was a small business and it was very difficult for me to expand and become solid and feel some security in what I was doing, without having some help from somewhere. So, the idea was that maybe if several of us came together and pooled our marketing dollar, our interests, and our experience that we may come up with some way that would benefit us all. So, that was the origin really of our project." (Vivian Johnston, founding member, 2001)*

### **Starting the Co-op**

Thirteen tourist operators on Vancouver Island, with a strong core in the Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys, came together in September 1999 to discuss ways to develop joint economic security. From

these initial discussions a core of people formed who seemed to have enough energy, time, and a strong commitment for working together. The group met regularly, from biweekly to weekly, discussing plans for establishing and expanding the co-operative. During tourist season the group met less frequently as the operators had to turn their priorities to their own individual businesses.

Their initial discussions ascertained that there were a lot of common concerns within the group. Each of the operators was finding that the costs and energy of marketing was too much for an individual business to take on alone. The group generally reflected the feelings that Johnston expresses above – pooling their marketing dollars and experience could benefit each member, while easing the burden of carrying out these tasks alone.

The group discussed several different models for organising themselves, including an incorporated business, a non-profit society and an association, as well as the co-operative model. Johnston had knowledge of the co-operative model from when she was looking into the opportunities for developing a shellfish co-operative in the North Island area several years ago. One of the community members in Alert Bay had worked with the Canadian Co-operative Association, and gave the group some material discussing the Mondragon Co-operatives in Spain, which inspired the group in the North Island to become enchanted with the concept of co-operative organisation. Johnston brought this enthusiasm for the co-operative model to the discussions.

The Ministry of Community Development, Co-operatives and Volunteers (MCDCV) set up a workshop for the group to discuss the co-operative model. After this workshop the group decided a co-op form would work best for their needs. In particular, the co-op model seemed the most appropriate as membership control of the organisation was the most vital need identified by the group. The group also felt the co-op structure would allow the most flexibility, enabling them to change the structure according to their developing needs.

The members of VIAC also knew that the MCDCV had money on offer for co-operative organisations. The group felt that this could provide them with the start up costs to ensure the co-op got off to a good start. The group submitted a proposal to the MCDCV, outlining their goal for a tourist co-op on Vancouver Island. It received funding from the MCDCV to carry out a feasibility study that aimed to identify the potential for growth in the tourism industry in the province, and how best the co-op could capitalise on this opportunity.

In general, Vancouver Island Adventure Connections has received a lot of moral support from others involved in the local tourist industry. The Tourist Association of Vancouver Island got the co-op involved in the association, and provided an outlet for information on the co-operative to tourists. Yet they have, on occasion, run into people who feel challenged by what they are doing. Vancouver

Island Adventure Connections has remained conscious of these concerns and do what they can to show that they are not reinventing the wheel, but doing something very different from what is available at the moment.

## **Goals**

The main aim of Vancouver Island Adventure Connections is to pool the marketing resources of tour operators, so that each business can concentrate its efforts on doing what it does best, whether that be organising kayaking tours or developing an educational package on the unique features and history of the region. The centralisation of the marketing programme will allow each member to focus on improving and expanding their own operations, while increasing the scale of promotional activities. As the co-op is able to collectively deliver services, it offers more complete service packages that bring together local products and talent.

An additional goal of Vancouver Island Adventure Connections is to develop multiple connections that can bring together people who are isolated from each other. This goes beyond connecting the customer with the tourist provider; the co-op aims to connect communities across Vancouver Island, as well as connect groups, such as school classes, and individuals together and with their environment.

By increasing awareness of what the area has to offer, and connecting communities across the island Vancouver Island Adventure Connections members feel that they can facilitate the creation of healthy and proud communities across Vancouver Island. By bringing together tour operators from across Vancouver Island, Vancouver Island Adventure Connections aims to increase awareness of the island as a whole, for tourists from both the Island and elsewhere. This would take place through multi-community tours and educational tour packages that examine the local history and habitat, among other things.

## **Opportunities and Challenges for Growth**

To bring more businesses into the co-op, Vancouver Island Adventure Connections invited dozens of tourist operators to several workshops held across Vancouver Island to discuss the co-op and the benefits of being involved with it. These workshops presented the reasons for choosing the co-op model, the benefits of pooled marketing resources, and the importance of membership control that the co-op model offered. VIAC prepared a package and a presentation that outlined the details of membership, the organisational structure of the group's vision. The key concern for the organisation at this period is developing the membership base to sustain the marketing expenses of the co-op.

Most of the tour operators who are interested in the idea of the co-op want to “wait and see” how the co-op does before they throw in their own lot.

*“People want to see how we do before they come on board. But without people being involved, there will be nothing for people to see in order to judge whether they want to be involved.” (Jim Bangle, founding member, 2001)*

One lesson drawn from this, according to Bangle, is that the co-operative should start with a small plan of action that will realise tangible outcomes in a fairly short time frame. In doing so, the co-op will likely attract members.

Vancouver Island Adventure Connections is taking advantage of the 2001 co-op legislation that allows them to have more than one category of membership. The two categories now would be tour operators and travel suppliers. This allows tour operators to have a controlling share in the co-op, but also bring others into the structure with a smaller financial commitment. The co-op structure, once in place, will include the membership, who will elect the board. The board will appoint the manager, who in turn will hire the staff. The board also envisions establishing a set of committees to carry out many of the activities of the co-op. Some of the current ideas for committees include finance, membership, education, and marketing.

## **Looking to the Future**

Vancouver Island Adventure Connections also sees a longer-term goal of assisting the development of tourism co-operatives in communities across the province, which could lead to a province wide tourism co-operative association. The group hopes to share its own experiences with others wanting to form tourism co-ops, as well as to begin developing sustainable networks of tourist operators across the province.

Vancouver Island Adventure Connections' vision is inspiring in its aim to bring back a sense of local pride by building upon the local resources and talents present in communities suffering the crises in the traditional resource industry. By focusing on revitalising community economies through bringing together local businesses to make them stronger, Vancouver Island Adventure Connections offers hope and solidarity to small business operators overwhelmed by their workload and disenchanted by their isolation, and together they have a louder voice in the marketing business. The co-op's strategy of paring down their efforts on membership drives, focusing on showing other businesses the benefits the current core membership enjoys and the expanding services that they can offer as a group, should prove to address the “wait and see” problem that VIAC has faced.

## **Addendum (May 2002)**

Since the original research and writing of this case study (2001) Vancouver Island Adventures Connections Co-operative has modified its co-operative. It has expanded to include the entire geographic area of British Columbia and is under the new name of Adventures BC Travel Cooperative. Adven-

tures BC received a \$45,000 grant from the former Ministry of Community Development, Co-operatives and Volunteers, which allowed it to conduct a feasibility study and to develop a new business plan. The co-op offers membership under the “one member-one vote” policy, which means each member has one vote regardless of the number of shares owned; members hold a minimum of eight shares in the co-op, valued at \$400 each.

The co-op also provides marketing options for tourism-oriented businesses under its “Tourism Marketing Service.” One option is for “Packagers” which is \$400 annually and a second is for “Non-Packagers”<sup>1</sup> which is \$99 per year (Adventure BC Travel Cooperative website). The former includes advertising opportunities, sales support and networking, and sponsorship by a travel agent. The latter receives both advertising and a link between the websites of the business and the co-operative.

“Adventures BC will pursue the cooperative development and collective marketing and delivery of programs, packages and services that offer adventures in educational, ecological and cultural experiences throughout British Columbia” (Mission Statement from Adventures BC Travel Cooperative website). The co-operative’s change has allowed the co-op to increase its services by offering a greater variety of opportunities to British Columbia’s visitors. Adventures BC is an excellent example of a co-op’s focus and tenacity. For further information please visit the co-op’s website at [www.adventuresbc.com](http://www.adventuresbc.com).

## Case Study Information

This case study was developed for a report entitled *Situating Co-operatives in British Columbia-2000-2001*, which was prepared for the Province of B.C. (Ministry of Community Development, Co-operatives and Volunteers) by the British Columbia Institute for Co-operative Studies, University of Victoria. To obtain the information for the study BCICS and the co-operative entered into a partnership agreement. BCICS is grateful to the co-op members for their contributions and time. The case study is published with the approval of the co-operative. Further information regarding this study includes the following:

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