Introduction

Ecotourism is a subcomponent of sustainable tourism that places emphasis on environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) articulately coined the term “ecotourism” as: “traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996, pp. 4–5). Sirakaya, Sasidharan, and Sönmez (1999) reviewed the literature on ecotourism by surveying 282 U.S.-based eco-tour operators. The plethora of perspectives provided in this study converge to state that ecotourism is constructed around the sustained conservation of resources in an almost non-consumptive manner involving non-intrusive exploitation of resources through the management of cultural and environmental resources (Sirakaya et al., 1999). Ecotourism is also considered “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and creates knowledge and understanding through interpretation and education of all involved (visitors, staff and the visited)” (Global Ecotourism Network, 2016, p. 1). Ecotourism has undergone exponential growth and is being considered as one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry (Bostick, 2020).

Ecotourism fits well with Indigenous values. Indigenous lands are rich in biodiversity and have existing cultural manifestations which makes these landscapes a natural setting for ecotourism activities (Johnston, 2000). The general elements that are integral to Indigenous tourism include a commitment to environmental sustainability, environmental education, and the sharing and promotion of the Indigenous host community’s culture (Graci, 2010). Therefore, Indigenous values that focus on honouring nature and culture, are in line with the concept of ecotourism.

Several arguments suggest that Indigenous knowledge and biodiversity conservation are complementary phenomena leading to ecotourism development. Maintaining and strengthening a distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditional land by utilising their ‘traditional ecological knowledge’, is a foundational element for Indigenous communities (Davis, 2008). Ecological knowledge is an accumulation of traditional knowledge, belief and practices, evolving by adaptive processes, culturally transmitted to next generations, about the human
relationship with the environment (Menzies, 2006). Second, Indigenous knowledge reflects generations of experience and problem-solving, providing an important opportunity for systematic in-situ maintenance of genetic resources in a destination, which is well aligned with the expected outcomes of ecotourism (Warren, 1996). Finally, Indigenous tourism is a drawcard for ecotourism as it’s mainly concentrated in the peripheral regions with a high degree of Indigenous biodiversity (Hall, 2007). The limited accessibility, number of tourists, and the distance from physical human structures often create a higher perceived value of naturalness and preserves the ecological integrity of the destination (Hall, 2007). All of these factors reiterate the commonalities between the concept of ecotourism and Indigenous cultural and natural attractions.

Definition of Indigenous ecotourism

Indigenous tourism in Canada is defined as an accumulation of all tourism businesses “majority owned, operated and/or controlled by First Nations, Metis or Inuit peoples that can demonstrate a connection and responsibility to the local Indigenous community and traditional territory where the operation resides” (ITAC, 2017, p. 4). Butler and Hinch (2007) have characterised the ‘Indigenous tourism product’ by examining the role of Indigenous societies in tourism and how they interact within the tourism framework. This ‘Indigenous tourism product’ includes activities in which “Indigenous peoples directly own or operate the tourism business or are indirectly involved by having their culture serve as the essence of the tourist attraction” (Butler & Hinch, 2007, p. 5). The Indigenous tourism product encapsulates a wide range of “special events (dances, festivals, powwows), experiential tourism (guided hikes, cultural-interpretation programs, wildlife tourism, applied activities), arts and crafts, museums, historical recreations, restaurants, and accommodations, lodges, and resorts that celebrate Aboriginal culture and are offered by or located in indigenous communities” (Gets & Jamieson, 1997 as cited in Lemelin, Koster, & Youroukos, 2015, p. 318).

In the context of Indigenous ecotourism, the tourism products include ethically managed non-consumptive, low-impact and locally oriented experiences that focus on natural and cultural attractions within Indigenous territories; managed and developed by Indigenous peoples (Fennell, 1999). In 2006, Zeppel defined Indigenous ecotourism as “Tourism which cares for the environment and which involves (Indigenous) people in decision making and management” (ANTA, 2001 as cited in Zeppel, 2006, p. 11). It includes nature-based tourism products or accommodation owned by Indigenous groups and Indigenous cultural tours or attractions in a natural setting (Zeppel, 2006, p. 11). This Indigenous ecotourism product usually refers to a variety of experiences including cultural performances such as singing and storytelling, nature-based activities such as canoeing, snowshoeing, kayaking, walking or sailing-based local tours, and incorporating Indigenous tourism experiences in the existing tourism businesses, “encouraging sustainable hunting, fishing, and harvesting; wildlife viewing; and lodge-based overnight stays” (Tides Canada, 2018, p. 9). According to Tides Canada (2018), Indigenous-led ecotourism can be defined as an initiative that is owned and operated by Indigenous peoples. The main purpose of Indigenous-led ecotourism is to educate the public about Indigenous culture, values, and ways of life while maximising community benefits. Considering such benefits, the definition of Indigenous ecotourism may be broadened to incorporate Indigenous cultural tourism (Tides Canada, 2018). Indigenous cultural tourism meets the Indigenous tourism criteria and, in addition, a significant portion of the experience incorporates Indigenous culture in a manner that is appropriate, respectful, and true to the
Indigenous culture being portrayed. Authenticity is ensured through the active involvement of Indigenous people in the development and delivery of the experience (ITAC, 2017).

**Benefits and barriers of Indigenous ecotourism**

There are several potential benefits as well as challenges of Indigenous ecotourism as observed in the Tides Canada (2018) report, noted previously. The report recognises ‘flexibility’ and ‘attainability’ as the two main characteristics of ecotourism. Based on these characteristics it concludes that there is a scope for building on existing infrastructures and capacity, as well as piloting initiatives that have proven to be successful elsewhere. This report highlights Indigenous-led ecotourism potential to create lasting and rewarding community impacts. According to the report, Indigenous communities can benefit from this type of tourism as it supports auxiliary businesses and employs youth. Community solidarity and pride strengthen when people share their culture, heritage, languages, and arts with others. As a result, ecotourism allows for communities to connect with their land, thereby reinforcing their commitment to environmental stewardship. Community leaders can benefit by paving an alternative path for economic development, steering away from natural resource extraction industries. Indigenous communities can also retain their youth and keep them engaged in ecotourism, who might otherwise leave in search of employment. Finally, when Indigenous communities integrate a sustainable relationship with their hereditary land into their personal lives, ecotourism has the capacity to provide healing, health, and well-being (Tides Canada, 2018).

In practice, however, there are many barriers hindering the implementation of ecotourism. Much of the literature analyzing the link between biodiversity conservation and community development assumes that ecotourism managed by Indigenous peoples will not only result in environmental conservation but also increased development. However, a study by Coria & Calfucura (2012) indicated that in practice, ecotourism has failed to deliver the anticipated benefits to Indigenous communities. Based on this study, the major factors limiting Indigenous communities from reaping the benefits of Indigenous ecotourism development include shortages of human endowments, lack of financial and social capital within the community, land insecurity and the absence of a proper mechanism for the fair distribution of economic benefits of ecotourism (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). A study conducted on the Indigenous community of Long Lamai in Malaysia established that the marketing of destination areas, formulation of tourism policies, and development of tourist attractions are mainly dictated by the needs of the visitors. Several scholars have argued that this process fails to take into account the local perspective, and often results in a lack of interest of the local Indigenous communities, dissatisfied residents and tourists, and a loss of the destination’s culture (Liu, 2006; Falak, Chiun, & Wee, 2016).

The first Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Symposium held in Nanaimo, Canada, in 2017 facilitated talking circles with stakeholders and determined the three main barriers to Indigenous ecotourism development. The first barrier pertains to the concept of authenticity and the process of creating an authentic Indigenous tourism product. The delegates were concerned about their positive intentions being misinterpreted and feared portraying an attitude of appropriation and/or suggesting homogeneity between cultures (Graci, Maher, Peterson, Hardy, & Vaugeois, 2019). The second barrier emerged from discussions on reciprocity. The delegates believed that due to the history of Indigenous people in Canada, there is a sense of distrust between the respective parties, which limits engagement opportunities of the Indigenous communities in the decision-making process. Finally, the third
barrier concerned the shortage of, or failure to allocate, tangible resources for Indigenous ecotourism development (Graci et al., 2019).

According to a study conducted by Graci (2010) on the potential for Indigenous ecotourism in Ontario, a major barrier identified was the competition with other tour operators within and between other provinces in Canada (Graci, 2010). Other barriers included insufficient funding and a lack of education and training within Indigenous communities for developing ecotourism products. In addition, the variations in seasonal travel lead to fluctuations in the utilisation capacity of the facilities as well as issues relating to staffing and employment. Lastly, the lack of proper marketing and support from the provincial and federal government can also make it difficult to attract tourists to Indigenous destinations (Graci, 2010). The barriers and benefits to Indigenous ecotourism development affect both the prevalence and success of this type of tourism.

The Larrakia Declaration and the N’autsamawt Declaration

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples in 2007 raised several themes related to Indigenous tourism (United Nations, 2007). However, it was not until 2012 that the Pacific Asia Travel Association organised a global Indigenous tourism conference to formulate the guiding principles for Indigenous tourism development. These Indigenous tourism development principles are now being referred to as the Larrakia Declaration, named after the meeting’s Australian Aboriginal host community (PATA/WINTA, 2014).

The following principles were listed in the Larrakia Declaration to guide all culturally respectful Indigenous tourism business development (World Indigenous Tourism Alliance, 2012, pp. 1–2):

- Respect for customary law and lore, land and water, traditional knowledge, traditional cultural expressions, cultural heritage that will underpin all tourism decisions.
- Indigenous culture, the land and waters on which it is based, will be protected and promoted through well-managed tourism practices and appropriate interpretation.
- Indigenous peoples will determine the extent, nature, and organisational arrangements for their participation in tourism and that governments and multilateral agencies will support the empowerment of Indigenous people.
- That governments have a duty to consult and accommodate Indigenous peoples before undertaking decisions on public policy and programs designed to foster the development of Indigenous tourism.
- The tourism industry will respect Indigenous intellectual property rights, cultures and traditional practices, the need for sustainable and equitable business partnerships and the proper care of the environment and communities that support them.
- That equitable partnerships between the tourism industry and Indigenous people will include the sharing of cultural awareness and skills development which support the wellbeing of communities and enable enhancement of individual livelihoods. (PATA/WINTA, 2014, p. 13)

A think tank at the Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Symposium in Nanaimo, Canada, in 2017 facilitated knowledge sharing for supporting “community empowerment, cultural expression and economic prosperity” (Graci et al., 2019, p. 1). The think tank formed the Naut’samawt Declaration, which is built upon the Larrakia declaration and presents the following principles to guide Indigenous tourism development:
Recognising that often Indigenous people are marginalised, disadvantaged, and remote from the opportunity for social, economic and political advancement.

Recognising that whilst tourism provides the strongest driver to restore, protect, and promote Indigenous cultures, it has the potential to diminish and destroy those cultures when improperly developed.

Recognising that as the world becomes increasingly homogenous Indigenous cultures will become increasingly important to provide differentiation, authenticity, and the enrichment of visitor experiences.

Recognising that for Indigenous tourism to be successful and sustainable, Indigenous tourism needs to be based on traditional knowledge, cultures, and practices and it must contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous communities and the environment.

Recognising that Indigenous tourism provides a strong vehicle for cultural understanding, social interaction, and peace.

Recognising that universal Indigenous values underpin intergenerational stewardship of cultural resources and understanding, social interaction, and peace. (Graci et al., 2019, p. 4)

Additionally, with an aim to promote environmental and cultural tourism practice, the representatives at the Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Symposium (2017), formulated the following action principles:

- Recognising the need to acknowledge and understand both the community and ecological feasibility prior to embarking on tourism development.
- Recognising the need for cultural preservation in Indigenous tourism development and to work in collaboration to ensure the preservation of traditional knowledge and the environment.
- Recognising that Indigenous tourism development should be based on intrinsic authenticities and should protect what is sacred to the community.
- Recognising that Indigenous tourism development should be focused on reciprocity and that open communication and collaboration between Indigenous communities, non-indigenous communities, and tourism industry stakeholders is essential.
- Recognising the need to mentor and support Indigenous youth and future leaders to ensure that there is capacity, self-determination, and continuance in the values of the community in Indigenous tourism development.
- Recognising the important role of education in Indigenous tourism development including experiential hands-on learning opportunities, place-based learning, and exposure to best practices.
- Recognising that financial resources need to be identified, secured, and accessible in order to enable tourism development priorities of Indigenous communities and businesses. (Graci et al., 2019, p. 4)

These two declarations identify the importance of developing Indigenous ecotourism in line with these principles. Indigenous ecotourism should hold true to the principles identified in the Declarations and provide benefits to the local community while protecting the natural and cultural environment.

**Elements of Indigenous ecotourism**

In order for Indigenous ecotourism to be successful it must incorporate the following elements: be community focused, authentic, nature based, focus on partnerships, collaboration, and sustainability.
**Community focused**

Given the close ties between Indigenous peoples and nature, ecotourism widely depends on the ‘sustainability’ aspect in regard to tourism development (Nepal, 2004). Wachtel (1989) described sustainability as the building block for community development, that makes the people more aware of what they have and the long-term ripple effect of the short-term choices they make. Indigenous ecotourism explores the ways of putting sustainable concepts into practice, providing the best micro-solutions (Wheeler, 1991, p. 93).

Scheyvens (1999) argues that ecotourism ventures should only be deemed successful if local communities equitably share the benefits of the emerging ecotourism activities. The United Nations (2007) has also asserted the importance of community empowerment and participation, as well as the need for strong political leadership to ensure consensus building for sustainable Indigenous tourism development. Carr, Ruhanen, and Whitford (2016) explored an array of issues pertaining to sustainable Indigenous tourism and reinstated the capacity of tourism as a powerful tool for realising the potential of Indigenous community development. Carr et al. (2016) highlights the positive impacts of capacity building and the negative realities of commodification on Indigenous tourism development. The authors believe that this empowerment could successively help Indigenous communities gain global leadership within the tourism sector (Carr et al., 2016).

**Authenticity**

Indigenous ecotourism relies on delivering culturally authentic experiences as important contributors to Indigenous heritage. According to Paulauskaite, Powell, Coca-Stefaniak, and Morrison (2017) ‘authenticity’ is a core feature for experiencing and sharing economies through psychological and spiritual philosophies. Arguably, it is a prominent trend that has caused a ‘tourist-to-traveller shift’ by providing more opportunities to have meaningful interactions with locals (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Indigenous cultural tourism ensures authenticity through active involvement of Indigenous peoples in the formulation and delivery of their travel experience (ITAC, 2016). In addition to this, Indigenous cultural tourism also incorporates an experience that is appropriate, respectful, and true to the Indigenous culture being portrayed (ITAC, 2016).

**Nature based**

Nature-based tourism is a core component of ecotourism that integrates many trends relative to a variety of outdoor recreational activities and adventure travel. Nature-based tourism can be defined as any form of tourism that mainly motivates travellers to observe and appreciate nature as well as the cultural manifestations in the area (UNWTO, 2002). According to the UNWTO (2002), the attributes of nature-based tourism can be broken down as follows:

- Interpretational and educational features;
- Most commonly but not exclusively, organised by specialised tour operators for smaller groups of travelers;
- Mitigating the negative implications of tourism on the socio-cultural and natural environment;
- Support the in-situ maintenance of the natural areas utilised as ecotourism attractions by:
Generating economic benefits for host communities, organizations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes;

- Providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities;
- Increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists”. (UNWTO, 2002)

A growing body of literature has indicated that nature-based tourism possesses a strong potential to positively benefit the traveler’s mental health and wellbeing. There are several studies that indicate a need for service providers and policymakers to collaborate and partner, in order to increase access to, and develop nature-based recreation and travel to reap more therapeutic benefits (Lackey et al., 2019).

**Partnerships**

A partnership refers to the coming together of many different stakeholders who will pool their resources, knowledge and expertise to produce tangible solutions to their shared problems (Graci, 2016; Adu-Ampong, 2017; Towner, 2018). Partnerships and collaboration can be a tool to help Indigenous communities and other traditionally disadvantaged groups achieve success in developing sustainable tourism in their communities (Carr et al., 2016). These benefits can include improved capacity for livelihood building and community engagement, feelings of accomplishment for the community, cultural pride, and recovery and entrepreneurial and creative confidence (Espeso-Molinero, Carlisle, & Pastor-Alfonso, 2016, p. 1333). Partnerships can also be valuable in Indigenous communities since forming partnerships may procure more resources to use for the development of tourism (Olsen, 2016). Governments and DMOs may be able to provide funding or resources to help Indigenous tourism businesses be established or develop. For example, partnering with a DMO to receive support in advertising may widen the reach of the tourism product or service which will generate more business. In addition, non-Indigenous partners will benefit from including Indigenous partners and gaining access to their perspectives and products which are increasingly in demand (ITAC, 2019).

The literature on Indigenous experience in partnerships advocate for more inclusive partnerships, appropriate and considerate representations of culture, “bottom-up” approaches to policy formulation and implementation, and increased benefits directly impacting Indigenous communities (Olsen, 2016; Espeso-Molinero et al., 2016). By making these partnership goals explicit, it is more likely that Indigenous communities will be able to benefit from an ecotourism partnership based on trust and respect rather than be exploited for their desirable tourism products and services.

**Focus on sustainability**

Indigenous ecotourism has a focus on sustainability from an environmental and resource perspective. Biodiversity and resource conservation are primary goals of Indigenous ecotourism in many cases in Canada. For example, many lodges such as the Spirit Bear Ecolodge in British Columbia and Cree Village Ecolodge in Ontario have been developed with sustainability goals in mind that focus on water, energy, biodiversity, waste, and supply chain. Low-impact forms of tourism consisting of animal and marine life viewing are conducted with minimal impact on the natural environment and promote education in regards to conservation and cultural practices. This can also lead to the development of conservation areas that can be managed by the Indigenous communities themselves.
Case studies

Given the close ties between Indigenous peoples and nature, ecotourism widely depends on the ‘sustainability’ aspect in regards to tourism development (Nepal, 2004). Sustainable development has become the buzzword in the tourism industry and particularly in tourism research. Indigenous ecotourism that puts sustainable concepts to practice provide the best micro-solutions (Wheeler, 1991). Best practices can help identify a potential tourism opportunity, the impact of tourism on communities and develop sustainable business models (Tides Canada, 2018). Two case studies will be discussed that exemplify best practices in Indigenous ecotourism: Tundra North Tours in Inuvik, Northwest Territories and Spirit Bear Ecolodge in Klemtu, British Columbia.

**Tundra North Tours**

Tundra North Tours (TNT) is an Indigenous-owned and -operated tour operator that provides authentic Indigenous tourism experiences in Inuvik, Northwest Territories. TNT was founded by Kylik Kisoun Taylor with a vision of preserving Indigenous culture, providing work opportunities for Indigenous peoples, and connecting resources to Indigenous lands. The owner of TNT believes that tourism is a gateway for non-Indigenous people to explore the Indigenous culture (K. Taylor, personal communication, 2018). Tundra North Tours conduct adventure tours with an educational focus. Their tourism is low impact and consists of immersing tourists in the way of life in the Arctic. Tourists learn to make Igloos, participate in traditional forms of food preparation, learn about Indigenous culture, and live on the land. Tundra North Tours is an example of an Indigenous ecotourism product owned by an Indigenous entrepreneur. The tourism product is focused on community wellbeing, capacity building, and sustainability.

**Community based:** Tundra North Tours has created an opportunity for Inuvialuit people to share their traditions through tourism. TNT created itineraries that maintain the safety and cultural integrity of the Indigenous community and provide a source of income for local residents seeking employment as a tour guide. Kylik Kisoun Taylor also believes that, “It is always easy to find a solution when it is an Indigenous owned company, because we are more community based and helps us more in a financial way. Sharing culture and promoting culture is the biggest benefit for Tundra north tours (K. Taylor, personal communication, 2018). Tundra North Tours inspires Inuvialuit youth and Indigenous youth across Canada to embrace their culture by showing that it is possible to be successful and make a living through sharing the Indigenous way of life. TNT instills a sense of pride and empowerment in knowing that people seek out and support Indigenous tourism.

**Authenticity:** Visitors experience authentic Indigenous cuisine, culture, and traditions as a result of the close-knit communities of the North. TNT and their guests are welcomed by the Inuvialuit community which allows for a local experience. TNT incorporates cultural experiences that are based off of the way of the land and the people residing on it. TNT has created blogs specifically describing the adventures many visitors can partake in. To ensure authenticity, participants are able to discover the history of the burial site of Albert Johnson known as the Mad Trapper of Rat River or taste different Indigenous delectable foods such as Muktuk often made from the skin and blubber of the beluga whale—a staple food of the Inuit diet as it contains healthy concentration of Vitamins C and D.

**Nature based:** TNT focuses on sustainability in their operations through having low impact tourism such as winter camping, compost toilets, and living off the grid. The tours include activities such as reindeer herding, winter camping, overnight camping in an Igloo, ice fishing,
and other low-impact activities. There is a focus on having guests immerse themselves in the local culture and participating in traditional activities such as igloo building and traditional food preparation. Tourists live on the land at the camp and experience the way of life in the Arctic.

**Partnership/Collaboration:** TNT has partnered with many other Indigenous tourist companies to combine their tours and offer a larger variety of experiences. They have partnered with Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada, Spectacular Northwest Territories and World Indigenous Tourism Alliance (WITA) to combine tours and provide a wider product offering. Tundra North Tours has also partnered with universities to provide a transformative experience for students from Canada and internationally.

**Focus on sustainability:** Tundra North Tours ethos is focused on sustainability of both the culture and land. Tundra North Tours is incorporating food security into their current business plan with the development of a greenhouse and farm. The purpose of the farm is to grow fresh produce and herbs for the local community and to assist in the creation of a sustainable food system in the Arctic region. Tundra North Tours also practice sustainability initiatives at the camp with composting toilets, low impact accommodations and using locally sourced products. Tundra North Tours is an example of an Indigenous tourism business that is focused on capacity building, preservation of culture, and cross-cultural education.

### Spirit Bear Lodge

Spirit Bear Lodge provides a unique wildlife experience with local Kitasoo guides (Destination Canada, 2019). Located in the remote coastal village of Klemtu, in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia, this unique lodge takes visitors on an authentic cultural journey in search of the rare and beautiful Spirit Bear (ITAC, 2019). The Spirit Bear Lodge specialises in bear viewing and their experienced tour guides have an intimate knowledge of the behaviour and movement patterns of bears. In addition, Spirit Bear provides tours of culturally significant sites including the ‘Big House’ where visitors learn about the First Nations culture that has flourished in this region for thousands of years. In the 1990s, increasing media awareness of the Spirit Bear began to draw wildlife enthusiasts to this BC region. The ongoing interest in the bears prompted the local community to examine the viability of expanding and diversifying tourism and as a result, the Kitasoo Development Corporation (KDC) was created (ITAC, 2019).

**Community-based:** Spirit Bear Lodge is owned and operated by the community. The lodge is a way to increase economic development in the community as well as providing opportunities for capacity development and preservation of culture. Spirit Bear Lodge empowers youth through education and training. Through a local program, the lodge trains youth and provides local employment opportunities to high school graduates.

**Authenticity:** The Spirit Bear Lodge is owned and operated by the Kitasoo/Xai’xais First Nation. The exterior of the Spirit Bear Lodge pays homage to the traditional longhouses built by West Coast First Nations. The lodge is certified by the Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC as an Authentic Aboriginal tourism product. The certification is awarded to Aboriginal owned tourism programs that have made the commitment to excellence, quality, safety, hospitality, and cultural integrity (Coastal Funds, 2018).

**Nature based:** The Kitasoo developed environmental protocols, identified and protected areas, and implemented eco-based management philosophies into any extractive or non-extractive resource plans (Lemelin et al., 2015). With the help of conservation groups such as Valhalla Wilderness Society, Raincoast Conservation Fund, Greenpeace, and many others, the council and the people of Klemtu planned to protect the ecosystems and wildlife that
make up one of the most biodiverse places on the planet (Lemelin et al., 2015). One of the programs currently in place is the Watchmen Program. Employing two full-time seasonal band members, the Watchmen Program is an initiative developed by BC’s Coastal First Nations communities to control and participate in the stewardship and monitoring of their traditional lands and waters.

**Partnership and collaboration:** In 2010, the KDC invested over $1 million into the Spirit Bear Lodge to hire a general manager, expand the lodge by constructing an additional six rooms, purchase another vessel, and implement an international marketing plan (Coastal Funds, 2018). Spirit Bear Lodge also partners with conservation groups to ensure sustainable operations as well as several DMOs and tourism organisations to promote and market their business.

**Focus on sustainability**

Spirit Bear Lodge is now an integral part of the conservation economy in the Great Bear Rainforest (GBR). The Great Bear Rainforest is now recognised as a globally significant conservation model, and according to National Geographic, ‘the wildest place in North America’. Spirit Bear Lodge is a showcase community tourism business in the Great Bear Rainforest, and a recognised best practice model for Indigenous community-based tourism in Canada as evidenced by their winning the Indigenous Adventure Award at the 2017 International Indigenous Tourism Conference hosted by the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. The award recognises best practice in Indigenous Adventure travel with a focus on responsibility and sustainability (Linking Tourism and Conservation, 2020).

These case studies exemplify that for Indigenous ecotourism to be successful it should incorporate community, authenticity, be nature based, focus on sustainability, and include partnerships and collaboration. These fall in line with the principles of ecotourism and Indigenous philosophies and values. Indigenous values that focus on honouring nature and culture, are in line with the concept of ecotourism.

**Conclusion**

Ecotourism is a natural complement to Indigenous tourism development. As ecotourism focuses on being nature based with a component of education, culture, and sustainability this is congruent with the values and beliefs of many Indigenous tourism operations in Canada. Indigenous ecotourism can lead to an increase in capacity building in a community, cultural connectedness, cross cultural relationships and education, conservation, an increase in biodiversity, and a strong economic recovery in many communities. In a world post-COVID-19, it is especially pertinent for Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs to develop tourism that is focused on the facets of ecotourism. The world needs global healing and Indigenous tourism that is authentic and nature based. Indigenous ecotourism is by nature small scale and sustainable. The benefits from Indigenous ecotourism are immense for both community, the planet, and the tourists. Indigenous ecotourism can be transformational, leading to a greater understanding of the need for environmental and cultural preservation and a greater understanding about the need for reconciliation. It also exemplifies the approach to tourism that is high quality and focused on yield rather then numbers. The case for Indigenous ecotourism is strong in terms of benefits and the principles of the Larrakia and Naut’sa+mawt Declaration should be incorporated to continue to build a strong Indigenous tourism industry in Canada.
References


Indigenous Ecotourism in Canada


