



Youth in Community Economic Development

QQS Projects Society

Koeye Lodge: A Heiltsuk

Enterprising Non-Profit



Photos by Ian McAllister -Raincoast

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By encouraging our youth to re-embrace their culture and their traditional lands, we hope to open their eyes and hearts to their responsibility to care for and preserve it for generations to come. We are dedicated to helping our youth see themselves and their environment in a new way.

— Elroy White, Camp Director 2001

This profile is one of fifteen stories examining youth involvement in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been produced as part of the Canadian CED Network's efforts to encourage effective practices in youth leadership and engagement to enhance the social and economic conditions of Canada's communities.

This work was supported by Coast Capital Savings Credit Union, the Muttart Foundation, Social Development Canada, and Industry Canada.

QQS Society is a registered charity and enterprising non-profit established by the Heiltsuk First Nation on the remote central coast of BC in 1999. The Society was established to support Heiltsuk youth, culture and the environment and is backed by the Hemas, the traditional hereditary leadership, as well as the wider Heiltsuk community. The QQS Society operates the Koeye Lodge and the Culture/Science camp programs located at the mouth of the Koeye River, 30 miles south of Bella Bella.

Koeye is pronounced "Kway" and means "bird sitting on the water." Koeye is also considered a centre of Heiltsuk spiritual energy. It is here that Heiltsuk youth celebrate their cultural history and renew their spiritual connection to the land that has sustained their ancestors for centuries. The Koeye programs, including the Lodge and its programs for ecotourism and healing are youth directed by young Heiltsuk people in the QQS Society. The programs promote healing, education, capacity building and community development.

This profile will outline how this remote First Nation community is providing space for incubating youth-led CED initiatives, and at the same time strengthening its capacity for self-government and entry into a conservation economy through running Koeye Lodge as an enterprising non-profit.

Context

The QQS Society holds title to Koeye Lodge, which

is located in a pristine estuary that has been called one of the most beautiful wild places on earth. The Lodge was purchased after the Heiltsuk young people

approached the community and implored the elders to protect the Koeye and the Lodge. The Koeye is part of Heiltsuk First Nations territory located in the middle of the central coast and the newly partially protected "Great Bear Rainforest." The GBR lies between the Alaska panhandle and northern Vancouver Island. The Heiltsuk First Nation has been working in conjunction with the other First Nations in the region, as well as with the conservation organizations and government. On Feb 8th, 2006, the Heiltsuk gained the first stage of protection for numerous pristine rainforest valleys on the central coast.

The central coast region of BC is very sparsely populated; 1,500 people live in the Heiltsuk community of Bella Bella and other residents in the region live in small communities like Klemtu with a population of 400, Ocean Falls with 35, and Shearwater with 45 people. The economy of the area has historically been based on resource extraction, primarily fishing and logging. The economic benefits from these activities have generally not accrued to the local people, and both jobs and capital have flowed out of the region.

Presently unemployment rates range between 50% and 80% in the coastal First Nation communities. This is in part due to the fact that traditional economies of First Nations were almost entirely marine-based, and many Heiltsuk people are not in favor of large-scale industrial forestry in their territories. Low timber prices, high labour and transportation costs, outdated regulations that require cutting of uneconomical timber, and 30% duties imposed by the United States as part of the softwood lumber dispute, have left the coastal B.C. forest industry in a deep financial crisis.

History

First Nations have un-ceded and protected rights in public lands and British Columbia is one of the few remaining regions in Canada where few treaties have been signed with First Nations

peoples. This has created long-term legal uncertainty over ownership of public lands. In 2001, the coastal First Nations and the provincial governments signed two historic agreements establishing an ecosystem-based management (EBM) framework for the area. These agreements will guide planning and forest management activities to protect certain pristine valleys in Heiltsuk territory from industrial logging and mining and to defer logging in other pristine valleys while further analysis and negotiations were conducted. These negotiations concluded a second phase on Feb 10, 2006 when the BC government placed a significant portion of these highly significant ecosystems under a new level of 'conservancies protection' - a first step in respecting First Nations sovereignty and support for the creation of a conservation economy.

QSS's Koeye Lodge is located in the very heart of this pristine area and the Heiltsuk are in the middle of their own process to create a unique conservation economy to preserve their home and more than 50% of their traditional territory. There is much to steward as the ancient forests surrounding Koeye support amazing biodiversity and species richness that includes grizzlies, black bears, white Kermode bears, coastal wolf populations, 6 million migratory birds, and 3,000 genetically distinct salmon stocks. The valley bottoms on the central coast sustain more biomass than any other terrestrial ecosystem on earth. Salmon are a key species in these "salmon forests" and play a critical role in the healthy functioning of the marine, terrestrial, and freshwater systems.

Larry Jorgenson, a driving force behind the QSS Society recounts that: "The QSS Society was incorporated in 1999 but we'd been operating as a non-registered society for about 10 years before that. I and a couple of others in the community had been asked to try to set up some programs for some seriously at-risk kids that needed to get out of the community and be more connected to their environment and culture. So I got a grant, and hired a group of young people 15-17 yrs

old to be role models for these kids – and we organized to take them on extended camping trips. Every weekend we'd go hiking, camping, food and medicine gathering, and exploring old sites and artifacts. It evolved to be a successful model for the kids because they often became the older teen helpers over the years. We decided to formalize the programs, and so we decided we'd better formalize the society as well.

“Rather than carrying the tents and supplies all around, we decided we needed a base. So we built a series of cabins around the territory to encourage families to get back out on the land, because most people had given up their traditional family camps by then. We got grants and turned it into a whole youth training program where we would teach kids building skills. We got permission from forestry to get some logs and went out and got the trees, and brought them into town to mill so the kids got to learn the whole process. And then we went and built these 10 cabins all around our traditional territory so we could use them for families that might be harvesting food, for isolation cabins for justice, for our camps and for family programs – there was a multitude of uses of the cabins.

“Because the Koeye cabin was so popular, we built a second cabin so that we could have boys and girls groups at the same time. Then a lodge was put upon land we did not even know was privately owned, but it wasn't operating because we had opposed the granting of a foreshore lease to protect the estuary. Inevitably over the years we had a few conflicts with the lodge owners, about landing planes in the river near the camp and them did not liking our kids paddling around. The kids asked why we didn't just buy the lodge. Because we were on the land doing so much conservation work, we were well connected with the conservation organizations including Raincoast, the Land Conservancy in Victoria, and EcoTrust. We put together a package to raise the money to buy the lodge for \$1.2 million.

“We were able to get the money from the Buffett Brothers, and so the lodge became Heiltsuk property; we bought the lodge and the 80 logged hectares it was on. The Band Council and the Chiefs Council both decided that the QQS Society would hold the lodge – it would become a social acquisition rather than a political acquisition. We, the QQS Society, actually hold title to the lodge and the property and we were left to manage it – so we set about converting it to a resource centre to support the camps' and other family programs.”

Activities in CED

Larry explains the evolution of the Lodge as an enterprising non-profit run by youth, and the QQS's philosophy.

“Everything we do there at Koeye is as a teaching/training program. So when we built the Big House, we said, Okay let's hire a guy to build the Big House and then hire four young people who have no skills at all who have dropped out of school... and then they would go and get some funding and they would work with him to build a Big House – then they would own it, it would be theirs. Then we would do the same thing with getting young people who were interested in learning to carve, we'd get an artist and do the same thing. And we would get them involved in making tools, and getting the wood, carving etc. Any building project we do – even the medicine gardens - is directed with our young people. We have a group with Briony Penn and Nancy Turner, two of our medicine people, and Jessie who is nineteen, who organize all the restoration. The young people are the ones doing it [the medicine gardens and the whole restoration plan]. Young people are doing all the landscape work.”

Larry continues to explain the programs the Society runs at Koeye during the summer season. “We usually start in May. We run a couple of sessions of “Camp Hope” for kids struggling with addiction problems. We bring in three outside staff for that program. We do two family camps

for families who are struggling. We take 3 generations of the family down there so we can include grandparents and we use the lodge facility and the camp cabins. We do a week-long training/retreat with them – the kids, parents, and grandparents. They learn to cook food together, to eat, play, laugh together; they do communication exercises, feedback exercises and so on, learning from each other. It's a fairly structured program. We do at least 2 of these family camps during May/June as well. These are families that are identified within the community by our resource agencies. Part of the staff are our young college students who look after the cultural and recreation parts.

"Then we move into summer programs. This summer we have a group arriving from Europe and other regions of the world through a youth organization. So they arrive – three groups of 12, and they come for 2-week periods over the summer. They're all 18-25. They will pay their own way here but we will look after them while they're here. They will landscape the Big House and do a lot up upgrading work for us down there. They'll be there during the same time of the Koeeye Science and Culture camps are going on (8 camps) and they will be part of the camp program as helpers, witnesses and teachers.

"We do a Youth Leadership Camp, usually before we start the regular summer camps. We identify 12 kids in the community who are doing really well and who naturally fit the leadership role, and they go through a program with all of the camp staff. It's a team-building experience – we do challenge courses, competitions, marathons, and lighting fires with no matches, and that sort of stuff. It's a real team-building program to encourage them to be the way they are. They're all 14-17 years old.

"During the summer, we have some ecotourism at the lodge. We bring in some groups. For instance we'll bring in a group from the Netherlands; we have two groups coming from Korea. It provides a

good cultural mix for our kids as well – breakfast at the lodge is an interactive time for the kids and the visitors. The kids all hike to lodge for breakfast to start their day off in a healthy way.

"Some kids find such solace in the earlier programs at Koeeye, particularly in "Camp Hope", they sometimes want to be away from the community and they want to be doing something useful. Normally we would have a few of them working at the lodge all summer. Sometimes it is voluntary; sometimes we pay them to do it. They're always welcome; they are all welcome to be there. So if somebody from the community needs to get out of the community they can always go to the lodge. As a result we are going to have to build a new staff quarters.

"Our goal is to have 16 paid jobs between the lodge and the camp. The spin-offs are things like the family making \$1200 a week to run boats back and forth, we've got all the charters, that's \$350 a trip and guides, first aid people, people transporting others back and forth. We buy all our groceries and fuel from the community [Bella Bella]. All of the money that we do raise is recycled back into the community. There is a huge spin-off in terms of employment here just to organize the groups and the kids. It's fairly significant since we have bear and fish guides as well.

"All of our staff have to apply every year, and must submit an educational plan for themselves with that application. They also have to demonstrate that they did something during the winter that would give them better skills, like getting their Bronze Medallion. About 80% of our staff are Heiltsuk students and we want to encourage them.

"Then we set up a website for all the Koeeye kids and guests, to stay in touch all winter. The kids run it all. They can post pictures and questions/answers, and have online discussions. They had a big thing when one of our camp Elders died and they were able to post memories and support each other even though they were

spread all over at various schools and universities. Everybody refers to it as the Koeye family!”

Youth Inclusion in CED

Larry explains QQS’s philosophy regarding youth inclusion. “Our whole mandate is to support our youth, our culture, and our environment. These three things are all essential to each other – they’re the same thing to us. That’s our focus – our youth will drive what we do. We only purchased the lodge because the kids wanted it. We only built a Big House because they wanted a place where they could practice their culture more effectively; it’s a 3,000 square foot traditional Big House. They built it.

“Our board has three people in their early-twenties on it – they were all under twenty when we started it, though some of them are over twenty now. They were basically the people who were the leaders of our programs. We only hired young people to run the programs. All of our camp staff are students. They’re all young people that we want to be role models for the next generation. Everybody on staff at Koeye is under 25 (except a few of the lodge staff). We hire about 12 youths per year, who are all students. We also have students on the board of directors – there are three of them, two chiefs, two tribal council members, and two community members.

“One of the things we’ve started doing annually is a Drug & Alcohol Camp, for kids with drug & alcohol problems. We didn’t like the name of the camp because it creates a label. So we put this issue forward to the youth to see what the design for the program should be, and what the name should be. The first group to go through the program decided that it should be called “Camp Hope.” We had all of them do evaluations about what worked/what didn’t work, how long it should be, and provided a projection of what the camp should look like. They

were all 13-16 years old. They really set the stage for how that program operates. They even established that we needed to have on-going weekly follow-up sessions, which we do have now almost a year later. Half our staff are high-school students (16-19), and the other half are college/university students. It’s really a way of helping them with their education but also encouraging them to look at resource management and social services.”

Outcomes and Evaluation

We asked Larry about the impacts and outcomes from the programs at Koeye, and whether or not the programs are encouraging the youth to return to the community.

“Totally. The first thing we noticed is that our staff started going further in school, and got new direction. Until that point almost everybody from here that went into post-secondary studies either went into First Nations studies or teaching. Once the camps got going, and our staff went to college, now we have people in Archaeology, Marine Biology, Forestry, Child and Youth Care, and so on. So that was the first time we saw the impact we were having. These are the first people that are coming through our programs, with these backgrounds that are now returning to the community.

“[The camps and QQS] have definitely allowed them to return because they are coming back and replacing people who aren’t from here. I guess the other spin-off is that we have also really noticed that the kids who go through the program tend to want to stay in school. They want to do the kinds of things that the staff down there have been able to do; they want to be the next role models. This includes both genders.

“We started doing some formal research with Camp Hope. We do a pre-assessment and a post-assessment – not at the end of the program, but 8 months later. We’re doing a giant research project with ‘Power to Be’ and the University of Victoria. We’re starting to look at how we can do better and more meaningful evaluations.

“The other piece that I haven’t mentioned yet is that we are very heavy into research. The main reason is because we want our kids to be exposed to research. So we have a protocol – everyone doing research in Heiltsuk territory has to be prepared to give time to the camps as well. The guys who are doing the nitrogen dispersal study with bugs and birds, they all come down to the camps and do theme camps. We might have a wolf camp. That’s the time that Chris Dairmont and the folk from Raincoast might come down and we’ll do a forest stewardship camp- they’ll sponsor that camp and get to come and participate. Right now we’re planning with UNBC to do an archaeological dig in Koeye with the field school, so the kids can be part of that and part of that agreement is the guys will put a dig wall up. We’re also doing a research project with UBC regarding hydrology to look at the water system from the top of the watershed to the drop-off. Another group is bringing in six scientists this summer to develop watershed assessment tools for making management decisions. The kids can then learn what a healthy ecosystem looks like. We are also doing a global contaminant pathways study too; we’ve got air filters in there. We’re also doing a grizzly bear project with the Raincoast people. We tagged into that – we got a grant, and the kids are helping us in a fish contaminant study. We are catching the fish, then we send them out for analysis and they get to monitor the air filters that are part of that, and they get to go catch the salmon. It’s really neat.”

Lessons Learned

This profile provides an example of how a remote First Nation is engaging young people in the development of a traditional territory to both create opportunities for future generations while renewing cultural traditions and creating opportunities for youth to take on both leadership and stewardship roles in their community.

We learned the importance of co creating programs with the children and youth. “We couldn’t set up programs for the kids, but rather with the kids”

We had to move outside of our normal lifestyles and our normal roles. By going out on the land and going into the camps, we could essentially start a new society where the old roles didn’t exist – we all needed each other out there.

We became an “Enterprising non-profit” and we require everyone doing research in our territory to sign a research protocol that ensures they share their research and their knowledge.

Our success is due to the fact that this has been a community effort, a Society effort. Everybody benefits from this – everybody supports it. The fact that all of the community owns this is what has made it successful

We bring in the international volunteer groups to ensure that we engage ourselves with the rest of the world.

— Larry Jorgenson, QQS Society

Unique Success Factors, Policies and Lessons

When we asked Larry about what he felt QQS had done well, he replied: “I realized that we couldn’t set up programs for the kids, but rather we needed to do it with the kids. That was our mainstay. We set out with an idea of “this is what they need.” And that didn’t last very long at all. We sat down and said, “how can we do this”? We discussed it with the source -the

kids - then we got to the bottom of things. We decided to do things collectively. That took some power out of our roles, but it is more effective and meaningful now.

“Also, in order for the community and us to do that effectively, we had to move outside of our normal lifestyles. Our roles were too defined in the community. By going out on the land and into the camps we could essentially start a new society where the old roles didn’t exist – we all needed each other out there. In town there are roles that we have with our peer group and with elders, but when we get out there it all changes. We had to find a way to break out of our daily roles.

“We’ve started selling ourselves now as an ‘Enterprising Non-profit.’ We’re not there yet – we still raise \$250,000 a year. A lot of that money is for training programs, and for buying equipment. The lodge isn’t at capacity, and even if it was it wouldn’t generate enough to fully support the camps, but it’s taken some of the burden off. People can rent out the lodge at various rates; we’re not the only ones running programs there. Last summer, the Native Ed. Centre ran a program, and we gave them the community rate to use the lodge.

“We are looking at other ways of making ends meet. One of the ways is that we would sell some of the camp spaces to outside people. We’re considering working with some of the neighbouring lodges to collaborate. We’re looking at marketing a Koeye product such as bracelets, mosquito repellent, “Koeye clay.” This part is being managed by people under 20!

“I think the main thing to remember is that this has been a community effort, a society effort by Child and Family Services, Justice, School, Health, and the College. Everybody benefits from this – everybody supports it. That’s always been the case. The fact that all of the community owns this is what has made it successful. It gives the community ownership but also ensures that they’re interests are being served.

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Canadian CED Network
211-620 View Street,
Victoria, BC V8W 1J6
Telephone (250) 386-9980
Toll free 1 (877) 202-2268
Fax (250) 386-9984

Emerging Leaders Coordinator
fbrodhead@ccednet-rcdec.ca

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en français.*

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“It has been helpful to work with organizations like the ‘Power to Be’¹; they have had a big impact on the kids at the camp as well. Lastly, by bringing in the international volunteer groups it helps to make sure we don’t isolate ourselves from the rest of the world – to ensure that we engage ourselves with the rest of the world.”

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Contact:

Larry Jorgenson, QQS Society
P.O Box 786, Waglisla, BC, V0T Z20
Telephone: 1 (877) 957-2381
Lodge: (250) 957-2567
www.koeyelodge.com/welcome.html

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¹ *The Power to Be* is an Adventure Therapy Society based out of Victoria that has been taking children with cancer to the Koeye camp for the past three summers. See www.thepowertobe.ca