

Implementing the Trans Canada Trail 2017 connectivity plan in Northern Ontario, Canada: Tourism, hiking trails and rural development

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Despite a long history of natural resource extraction, many Northern Ontario communities are beginning to see tourism as a means of regional redevelopment in response to fluctuating natural resource extraction sectors (Johnston & Payne 2005). As such, Northwestern Ontario's burgeoning tourism industry was developed in the 1990's through the addition of hunting, fishing and cottaging operations (Johnston & Payne 2005). Boyd & Butler (1999) remarked that Northern Ontario has "a specific Canadian identity and image ... [and] ... inherent natural appeal" (pp. 123) that draws tourists. However, infrastructure is minimal, and "with respect to trails there is an urgent need to develop a more extensive system and network to improve access, as well as open up the region to a range of ecotourist types" (Boyd & Butler, 1999, pp. 123). The success of tourism development projects in the regions are dependent upon their ability to garner sufficient social capital, including government support, and funds to cover capital and other project costs, and to foster sustained buy-in from local stakeholders.

This paper examines the potential economic benefits of, and stakeholder engagement in, the proposed development of a rail trail in Northwestern Ontario, Canada. The Trans Canada Trail (TCT) was founded in September 1992 in Prince Edward Island by Bill Pratt and Pierre Camu. The Trail has since become one of the largest volunteer projects in Canada; once completed, it will be an estimated 22,500kms. From 1992–1994, TCT established relationships with trail organizations and user groups across Canada. Now, TCT is developed at the provincial and territorial level with trail organizations in every province and territory assisting locally. Over 400 local trail groups, municipalities and conservation authorities build and manage local sections of the Trail. Provincial and territorial organizations, i.e. Trans Canada Trail Ontario (TCTO) have provincial or regional coordinators who facilitate development with local organizations. Through its head office in Montreal, Canada, TCT brands the trail and provides funds for local trail construction.

In 2009, TCT undertook a Trails Master Plan called the "Connection 2017 Strategy" which identified 200 gaps in the trail, totaling 6,000 kilometers. This document formed the basis for provincial coordination to connect the gaps. There are currently 41 gaps in Northwestern Ontario equalling 1500 km, one of which is being addressed through the development of the Kinghorn Project. Initiated in 2008, the proposed TCT Kinghorn Rail Trail will span 111 kilometers from Nipigon to Thunder Bay, passing through the communities of Red Rock, Dorion and Shuniah along the abandoned Canadian National (CN) Kinghorn rail line

(Figure 1) and paralleling much of the proposed Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area (LSNMCA).

The development of this multiuse recreational trail is being completed through a partnership between local stakeholders, trail users, and communities including representatives from TCTO, the municipalities of Nipigon, Red Rock, Dorion, Shuniah and Thunder Bay, the Ontario Trails Council, various trail user groups, including the Voyageur Trails Association, and private citizens. These groups have varying levels of representation on the Kinghorn Project Working Group and the Kinghorn Project Advisory Committee. The project also has a full time Coordinator who reports to the Working Group and facilitates project objectives. Completion of the Kinghorn Project will provide valuable trail infrastructure and create a multi-community tourism attraction within the region; furthermore it will provide valuable connections to other regional trail networks.

Historic and present Kinghorn Project progress was compared to Saarinen's (2006) community based tourism approach and to key drivers of successful regional development (Money Penny, n.d.) in order to evaluate the Project's capacity and to conduct a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

The main strengths of the Kinghorn Project include industrial clustering, a baseline for / of progress, and improved project facilitation skills (ibid). The Advisory Committee and Working Group consist of regional stakeholders, the VTA and CN have signed a Letter of Intent to pursue a lease agreement for the rail bed, and regional tourism operators and trail groups exist who will use and maintain the trail once completed – all of which represent increased cooperation between locals and have the potential to lead to the development of an industrial cluster. The Kinghorn Concept Plan and Feasibility Study created a baseline for progress, and funding was secured for a project coordinator improving project facilitation; the Northern Ontario Trail Coordinator continues to provide mentorship to local trails-based businesses and user groups.

Weaknesses include poor systems thinking (ibid) as evidenced by the inclusion of unrealistic phased development in the feasibility study which was misunderstood by several community representatives and stakeholders who lacked sufficient tourism development knowledge and misunderstood the objectives of a Feasibility Study vs. a Work Plan.

Opportunities related to the Kinghorn Project include capital funding through TCT (50%), funding to develop a Business Plan, support from local development and funding agencies and collaboration among stakeholders. As such, the development of a rail trail presents a significant



Figure 1. Proposed Kinghorn Rail Trail Route

potential economic benefit for the region.

Threats to the completion of the Kinghorn Project include difficulty combining social and financial capital (Monypenny, n.d.), and issues around capacity and governance (Moscardo, 2008). These issues include: dominance of external agents (ibid), difficulty sustaining a competitive advantage (Monypenny, n.d.) with the emergence of the Lake Superior Heritage Coast Project, lack of local skills and tourism knowledge, and lack of an effective regional tourism association (Moscardo, 2008).

Some of the main barriers to enacting a community based tourism approach include the increased time required to make decisions (Moscardo, 2008), resulting in lost funding opportunities combined with difficulties ensuring widespread community and stakeholder representation as well as lack of a defined communication strategy and lack of tourism knowledge and capacity for participation among smaller municipalities and other regional stakeholders.

Support for the Kinghorn project from local community gate keepers, including stakeholder representatives, business owners and government officials, will be the key to the success of this trail development project and will ensure mutually beneficial and effective tourism development. Interconnecting the proposed trail with regional tourism entrepreneurial development will provide opportunities to stimulate regional tourism development in Northwestern Ontario, in addition to providing valuable skill development, career training and future employment opportunities.

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