

# Indigenous Ecotourism in Central British Columbia: The Potential for Building Capacity in the Tl'azt'en Nations Territories

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This article explores the potential for building capacity to plan and develop ecotourism in a traditionally forest-dependent indigenous community in central British Columbia (BC), Canada. It is based on fieldwork conducted in 2001 and 2002, consisting mainly of two community workshops, and a survey of 128 Tl'azt'en Nation households. Results show that there is significant potential for ecotourism development in the Tl'azt'en territory. The Tl'azt'en have a strong desire to be involved in ecotourism; however, they are incognisant of the challenges and opportunities that come with its development. There is a general lack of commitment to a shared responsibility in the planning and management of ecotourism. Four potential obstacles to fully realise the development of ecotourism include the speculation that most commercial 'niches' are already filled; lack of clearly identified target visitor markets; competing interests from other northern BC communities that have similar resources; and stereotypical images of First Nations in Canada. The article suggests several strategies, including the capitalisation of Tl'azt'enne knowledge of the resources, building networks with other aboriginal and non-aboriginal agencies and individuals, exploring opportunities for educating and training the youth in tourism and small enterprise development, and building partnerships with tour operators.

**Keywords:** community perspectives, indigenous ecotourism, natural and cultural heritage, Tl'azt'en First Nations, Canada

## Introduction

Since the publication of *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Smith, 1989) and *Tourism and Indigenous Peoples* (Butler & Hinch, 1996), interest in indigenous tourism development issues has increased significantly. Recent indigenous tourism discussions have focused mainly on aspects of empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999; Sofield, 2003), authenticity (Smith & Ward, 2000; Zeppel, 2002) and sustainability (Nepal, 2002; Zeppel, 1998). Ryan (2000) identifies indigenous peoples, their role within tourism, the nature of their culture as a tourism product, and the associated issues of authorisation as one of the growth topics within tourism literature.

Indigenous tourism is characterised as any tourism product or service that is owned or operated by native peoples (Zeppel, 2002). In the context of indigenous ecotourism, tourism products and services refer to activities that focus on natural and cultural attractions within indigenous territories, and are planned, developed and managed by indigenous peoples. Fennell (1999: 43) considers

ecotourism as a sustainable activity that is primarily focused on 'experiencing and learning about nature ... ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally-oriented.' However, ecotourism as a concept is ambiguous, and has been interpreted to mean different things to different people (Wall, 1997). For the purpose of the discussion here, indigenous ecotourism is defined as an activity and enterprise focused on maintaining the natural and cultural integrity of the land and people where it is developed.

There are conflicting reports about whether the development of indigenous tourism is an essential element of self-determination, or a process to assimilate indigenous societies into the mainstream culture. Those in favour of indigenous involvement in tourism argue that, through the provision of economic stability and the reinstatement of traditional cultural practices, indigenous people can achieve self-determination and self-reliance. It is believed that, by 'showcasing' native culture and values, especially through the art of native storytelling and interpretation, non-indigenous society will gain a fuller understanding and insight of their views, whilst providing indigenous peoples with opportunities to assert their rights and autonomy through economic empowerment (Pfister, 2000; Smith & Ward, 2000). Development of indigenous controlled tourism is expected to bring positive social and economic changes too (Beltran, 2000; Butler & Hinch, 1996; Nepal, 2002). In contrast, critics have argued that indigenous tourism is yet another form of cultural imperialism (Nash, 1989), and an example of Westernised attempts to assimilate indigenous peoples into mainstream societies (Francis, 1992; MacCannell, 1999). Tourism has often proved to be disastrous to the indigenous communities, resulting in their displacement, conflict and violence within the community, and disruptions of social and cultural practices (Colchester, 2004).

Effective marketing strategies, modern communication media, access to information and technology, and the awareness of environmentally friendly tourism practices have made remote communities aware of ecotourism development as a viable economic activity (Howe *et al.*, 1997). In the Canadian context, given that indigenous peoples have lagged behind in economic development and face many social challenges, ecotourism appears to be a viable alternative. Ecotourism development is seen not just as an economic strategy, but also as a means to strengthen First Nations positions in regional and national development policies (TRN, 2003). The development of ecotourism is seen as an integral aspect of this process towards indigenous control, self-reliance and improvement of social and economic conditions. It has been heralded as an alternative, sustainable development initiative particularly in remote communities located in north and central British Columbia (BC). Many First Nations communities in BC have already taken necessary steps to develop ecotourism. A guidebook on native sites published in 1998 estimated that close to 200 First Nations-owned and operated tourism businesses exist in BC (Kramer, 1998). While it is difficult to estimate their current numbers in central BC, there are several notable examples of First Nations-owned and operated tourism businesses, including the 'Ksan Historical Village in Hazelton, Doig River Rodeo in Rose Prarie, Wilp Syoon Wilderness Lodge in Chatham Sound, and Qat'llnagaay Lodge and Heritage Centre in Haida Gwaii (*The Vancouver Sun*, 2001).

This article explores the potential for building capacity to plan and develop ecotourism in a forestry-dependent indigenous community. The community in question is the Tl'azt'en First Nations, comprising four native population bands located in central BC. Analysis of the Tl'azt'en Nations' perspectives of ecotourism development provides valuable insights into economic development opportunities among many indigenous and remote communities in northern BC. In-depth examination of community visions, priorities and preferences provides a guide to implementing sustainable strategies for the First Nations communities. From a scientific perspective, this research provides important knowledge with regard to BC's First Nations' willingness to embrace change and adapt to changing socio-economic circumstances and, in general, contributes to the growing research literature on indigenous tourism.

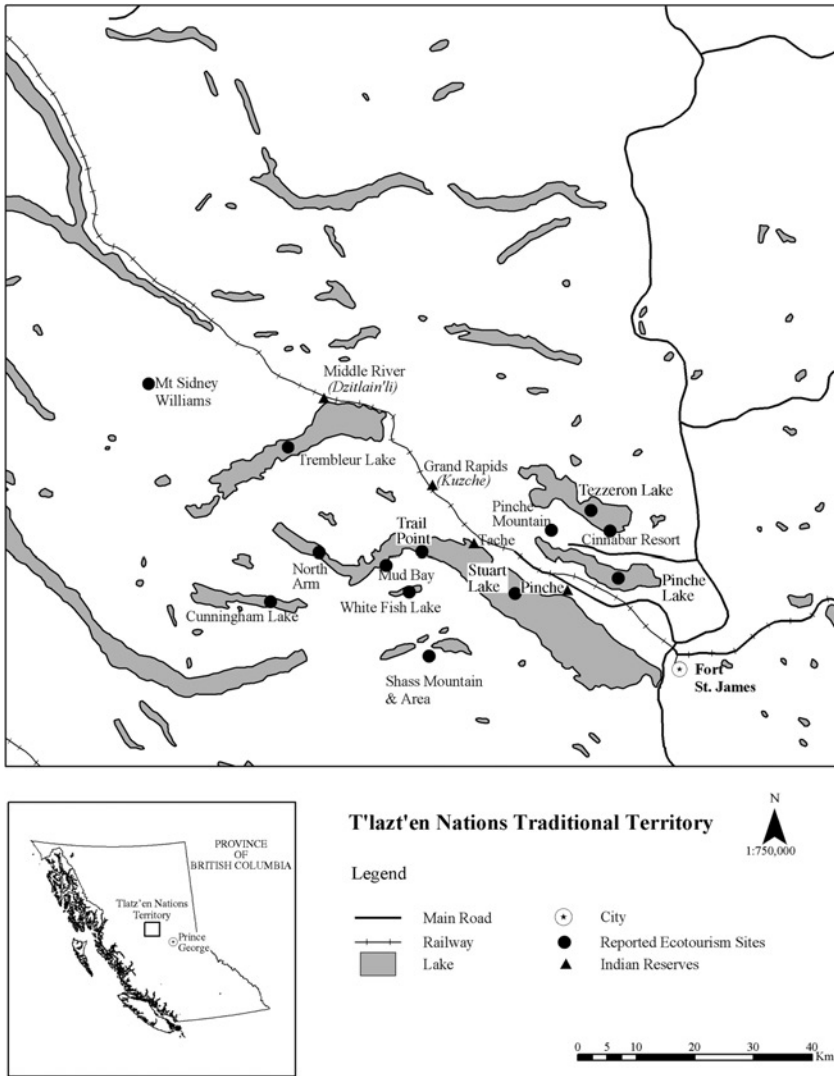
The study is important for two main reasons. First, the alarming scale and speed at which tourism is spreading into remote and peripheral areas, driven by the search for new destinations and marketing of things natural and unspoiled, have become a concern to local communities. Secondly, problems of indigenous peoples, including those related to tourism development, have been recognised at several international fora. While there is no doubt that ecotourism can play an important role in the revival of stagnant economies in many parts of central BC, it must be ensured that ecotourism plans adequately consider the needs, aspirations and values of indigenous communities, and protection of natural resources.

As a point of clarification, the term 'First Nations' is used in this article. Since the Constitution Act 1982 the First Nations of Canada are recognised as Inuit, Métis and Indian (Havemann, 1999); the Tl'azt'en are included in the third category. The term 'indigenous' is used when discussing issues that are common to Aboriginal, native, tribal and other ethnic groups from around the world.

## **Study Area**

The Tl'azt'en Nation, a sub-tribe of the Carrier linguistic group of the Dene (Athapaskan) family, inhabit 47 registered Indian Reserve Lands, spread over approximately 6560 square kilometres in a relatively pristine natural environment in central British Columbia (Morris & Fondahl, 2002). In most Athapaskan languages the word for people is 'dene' sometimes pronounced as 'ne', 't'en', or 'jan' (Brown, 2002). European explorers gave the name 'Carrier' to these people, observing that widows carried the ashes of their deceased husbands during the period of mourning.

The Tl'azt'en Nation territory is situated on the Interior Plateau, bounded on the west by the Coast Mountains, on the north by the Omineca Mountains and on the east by the Rocky Mountains. The territory is approximately 250 km northwest of Prince George and 60 km northwest of Fort St James on the north side of Nak'al Bun (Stuart Lake) (Figure 1). It is dominated by the Sub-boreal Spruce biogeoclimatic zone, combined with parts of the Mountain hemlock and Englemann Spruce-Subalpine Fir zones (Cannings & Cannings, 1996). The climate is continental, with long, cold winters; summers are short with relatively long, warm days. The forests in the region provide a rich habitat for ungulates (moose, deer, caribou and mountain goat), fur-bearing



**Figure 1** Location of potential ecotourism sites in the Tl'azt'en territory, British Columbia

animals (bear, wolf, lynx, beaver, mink, marten etc.), as well as rodents (Brown, 2002). Bird life is abundant, including birds of prey (eagle, hawk, owl), songbirds, grouse, ptarmigan and waterfowl. The streams and lakes in the territory are abundant with trout, char, sturgeon and whitefish.

The majority of Tl'azt'en people reside in four reserve lands, namely Tache, Binche (Pinche), K'uzche (Grand Rapids) and Dzitl'ainli (Middle River), of which Tache is the largest community with 501 residents. Tl'azt'en refers to 'people by the edge of the bay.' Of the total native population of 1281, 82% are under the age of 40, indicating a relatively younger population compared with other similar communities in the region. Approximately 641 members

live on reserve lands, while the rest are scattered throughout central BC, with a large cluster in and around Fort St James. Oral history suggests that for thousands of years prior to the 18th century arrival of Europeans, the Tl'azt'en existed as a hunter-gatherer society (Morris, 1999). The traditional way of life of the Carrier people has been described elsewhere (Jenness, 1943, cited in Brown, 2002), while a contemporary overview of the traditional livelihood of the Carrier is found in Furniss (1995). Wildlife was, and still is, an important aspect of the Tl'azt'en livelihood. Woodland caribou, deer, elk and black bear were hunted extensively throughout the territory for their meat and hides and salmon were fished in the Skeena and Fraser rivers. The Tl'azt'en demonstrated an ability to sustain themselves as a people through subsistence activities in the forest for centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans in the late 1800s. The contacts with the colonial settlers have had disastrous consequences for the Tl'azt'en people, as they went through the process of Catholic education and 'civilization', including residential schools, and were affected by the introduction of diseases such as small pox (Tl'azt'en Nation, 1997).

After the arrival of colonial settlers, the Tl'azt'en incorporated the fur trade into their existing fishing and hunting economy. Some researchers have argued that the native land and space in the Tl'azt'en territories have been influenced not just by the early European settlers' expansionist policies, but also due to the Tl'azt'en Nations' often successful negotiations with the white settlers to control and manage vast tracts of land under their jurisdiction (Morris & Fondahl, 2002). The Tl'azt'en added to this gardening and animal husbandry to produce products that could be sold and traded to non-natives to supplement their own consumption of wild food. Hunting, fishing and trapping continued to be viable and socially important activities; however, in the 1940s, the Tl'azt'en economy began to include more seasonal wage labour in mining, forestry and guiding (Morris, 1999).

The Tl'azt'en traditional territories are based on the concept of *keyoh* which means the resource area (i.e. traplines) that belongs to a particular settlement or clan, and that serves as the material, cultural and spiritual basis for sustaining human life. The four clans are beaver, bear, frog and caribou, which underscore the sense of kinship and respect the Tl'azt'en have for all living things within their territories. The *keyoh* is an important part of the potlatch system, or *Bahlats*, which divides the Tl'azt'en society into matrilineal clans (Brown, 2002). The potlatch system was declared illegal by the Potlatch Law of 1885; it was repealed in 1951 (Ridington, 1992). Today, there are 30 *keyoh* within the Tl'azt'en Nations territories. The Indian Act of 1876 placed the Tl'azt'en people on reserve lands, thus explicitly disavowing their ownership of their traditional territory (Morris & Fondahl, 2002), and with the passing of Bill 13 by the Government of Canada, the British Columbia Indian Lands Settlement Act further reduced the size of reserve lands (Baruah, 1998). The 1940s saw an increase in forestry-related operations and construction of logging roads. The Tache-Fort St James road was upgraded to all-season in 1969, and construction of a railroad was completed in 1973 (Morris & Fondahl, 2002). These improvements in access resulted in increased intensity of resource extraction activities in the Tl'azt'en territory.

With changing national government policies toward indigenous peoples in Canada, which after the 1960s began to be more reconciliatory, recognition of indigenous rights took a major step forward with the Comprehensive Land Claims Agreements (CLACs) in Quebec and Northwest Territories (Saku, 2002), and in BC the Supreme Court of Canada's judgments in the case of Nisga'a Nation (Asch, 1999). There have been a number of provincial and federal organisations since the 1950s, culminating today in status Indians and band councils in the Assembly of First Nations (Foster, 1999). In BC, the first native group to establish a tribal council was the Nisga'a in 1955, and they soon resumed the campaign for their land rights that had begun in the 1880s. The result in 1973 was the precedent-setting case of *Calder v. Attorney General for British Columbia*, in which the Supreme Court of Canada declared that 'the concept of Aboriginal title was a part of Canadian law, whether such title had been recognised by government or not' (Foster, 1999: 367). In 1979, the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council (CSTC) was formed, which represents eight central and northern Carrier bands including the Tl'azt'en, and has one of its bands with some Sekani (another Athapaskan linguistic group) members (Brown, 2002).

One of the outcomes of native activism during the 1970s that is relevant to the Tl'azt'en was the granting of a Tree Farm License (TFL) in 1982. The TFL is the most secure form of tenure in the Province, and the only major license which grants exclusive harvesting rights to a specific area. With the granting of the TFL the Tl'azt'en Nation received a 25 year renewable license with exclusive right to harvest timber on 54,000 hectares of Provincial land (Morris & Fondahl, 2002). This was the first, and up to that point the only, TFL in British Columbia operated by a First Nation, and as such represents a positive outcome of the decades of native struggles against the government. In 1992, the government of British Columbia and the BC First Nations Summit agreed to establish the BC Treaty Commission with the overall objective of providing economic self-sufficiency and a degree of political autonomy to First Nations. In 1993, the member bands of the CSTC jointly entered the BC Treaty Commission Agreement Process. The CSTC is in the process of negotiating the 'agreement in principle' with the government of BC; this principle identifies and defines a range of rights and obligations, and forms the basis for the treaty.

Today, while traditional economic activities such as trapping, hunting and fishing continue to be carried out by a number of band members, the Tl'azt'en's predominant industry is forestry. Tl'azt'en active in the labour force are primarily seasonally employed in the forest industry with a much smaller portion spread out across the government, public and private services sectors. The unemployment rate for Tl'azt'en is 60%, which is significantly higher than the provincial average (Baruah, 1998; Morris, 1999). The relative absence of Tl'azt'en with the experience, training and education needed to establish and operate local enterprises that, to some degree, must interact and compete with external enterprises has led to the erosion of confidence among community members.

Given their history of adaptation to changing economic circumstances, the Tl'azt'en have recognised the need to diversify their economic base, through

ecotourism. With spectacular landscapes dotted with hiking mountains and navigable lakes and rivers, rich wildlife population, and cultural heritage, outdoor recreation and ecotourism opportunities abound in the territory. Angling is a particularly popular recreational activity as the lakes in the area support healthy populations of rainbow trout, char, whitefish and kokanee. Currently, 45 lakeshore lots have been leased out to mostly non-native guides and outfitters (Sears *et al.*, 2002). There are also historic native pictographs that are a testimony to the rich history of the area, a great opportunity for cultural heritage interpretation and photography.

This brief background indicates that all four essential elements of indigenous tourism (Smith, 1996) – habitat, history, heritage and handicrafts – are present in the Tl'azt'en territory, and have the potential to be developed as resources for indigenous tourism development.

## Methods

The level of community support for the research project was very strong, as the research topic was developed based on their suggestions rather than based on the researcher's perspective. Particular attention was paid to the sensitivity to cultural differences (Schuler *et al.*, 1999), which is why three Tl'azt'en research assistants were hired to help with the interview process, and only those willing to be involved in the project were interviewed.

This research is exploratory, and the analysis mainly qualitative. Firstly, a comprehensive literature search on indigenous tourism was conducted, based on which an annotated bibliography was developed (Bass & Nepal, 2002). A rapid appraisal of ecotourism opportunities in the Tl'azt'en Territory was conducted during April–May 2001. This appraisal was based on existing literature, particularly the *Fort St James LRMP Forest Recreation and Tourism Opportunities Study* (Meredith & Associates, 2000), Internet sources and informal interviews with key informants (Oussoren *et al.*, 2002). Secondly, two half-day workshops were held at the Band office in Tache, the administrative centre of the Tl'azt'en Nation, in May and July 2001. The workshop discussions focused on local visions for community development, and interpretation and understanding of ecotourism issues. These workshops formed the basis for developing a research protocol, and identifying research assistants and key informants. Two follow-up interviews, one with Tl'azt'en elders and the other with Band members working in the Reserve administration, were conducted (Joseph *et al.*, 2002). At the workshop, community members were also asked to identify potential ecotourism sites and recreation opportunities at these sites. Based on the initial feedback, and existing literature on recreation opportunity analysis (Meredith & Associates, 2000), selected sites were surveyed during July and August with help from native research assistants (John *et al.*, 2002). The rapid appraisal of tourism opportunities indicated that a total of 45 guide-and-outfitters were active in the Tl'azt'en territory. A checklist consisting of 31 questions on various aspects of tourism development opportunities and constraints in the region was developed, and was used to interview all guide-outfitters between January and February 2002 (Sears *et al.*, 2002). Finally, a household survey of Tl'azt'en in Tache was conducted

during January and February 2002. A total of 135 individuals were interviewed, out of which 128 survey forms were used for analysis, and are the focus of this paper.

### **Household survey questionnaire**

The survey questionnaire was six pages long, and contained 21 questions on various aspects of ecotourism (Nepal & Zeiger, 2002). Following the introductory letter, the first part of the questionnaire solicited respondents' background information. The second part contained 20 questions: questions 1–3 were related to respondents' knowledge of potential ecotourism sites; questions 4–6 solicited respondents' interpretation of ecotourism and attitude towards tourism; questions 7–9 were related to respondents' perceived opportunities and constraints of ecotourism; questions 10–11 were about control measures; questions 12–14 asked if ecotourism would improve First Nations' social, economic and environmental conditions; questions 15–16 solicited respondents' opinions about community-managed or independent ecotourism operations; questions 17–19 were related to their opinions regarding any potential contributions they could make, and if any outside support was needed; questions 21 solicited additional comments.

Questions were both closed- and open-ended. A closed-ended question often included 'Others (please specify)' as a category, to generate ideas from the respondents. The questionnaire was initially designed as a mail-survey; however, it was assumed that the return rates would be low, and that a face-to-face interview could result in better responses, and would also give researchers the opportunity to establish rapport with the community. A Tl'azt'en woman, with prior training and experience in conducting household interviews in the community, was employed to conduct the interviews. She was recommended by several band officials, and was well known in the community. The first version of the questionnaire, designed by this author, was discussed with the research assistant and changed as necessary. A pre-test survey in the field revealed that some questions required clarification and needed rewording in a more straightforward manner. For example, the original question: *Where do you think are the potential ecotourism sites?* was changed to *If you had a tourist coming to visit for 5–6 days, where would you take them? What would you do with them?* After necessary revisions were made, house-to-house interviews, which were typically between 45 and 60 min per interview, were completed. The household head was the target respondent; in the absence of the household head, other adult members were interviewed. The proportion of male and female respondents was equal.

## **Survey Results**

### **Tl'azt'en perspectives of ecotourism development**

In order to examine whether or not ecotourism attributes and their meanings are understood by the Tl'azt'en, questions were asked about their interpretations of ecotourism. Their responses indicate that the majority of respondents view it as a form of tourism that involves wildlife and nature, respects local culture and traditions, and creates job opportunities for local communities

(Table 1). Interestingly, 74% of the respondents also indicated that ecotourism may also involve traditional wildlife hunting, as it was argued that wildlife hunting and living off wildlife (food, medicine, construction materials, etc.) couldn't be separated from First Nations' livelihood strategies. Under these circumstances, ecotourism should allow sustainable extraction of wildlife

**Table 1** Tl'azt'en Nations' interpretation of ecotourism ( $n = 128$ )

<i>Interpretation of ecotourism</i>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Includes wildlife viewing and enjoying natural scenery	117	91.4
Respects local culture and traditions	113	88.3
Creates awareness among First Nations on visitors perspectives toward nature, wildlife and society in general	106	82.8
Provides economic benefits such as jobs and cash income to local communities	104	81.3
Facilitates dialogue between First Nations and other people	96	75.0
Includes wildlife hunting using traditional methods	95	74.2
Includes community members in its planning processes	95	74.2
Has a community-based management structure	80	62.5
Has minimum negative environmental impacts	74	57.8
Has minimum social impacts	51	39.8

Source: Field Survey, 2002.

$f$  = frequency of responses; percentages are calculated from total number of responses.

**Table 2** Tl'azt'en Nations' attitude toward ecotourism/tourism development ( $n = 128$ )

<i>Question</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
Is it good to develop ecotourism in your area?	119	4	3
Does your area have good potential for ecotourism?	115	9	1
Do you think tourism will generate revenue for the region?	110	6	8
Do you think tourism will enhance understanding between native and non-native culture?	116	6	3
Do you think tourism will improve economic conditions in your area?	109	10	6
Do you think tourism will improve social conditions in your area?	100	17	6
Do you think tourism will result in greater appreciation of First Nations' culture?	112	8	5
Do you think First Nations will value their culture more if visitors show appreciation of First Nations culture?	122	3	2
Do you think tourism will have negative effects on First Nations (e.g. drugs, alcohol)	60	53	12

Source: Field Survey, 2002; figures indicate frequency of responses.

resources. Since 'traditional wildlife hunting' was not a choice to be ticked on the questionnaire, but was mentioned explicitly by the respondents themselves under the 'Other' category, this finding is very important. Responses to negative environmental and social impacts were relatively low, which could imply that many respondents acknowledge that with the development of ecotourism negative impacts are bound to occur. To this author, this is a realistic perspective. Ecotourism was also seen as a community initiative in which community members are consulted, and involved, however; fewer saw ecotourism as having a community-based management structure.

A highly significant proportion of respondents were in favour of ecotourism development, as they held the opinion that there are significant natural and cultural resources appropriate for ecotourism development (Table 2). The overwhelming majority answered positively to all nine questions about general attitude towards ecotourism. Ecotourism, they believed, could positively influence public appreciation of First Nations culture and traditions. When asked if ecotourism development would have negative impacts (e.g., increased drug and alcohol consumption), 60 out of 125 respondents or 48% indicated that it was inevitable. Overall, 95% of the respondents indicated that ecotourism would be good for the community.

### **Potential sites for ecotourism activities**

Discussion during the two workshops, and follow-up interviews with the Tl'azt'en elders and employees of the Reserve administration, focused on identifying potential ecotourism sites and activities. Based on this information, selected sites were evaluated for their suitability and inclusion in a tour itinerary. It was deemed necessary to examine whether or not these areas would be the preferred choice of the respondents too. The question was open-ended, so as to compile a reasonable list of potential sites. Discussion during the workshops had indicated that areas around Pinche and Stuart Lakes, Middle River, and Shass Mountain were the preferred locations. An earlier study had identified areas northeast of Tezerron Lake, the lakeside area around Stuart, river corridors between Stuart, Trembleur and Takla Lakes, Middle River, north of Trembleur Lake (Mt Sidney Williams and surrounding areas), upper reaches of Stuart Lake (areas around Tache), and North Arm Lake as areas of high recreational potential (Meredith & Associates, 2000). These were also the areas most frequently mentioned by the respondents. References were frequently made to Stuart, Pinche and Tezerron Lakes, Middle River, Grand Rapids (along the Middle River), Pinche Point, Pinche Falls, Mt Sidney Williams, North Arm Lake, Jenny Chow Island on Stuart Lake, Cunningham and Whitefish Lakes, Stones Bay, Mud Bay and Tanijul Tree Farm License Area (Cinnabar Resort; see Figure 1).

With respect to questions regarding recreation activities, almost all respondents referred to a combination of water-based and land-based recreation activities. Canoeing, hiking, camping, fishing, spelunking, guided hunting, wildlife viewing, bird watching and boating were mentioned most often. Many respondents also indicated the possibility of developing a tour focused on First Nations cultural activities such as a tour of native traplines and smokehouses, storytelling, dance and festivals, and travelling to sites of

native petroglyphs. Also mentioned were demonstrations of native craft works such as bead making, skinning moose and beaver hides, and other traditional ways of life. Specific references were made to activities including fishing in Rosetie Creek, hunting in the Steamboat Bay area, Leo Creek and Tanijul Forest, hiking on historic trails along the Middle River, horseback riding in areas around Pinche Point, beach camping at Pinche Lake and canoe trips through Trembleur Lake and Middle River. Several respondents also indicated that it would be possible to organise trips that would take advantage of immensely popular recreations areas such as canoeing through Babine Lake (Babine Provincial Park), the Nation Lake chain and Takla River. Overall, the Tl'azt'en people were highly enthusiastic when talking about local attractions and activities, as summarised by a young high school student from Tache:

I would bring them [visitors] on a tour of the [Stuart] lake and show them where we get our food from . . . if successful, show them a lot of our wild-life . . . which ones we live off and which we leave alone . . . I would show them which wild berries we eat, and the plants from which we make our medicine . . . where the trap lines are, and what trap lines mean to us and our way of life.

### **Perceived opportunities and constraints**

Many northern communities in BC view ecotourism development as a direct response to the need to generate more tax revenues, and provide local income and employment opportunities. The Tl'azt'en Nations were asked what their perceived social, cultural, economic, and environmental opportunities were (Table 3). Jobs and skill development, building partnerships, enhanced appreciation of Tl'azt'en Nations culture, outlets to showcase art and crafts, and cultural promotion were the most cited opportunities. Strong attachments to wildlife, stewardship of natural heritage, youth leadership, cultural exchange, self-respect, craft promotion and alternative economic opportunities were also frequently mentioned.

Communities that are not sensitive and proactive enough to minimise harmful effects of ecotourism will fail to sustain positive benefits and, in the long run, may very well erode the resources that brought ecotourists in the first place. Thus, it was essential to examine the Tl'azt'en perceptions of potential constraints for ecotourism development. The results were somewhat unexpected: the total number of responses to questions related to ecotourism constraints was much lower compared to the earlier questions about opportunities (Table 4). It was a clear indication that the respondents were very positive about ecotourism opportunities, and did not consider the constraints to be very important. In terms of economic constraints, the highest frequency of references (57%) was made to the speculation that most income from ecotourism might go to outsiders. Similar concerns were expressed in regard to seasonal and low-paying jobs. The potential for conflict among community members was seen as a social constraint, while erosion of First Nations values was cited by only 32% of the respondents. This may imply that the Tl'azt'en, by and large, believe that ecotourism will not erode traditional values. There were some

**Table 3** Tl'azt'en Nations' perceived opportunities from ecotourism

<i>Opportunity</i>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Economic</b>		
Jobs	<b>125</b>	<b>97.7</b>
Business opportunities	110	85.9
Infrastructure development	111	86.7
Skill development and training	118	92.2
Others	13	10.2
<b>Social</b>		
Shared understanding of outside culture	108	84.4
Enhanced appreciation of Tl'azt'en Nations' culture	117	91.4
Partnership among Tl'azt'en Nations	<b>120</b>	<b>93.8</b>
Improved relations with communities from outside	106	82.8
Outlets for dialogue and communications	99	77.3
Others	6	4.7
<b>Cultural</b>		
Enhanced cultural awareness among Tl'azt'en Nations	112	87.5
Opportunities to showcase local arts and crafts	<b>114</b>	<b>89.1</b>
Traditional values are made know to outsiders	112	87.5
Opportunities for cultural promotion	113	88.3
Others	5	3.9
<b>Environmental</b>		
Wildlife conservation	114	89.1
Natural heritage protection	<b>117</b>	<b>91.4</b>
Awareness of values of wildlife	114	89.1
Demonstration of importance of wildlife to society	113	88.3
Strengthening of value that we are part of nature	110	85.9
Others	5	3.9

Source: Field Survey, 2002.

*f* = frequency of responses; percentages are calculated from total number of responses.

concerns about potential impacts of ecotourism on the Tl'azt'en youth, for example, imitation of tourists' lifestyles and anti-social behaviour. Fifty-four percent of the total respondents cited lake and river pollution as a potential constraint while only 28% made references to wildlife disturbance.

When asked what the net effect of tourism would be, almost 45% indicated that it would be positive, and only 4% said it would be negative. Over half of

**Table 4** Tl'azt'en Nations' perceived constraints from ecotourism ( $n = 128$ )

<i>Constraint</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Economic</b>		
Few jobs	55	43.0
Seasonal, low paying jobs only	68	53.1
Jobs mainly for outsiders	54	42.2
Income mainly for outsiders	<b>73</b>	<b>57.0</b>
Rich and influential people benefit most	61	47.7
Others	4	3.1
<b>Social</b>		
Erosion of Tl'azt'en Nations' values	41	32.0
Conflict between community members	<b>78</b>	<b>60.9</b>
Others	9	7.0
<b>Cultural</b>		
Cultural erosion	36	28.1
Youngsters imitating tourists' lifestyles	<b>69</b>	<b>53.9</b>
Youngsters not showing respect to elders	56	43.8
Youngsters developing bad habits	60	46.9
Others	5	3.9
<b>Environmental</b>		
Wildlife disturbance	36	28.1
Lakes and river pollution	<b>69</b>	<b>53.9</b>
Wildlife exploitation	56	43.8
Wildlife habitat threatened	60	46.9
Others	5	3.9

Source: Field Survey, 2002.

$f$  = frequency of responses; percentage calculated from total number of responses.

the total respondents believed that both positive and negative effects would occur. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether or not they would be capable of controlling undesirable impacts of ecotourism. The majority (78.9%) indicated that the Tl'azt'en are capable people, while 16% indicated they do not have the capability, and 5% were not sure what capability the Tl'azt'en people possessed.

Respondents were also asked about their opinion with respect to impact-mitigation measures (Table 5). It became apparent during the workshop deliberations that not all sites would be open to visitors. Specific concerns were expressed regarding tourist visits to sacred grounds and burial sites, and during traditional rituals and events. Community reaction is manifested in the responses recorded here, for example, 76% of the respondents made it clear that certain areas had to be closed off, and that restrictions would be placed on certain types of activities. It was indicated by some community

**Table 5** Potential measures to control tourism impacts ( $n = 128$ )

<i>Measures</i>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Control on sites to be visited	97	75.8
Control on type of activities permitted	94	73.4
Control number of visitors	92	71.9
Control timing of visit	88	68.8
Others	10	7.8

Source: Field Survey, 2002.

$f$  = frequency of responses; percentages calculated from total number of responses.

members that offensive behaviours or activities that are not suited to their lifestyles would not be welcome. There were no specific mention of what these offensive behaviours would be; however, some community members referred to hiking etiquette and respect for local customs.

### **Preferred ecotourism projects**

Respondents were asked to indicate their preference for potential ecotourism projects that could be launched in the immediate future. Access improvement and facility development were accorded high priority. Large sections of the Tl'azt'en territory do not have an adequate network of trail systems and, with the exception of the main road from Fort St James to Tache, others are gravelled and used mainly as logging roads. While this may add to the adventure of ecotourism, many residents expressed the opinion that paved roads are essential for reducing travel distance, especially for supplies. Some community members referred to the presence of historic trails that could be of interest to many visitors; however, these trails have become overgrown and require maintenance. One such trail connects Tache to Grand Rapids via the river corridor. Facility-related projects included portage or marina development, bed and breakfast, a visitor information centre, a native heritage interpretive centre, and boats and canoe rentals. Site development referred to campsites and shelters, rest stops, viewpoints, signage and maps, and development of special interest points, e.g. limestone cliffs suitable for rock climbing. Information brochures and pamphlets were cited by relatively few, as these could be considered at a later stage of ecotourism planning. The most important consideration was to have some basic infrastructure in place before the area could be opened to visitors, as one of the elders stated:

ecotourism cannot happen overnight . . . we need to have the basics put in place first, and start marketing . . . with the right kind of strategy . . . it will work!

The overwhelmingly positive reactions to ecotourism development from the Tl'azt'en people indicated that, irrespective of age differences and access to income and employment opportunities, community members had common perspectives about ecotourism. Respondents were asked whether they would prefer a community-managed ecotourism development, or one based on

*laissez faire*. The majority was in favour of the former type, due to their concern that this would prevent individuals from taking undue advantage. Management based on shared responsibilities would inspire a sense of ownership as opposed to independent initiatives. Suggestions were made to have equal representation from the elders and youth and adult Tl'azt'en members, and ensuring a gender balance. Consultations with the *keyoh* holders when planning access improvements and development of sites and facilities were strongly suggested, as was the suggestion that a strong involvement of the Tl'azt'en elders is crucial in ecotourism planning and management processes.

With reference to questions about individual contributions, in the event that ecotourism projects were realised, almost 80% of the respondents indicated that labour would be their only contribution, while 40% offered their business advice and training skills. The need for governmental support was mentioned unequivocally; however, respondents also realised that, given the current level of cutbacks and reductions in social assistance programmes at the provincial level, government help would be appreciated but unexpected. Funding and technical support were the two key items most referred to, while some references were made also to leadership and guidance.

## Discussion

One of the most important findings of this research is the overwhelming reference made by the respondents to the continuation of traditional wildlife hunting as part of their ecotourism strategy. This local interpretation of ecotourism is sharply in contrast to existing norms of ecotourism, as discussed in current literature (Fennell, 1999; Weaver, 2001). However, from a First Nation's view this interpretation is legitimate. Given the close ties between human and nature among indigenous societies, and a livelihood that depends on sustainable extraction of wildlife resources, it is no wonder that the Tl'azt'en people are interested in showcasing their hunting lifestyle as an ecotourism attraction. The implication of this finding is that the context and meaning of ecotourism greatly varies between indigenous communities around the world, and needs to be considered when developing ecotourism policies and guidelines. Similarly, the Tl'azt'en's concern that most ecotourism-related jobs could be taken by outsiders is valid, as research in other indigenous communities has shown that a low level of tourism infrastructure and the lack of a strong production base means goods and products needed to provide for visitor services and facilities will have to be imported, resulting in significant economic leakages (Nepal, 1997, 2000). Ecotourism principles that allow the continuation of a traditional livelihood such as hunting and its incorporation into the development of ecotourism products and attractions could offer a sense of economic, social and cultural security to indigenous communities. This will not only secure their livelihood if ecotourism fails to make a viable return, but the potential for competition for jobs from outsiders will be limited too. The high proportion of positive attitude among the Tl'azt'en toward ecotourism is unusual, as research on indigenous involvement in tourism has indicated that local attitudes vary greatly (Butler & Hinch, 1996; Grekin & Milne, 1996). One likely explanation is the declining state of the

forest industry, which could be the main reason why the Tl'azt'en view ecotourism as a potential economic alternative.

Tourism in many remote communities is often dominated by outside interests, as some examples suggest. McLaren (1999) reports that beach hotels have displaced traditional fishing communities that once lined the coasts of Penang in Malaysia and Phuket in Thailand, and a Mohawk uprising in Canada was triggered by plans to extend a golf course on to Mohawk burial grounds. Similarly, in the Black Hills, the native Sioux work as low-wage labourers in a white-owned tourism industry that promotes their culture and lands (McLaren, 1999). In the Navaho Reserve, authentic ecotourism experience has been compromised in favour of commodified products, packaged and placed front-stage without tourist penetration into personal lives (Smith, 1996). While this may be a deliberate attempt to protect indigenous cultures, it defeats the purpose of educating or sensitising visitors about indigenous cultures, and thus undermines any attempts towards greater cross-cultural understanding. There are also dangers that indigenous populations may increasingly become dependent on the global tourism market. Thus, careful planning is necessary if the Tl'azt'en Nations are to benefit from ecotourism ventures in their territory, and the processes of visioning, planning, developing and managing must be community-driven.

Remoteness and lack of information and economic development strategies place First Nations communities at a competitive disadvantage with other destinations. Communities such as Tl'azt'en are in serious need of gaining the ability to make themselves known to a wider market and to establish local networks to actively apply local points of view on development issues. The support and cooperation from existing guide-outfitters active in and around the Tl'azt'en territory is crucial, as these are people with business acumen and marketing connections. The 45 active guide-outfitters offer a range of services including bed and breakfast accommodation, campgrounds, helicopter, fixed-wing and float planes, rafting, horseback riding, skiing and golf (Meredith & Associates, 2000; Sears *et al.*, 2002). Interviews with these guide and outfitters indicated their positive views of ecotourism development potential in the Tl'azt'en territory. They believed that, with a right attitude, marketing strategy, financial help and development of key sites and facilities, the Tl'azt'en should be able to successfully establish the area as an important ecotourism destination in central BC. The recreation resource survey, conducted as part of the study, showed that the Tl'azt'en territory could attract visitors interested in wildlife viewing, canoeing and rafting, hiking and camping, native cultural events and storytelling, guided hunting, and demonstration of drying and hiding techniques. Some Tl'azt'en individuals were identified to have previous experience in the tourism industry as guide-outfitters, and given some support they could provide leadership in planning, developing, marketing and management of ecotourism. The Tl'azt'en also need to familiarise themselves and establish connections with several information technology providers, and approach the provincial and federal aboriginal business development assistance agencies.

There are some limits to the development of indigenous ecotourism in the Tl'azt'en territory. First, it could be argued that the existence of 45 tour

operators active at different locations in the territory may indicate that most ecotourism 'niches' are already filled. Although this was not mentioned by any of the existing operators, it nevertheless requires a careful assessment of what is feasible, where, and how priorities are to be accorded. Secondly, many rural areas in central BC are experiencing economic uncertainties, and may possibly look toward tourism. Given that rural areas in central BC have similar natural and cultural attributes, without 'niche' products and targeted visitor markets, the risk of too many ecotourism ventures sprouting everywhere may eventually be disadvantageous in terms of prices and markets. Apparently, communities that are progressive in their thinking and proactive in the development of new products and experience will edge out the others. This brings us to the question of whether indigenous communities like Tl'azt'en can survive sustainability and competing interests from other equally potential areas. What if 25 other rural communities start to compete with each other for potential ecotourists? Will this lead to stiff competition, price undercutting and lowering of standards? An equally valid concern is the size of indigenous tourism market, both in Canada and overseas (Williams & Richter, 2002). Is the market for indigenous tourism economically viable? What indigenous ecotourism products will be marketed, what are appropriate marketing channels, and how will these be tapped, and by whom? These are issues that require further considerations.

The fascination with Canada's First Nations people predates the 1860s (Nicholson, 1997). Nineteenth-century travellers and pioneers depended upon indigenous knowledge and guidance when exploring Canada's vast areas. As part of its efforts to draw tourists to Western Canada, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), during the early 20th-century, made frequent use of portraits of the romanticised 'noble savages' in its marketing campaigns (Shanley, 2001). With this fascination came a fictitious indigenous identity that had to be nationally overcome in the 20th century, but the identity persists even today, particularly in Western Europe, where native mythology, imagery and stereotypes have created a typecasting of Canada's First Nations people among the general public (Francis, 1992). Promoting a culturally authentic indigenous ecotourism in Tl'azt'en territory requires overcoming of the stereotypical images of native people in Canada and their lifestyle, which are very different from current realities. Tourism brochures in Canada typically depict First Nations wearing feather headdresses, painted faces and outfits made of animal hide. Historical images of native Americans with bows and arrows, riding horses, living in tepees, or depicted as fearsome warriors, have nothing to do with modern day realities of unemployment, drug and alcohol addictions, domestic violence and suicide, some of which can be traced back to the abuse many native children received at residential schools (Reed, 1999). The economic reality in many First Nations communities in BC is that the majority is unemployed, lacks education and trade skills, and has low self-esteem and limited knowledge of the outside world, making them vulnerable when choosing to leave the life of a reserve. These are characteristics of what Frideres (1988) calls the 'culture of poverty', and must be overcome through the provision of appropriate and relevant education and skills, and through social, economic, psychological and political empowerment of the

communities (Scheyvens, 1999). One of the participants at the workshops observed that the Tl'azt'en youth might do very poorly in European-oriented school curricula, but would make significant impressions if they are asked to perform activities suited to their ways of life such as hunting, fishing, tracking wildlife and plants, and other bush skills. Therefore, it is argued that these youth would easily adapt to ecotourism that is focused on nature and cultural heritage of First Nations, and that they could become excellent guides, interpreters and storytellers, just as they did during colonial periods. In essence, ecotourism would provide them with a lifestyle that is not too different from their traditional ways of life and values.

## **Conclusion**

Recognition of indigenous conservation systems as well as recovery of indigenous rights has been the global movement in recent years. International conventions, including the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, recognise the need to protect and promote indigenous knowledge systems (Johnston, 2001). In the spirit of the Convention, indigenous people in Canada believe that they have legitimate rights to stop, or at the very least minimise, damaging forms of tourism – or initiate positive tourism alternatives – on their ancestral lands. Co-management and partnership approaches have been initiated in several business and resource management practices. One such example is the Clayoquot Sound Agreement 1994, and Clayoquot Sound Interim Measures Extension Agreement 1996, which was established between the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations on Vancouver Island and the Canadian government (Harris, 2002). Similarly, the Gwaii Hanaas National Park, where the Haida Gwaii Nations have managed to set and enforce terms of visitation, agreements for access and benefit sharing, codes of conduct and other management tools, offers valuable lessons for the Tl'azt'en community in incorporating sustainable environmental practices in tourism development (TRN, 2003). In the Tl'azt'en territory, and particularly at the John Prince Research Forest (JPRF), which is a co-management initiative between the Tl'azt'en and the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), prospects for government or private sector funding opportunities for a pilot project should be given adequate consideration. A recent development is the purchase of the Cinnabar Resort located at the Tanijul Forest by the JPRF, which offers a great opportunity to build a pilot project involving the renovation of the resort, and transforming it into a multi-functional facility. Such a facility could house an ecolodge, a native interpretive centre, and a research and education centre. This would be beneficial to both the Tl'azt'en people and UNBC. It will not only speed up the process of ecotourism development in the Territory but would also be useful in evaluating sustainability of future ecotourism projects in the Tl'azt'en Territory. These few examples indicate improvements in relationships between the Canadian government and indigenous peoples. While treaty talks have been officially underway in British Columbia since 1993, and more recently talks of a referendum have started to take a definite direction, it should be recognised that resolution of complex issues takes time.

There is a strong need for skill development among the Tl'azt'en, which is crucial for their effective participation in planning, management and ownership issues. Recognising that the Tl'azt'en lack the resources to fully realise the potential of ecotourism, governmental and non-governmental agencies should facilitate the provision of tourism education and training relevant to First Nations experience and traditional knowledge. Similarly, the private sector can facilitate the networking, marketing and promotion of indigenous tourism products. However, this is not an easy task. An essential step in strengthening Tl'azt'en's decision-making, innovation and management capacity is to remove the barriers for funding and technical support from outside sources. More recently, several First Nations communities have been able to tap into provincial funding for start-up tourism development projects, but it must be ensured that these funds facilitate the development of long-term sustainable projects and are not seen as short-term solutions.

Through their direct involvement in ecotourism, First Nations in Canada have the opportunity to assert their historic rights and ways of life, and demonstrate these to Canadians and international visitors. Tourism's role as an educational tool and vehicle for cultural exchange can help to create a better understanding of the reality and culture of First Nations people in Canada. The Tl'azt'en have struggled to achieve control over their economic, political, social and environmental circumstances through the negotiation of land claims, the development of economic enterprises and the implementation of community initiatives. The renaissance of language and culture in the community, and awareness and recognition among its members of preserving and perpetuating key elements of traditional culture may steer the community toward a sustainable future. The greatest challenge lies in bringing together sound practices of the past with the constraints and realities of the present in a manner that allows the community to prosper in the most desirable manner.

While the interests of the Tl'azt'en, from a social standpoint, are paramount in the development of ecotourism, all parties within the community need to cooperate effectively in ensuring that a high-quality product is delivered without diminishing the natural and cultural integrity of the Tl'azt'en Nations. This will also ensure long-term sustainability of the Tl'azt'en economy. Barriers such as lack of training, education, operating funds and control can hinder the potential for successful tourism ventures by First Nations. A few enterprising Tl'azt'en elders and the skilled and knowledgeable workforce in the Reserve administration can help overcome some of these barriers. Addressing these issues along with controlling growth, maximising benefits while minimising impacts, and ensuring community acceptance can help the Tl'azt'en and other First Nations in BC and Canada to start planning for ecotourism in the right direction. The key is to recognise the potential and limits of such enterprise, and use it to the Tl'azt'en's comparative advantage of the remote location, traditional knowledge base, and visitor interests in indigenous tourism. As in the words of a Tl'azt'en elder, it is time to start a new era of opportunities:

this [ecotourism] is an excellent idea . . . it is about time the outsiders come in . . . the Tl'azt'en get a bad reputation from people who have never been

here . . . we get so many visitors but all activities are concentrated around the lakes . . . there is much more . . . so much potential here . . . so much to offer . . . given the opportunity, the Tl'azt'en can excel.

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