

An Indigenous perspective on economic sustainability in mountain pine beetle-affected communities

Natasha Caverley¹

Abstract

The mountain pine beetle (MPB) infestation has created momentum for change in British Columbia. Over the past 3–4 years, the formation of collaborative networks and other innovative partnerships, such as the First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative (FNMPBI), has identified strengths in multi-agency economic development dialogue and problem solving. For the 103 First Nations communities affected by the MPB, a need exists to further transform this collaborative and synergistic atmosphere into tangible economic gains for local communities, whereby First Nations are full partners (rather than mere stakeholders) in the design and implementation of joint decision making, integrated planning, and sectoral strategy development for traditional lands. Equally important is the opportunity to acknowledge First Nations knowledge, values, and connection to nature and the surrounding land base. This commentary reflects on key discussion points that arose during the FNMPBI strategic planning sessions and the respective implications for advancing economic sustainability in MPB-affected First Nations communities in British Columbia.

KEYWORDS: *cultural values, economic sustainability, First Nations, mountain pine beetle.*

Contact Information

1 Vice-President, Turtle Island Consulting Services Inc., 8845 Haro Park Terrace, North Saanich, BC V8L 3Z3.
Email: natasha@turtleislandconsulting.ca

Sacred Tree of Life

*Sacred tree of life
Teach us to root our self
and walk in balance.*

*Teach us to share our
shelter, food, our breath.*

*Teach us to bend, and to have
compassion and love
for our brothers and sisters.*

*Teach us to be grateful
for all gifts we receive
and, remind us to pray.*

*Teach us to stand tall and
reach for grandfather sun.*

Teach us to share and live as one.

*Sacred tree of life
thank you for all your
wisdom and for all
life in which you
provide.*

(Running Elk Woman, n.d.)

Introduction

Running Elk Woman's poem serves as a gentle reminder of the strong interrelationship with forests and range lands that many Indigenous people have as stewards of the land base—co-existing with Mother Earth's flora and fauna, conserving one's resources, and living as part of that environment for future generations. The poem's themes of balance, co-operation, and shared understanding of human relationships with the land serve as principles to guide enhanced collaboration on economic sustainability for First Nations communities affected by British Columbia's mountain pine beetle infestation.

This personal commentary focuses on the discussion points raised during the First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative (FNMPBI) economic sustainability planning sessions and the implications for MPB-affected First Nations communities. As one of the lead facilitators for this multi-agency strategic planning process, I was humbled by the opportunity to guide participants and to listen to the local experiences they shared in addressing the economic diversification needs of MPB-affected First Nations communities. This article conveys my personal reflections and opinions on these shared interests as well as the needs expressed at the planning sessions, which were held in North Saanich, Prince George, Kamloops, and Williams Lake in 2007.

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The MPB and its effects on First Nations communities

The BC Ministry of Forests and Range estimated that:

... as of 2007, the cumulative area of provincial Crown forest affected to some degree (red-attack and grey-attack) was approximately 13.5 million hectares . . . trees turn red after the first year of attack. In the following year, the trees generally turn grey (BC Ministry of Forests and Range 2008).

Approximately 103 First Nations communities in the interior regions of British Columbia are situated on lands affected by the MPB. The MPB outbreak is creating a significant change and shift in the ecosystems, economies, and quality of life for local First Nations community members (Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations 2007). For thousands of years, First Nations communities have relied on their environment to advance traditional local economies and sustenance, such as wild harvesting, hunting, trapping, fishing, forestry, and trading. The MPB infestation has thus created serious socio-cultural, spiritual, and economic ramifications, including:

- sharp reductions in available timber supply following a period of accelerated harvesting of MPB-affected forests;
- loss of wildlife habitats as well as associated food supplies for traditional economies in local communities; and
- loss of forest cover resulting in silting of rivers and flooding (Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations 2007).

The long-term effects of these cumulative ecosystem changes have the potential to drastically alter the landscape. A major challenge for First Nations communities is to develop immediate and long-term strategies that will diversify the

economic base of their communities in a manner that considers a viable Aboriginal holistic¹ approach to economic development—an approach that respects environmental, financial, and cultural/spiritual interests in traditional lands.

The MPB and First Nations economic sustainability

Over the past 3–4 years, organizations such as the FNMPBI have led forums and harmonized strategic planning opportunities to facilitate dialogue on topics such as community protection, ecosystem stewardship, and economic sustainability as they relate to the effects of the MPB on local First Nations communities. From September 2007 to December 2007, the FNMPBI facilitated a set of planning sessions in North Saanich, Prince George, Kamloops, and Williams Lake that focused on economic sustainability in MPB-affected First Nations territories. One hundred and six participants representing a diversity of perspectives (i.e., First Nations communities; municipal, provincial, and federal governments; industry; and non-governmental organizations) examined MPB issues related to accelerated harvesting, energy and mining opportunities, economic diversification, engagement of First Nations, retention of First Nations cultural/spiritual values, capacity development, and resource management constraints. Five major themes emerged from these sessions, ranging from understanding First Nations' holistic worldviews, recognizing traditional economies, establishing collaborative networks, and fully implementing government policy, to addressing the socio-economic divide between First Nations and non-First Nations.

Theme 1: Understanding the holistic worldviews to First Nations economic development

The FNMPBI planning sessions identified descriptions of a “holistic approach” to economic development that recognize First Nations worldviews on this particular topic. Cultural values, the interconnectedness with all living systems, and sustainability for future generations are rooted in these definitions of economic development for many First Nations. This holistic approach entails shifting from an exclusive revenue/profit-driven approach to sustainable resource management, which includes respecting local

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socio-cultural, spiritual, and ecological interests alongside financial drivers in local First Nations communities (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007a). Participants at the Prince George session acknowledged the need to manage for multiple forest values in response to diverse and changing landscapes and associated pressures. Ultimately, this will require integrated land use planning that fully engages First Nations as strategic partners (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007c).

By taking these worldviews and shared interests into consideration, many participants at the sessions associated economic sustainability with community resiliency. Participants described resiliency as being self-sufficient and able to manage community-based change or crisis, and as a willingness to invest in health care, education, housing, and basic infrastructure to address barriers which are prevalent in many First Nations communities (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007a–d). Such barriers include low labour force representation, low educational attainment, lack of affordable housing, and poverty. An emphasis on fit with First Nation worldviews is important in developing and subsequently implementing a holistic economic sustainability framework. The need to include and respect local culture, aspirations, traditions, and history within First Nations economic sustainability planning is warranted to effectively identify community needs and design collaborative initiatives with strategic partners (i.e., government, industry). First Nations people place a strong emphasis on the ecologically responsible use of land and resources, which are viewed as interdependent and interrelated with humans (Anderson et al. 2006). Some First Nations communities may be willing to forfeit a financial gain

¹ This phrase was coined by Michael Christian (Splantsin/Secwepemc), Manager of Esh-Kn-Am Investments Joint Venture.

for socio-cultural interests as a means of advancing a holistic approach to economic sustainability.

Theme 2: Recognizing traditional economies

First Nations driven economic development and resource development activities/initiatives already exist (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007a:14).

The concept of economic development is not new in MPB-affected First Nations communities. In fact, participants at the Prince George session stated that:

we have not effectively communicated and shared information on socio-economic solutions related to the MPB (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007c:13).

Therefore, a need exists to recognize economic sustainability activities currently practiced by First Nations people. Activities such as wild harvesting, gathering, hunting, fishing, forestry, and trading have been, and continue to be, primary traditional economic and natural resource-based development sources for many MPB-affected First Nations communities. Nuttall (2005) stated that traditional economic activities are mainly aimed at satisfying important social, cultural, and nutritional needs, as well as the economic needs of families, households, and communities. First Nations communities affected by the MPB need to showcase effective economic sustainability practices and lessons learned to inform current and future economic decision making. The recently published *Journey to Economic Independence: BC First Nations' Perspective* (Williams [project manager] 2008) provides a first-hand examination of the successes and struggles in economic development within a cross-section of First Nations territories in British Columbia, shedding light on the journey of 11 participating communities (including some MPB-affected communities) as they move towards building sustainable economies.

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Theme 3: Establishing collaborative networks

Participants at the Kamloops and Prince George FNMPBI sessions acknowledged that in difficult times:

We have created opportunities to pool resources in addressing “sustainable economy” issues related to the . . . MPB epidemic . . . the MPB epidemic has created an impetus for change—the MPB has forced us to work together (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007c:13).

The MPB has created an opportunity for communities and territories to work together; thus, creating a demand for economic diversification—opportunities exist in discussing sustainable economy needs which will hopefully lead to results (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007b:12).

Therefore, it is important to highlight the need to grow relationships and establish collaborative networks. This will help to develop common solutions that address the implications of the MPB outbreak on economic sustainability. First Nations participants at the planning sessions recognized that the MPB has served as a catalyst for identifying strengths, sustainable solutions, and collaborative economic development opportunities. Also acknowledged were the strengths and assets that First Nations communities may have overlooked, taken for granted, or are currently untapped. Participants noted numerous ways to tap into new markets and promote economic diversification in MPB-affected First Nations communities in association with strategic partners and associated networks, including ecotourism, non-timber forest resources, agroforestry, bioenergy, tribal council investments, and joint ventures. It was also recognized that partnerships between First Nations and governments need to be encouraged—moving to full implementation of shared financial and human resources to create initiatives that support self-sufficiency and empowerment within affected communities (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007a–d). Furthermore, the sessions highlighted revenue-sharing with First Nations:

. . . the land base that is delivering the accelerated harvest is largely subject to unsettled land claims. As resources are extracted, a percentage of that revenue must be reserved for First Nations (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007b:4).

A need therefore exists to set aside income from accelerated harvesting specifically to initiate activities designed for economic diversification in MPB-affected communities. If not, there may be a tendency for

revenues from accelerated harvesting to become part of the general revenue for the community as opposed to creating new economies at the local level.

Theme 4: Fully implementing government policy

At the Kamloops session, participants felt that:

...the New Relationship Agreement is not being fully implemented (e.g., lower level policies and practices do not incorporate the spirit of the New Relationship)—resulting in little or no evidence of the application of the agreement at the local community/territory level (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007b:12).

As a result, there is a strong need for the full implementation of the *New Relationship Agreement*.² This involves shifting meaningful First Nations engagement to full strategic partnerships, particularly as it relates to making decisions about natural resources and economic interests. With full implementation, performance measurement and tracking will follow as a means of monitoring the extent to which transformative change is occurring and benefiting First Nations people. Possible performance indicators may include:

- revenue flow to First Nations;
- number of economic diversification projects with substantive First Nations involvement;
- percentage of economic benefits accruing to First Nations;
- return on investment and monetary benefits to First Nations economic development programs;
- total dollars spent on First Nations employment initiatives (i.e., recruitment or professional development initiatives);
- number of economic development partnerships between industry, government, and/or academia with First Nations communities; and
- correlations to social and health issues (i.e., crime, substance abuse, unemployment rates).

In the long term, investments made in areas such as economic development under the full implementation of the *New Relationship Agreement* will not only benefit First Nations people and their local communities in British Columbia, but the regional economy as a whole.

Theme 5: Addressing the socio-economic divide

First Nations, governments (municipal, provincial, federal), industry, and the broader public must focus on addressing the disparity between First Nations and non-First Nations communities. In addition to experiencing challenges centred on employment and lack of community infrastructure in the areas of housing, health, and education, Kunin (2009), Papillon and Cosentino (2004), and St. Germain and Sibbeston (2007) acknowledged that limited capacity and access to lands and resources are also determinants of Aboriginal people's overall economic development success. To effectively advance socio-economic interests within First Nations territories, one must recognize and develop mitigation initiatives that concentrate on capacity and resource management growth (e.g., community planning, technical training, and management development/education). Limitations on both human capital (e.g., local employment opportunities) and financial resources create barriers to meaningfully engage in decision making and endeavours related to economic sustainability. Unless government and First Nations policy-makers collectively commit to fund implementation of local Aboriginal holistic economic development plans, these documents will be ineffective and the socio-economic divide will widen.

At the Williams Lake planning session, participants acknowledged that:

... capacity constraints are evident as First Nations staff is very stretched in responding to immediate needs on issues such as economic sustainability (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007d:11).

First Nations participants at sessions in all communities described capacity limitations and associated resource constraints within MPB-affected First Nations communities, especially as these pertain to full and meaningful engagement in a diverse array of issues. In addressing capacity constraints, many First Nations participants noted the value of community futures development corporations in helping their communities. For example, the Community Futures Development Corporation of the Central Interior First Nations promotes and provides community-based economic and business development support services

² This is an agreement between First Nations and the Province of British Columbia to establish a new government-to-government relationship based on respect, recognition, and reconciliation of Aboriginal title and rights (Province of British Columbia 2005).

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to First Nations people within the Thompson, Shuswap, Nicola, Fraser Canyon, Lillooet, and Okanagan geographic areas. Some important services and programs provided include post-secondary training, community workshops, and cross-cultural training (Community Futures Development Corporation of the Central Interior First Nations 2008).

In addition to these training programs, First Nations communities need to strengthen their organizations (Kumar 2006). If these organizations do not have the capacity to effectively use the skills developed, the newly acquired skills tend to disappear. Like economic sustainability, capacity development must also be approached in an Aboriginal holistic manner. This means that capacity development extends beyond enhancing knowledge, skills, and abilities to include the development of organizational structures (i.e., incentives and governance) that make effective use of skills in promoting the concepts of economic development (Kumar 2006). The Osoyoos Indian Band, Westbank First Nation, and Burns Lake Band have established independent, functional, and sustainable First Nations economic development enterprises that support job creation and diversify the local economy, but that separate business from local community politics.

Advancing First Nations economic sustainability

The Aboriginal holistic approach to economic sustainability identifies the need for MPB-affected First Nations communities to measure and assess community resiliency in relation to sustaining shared interests and values within traditional territories. This holistic approach coupled with performance measures to monitor effectiveness will be important in guiding community leaders in community planning

as well as program decision making for the land base. Economic development strategies, such as *A Strategy for Developing a Sustainable Economy* (First Nations Mountain Pine Beetle Initiative 2007a), the *BC First Nations Forestry and Land Stewardship Action Plan* (First Nations Forestry Council 2008), and the *BC First Nations Economic Development Action Plan* (First Nations Leadership Council 2008), are intended to create thriving communities with a diverse economic base. Governance is essential to launching and subsequently implementing any immediate or long-term initiatives in MPB-affected communities. The establishment of co-ordinated First Nations-led organizational structures can improve access to and management of innovative economic opportunities by MPB-affected territories. This includes protecting cultural values; that is, the connection to traditional knowledge, local community-to-community relationships, and commitment to First Nations peoples' spiritual linkage to nature. The establishment of a tri-party framework (i.e., First Nations along with the governments of British Columbia and Canada) will ensure co-operation and the assignment of specific responsibilities to organizations. Identifying performance indicators and specific initiatives will be additional critical components in advancing Indigenous economic development in MPB-affected territories.

Conclusion

Although many First Nations communities will “weather the storm” of the MPB outbreak and the downturn in the economy, it will be important for First Nations communities affected by the pine beetle to co-ordinate their human capital (i.e., recognize and access local First Nations talent) and community infrastructure. This co-ordination of resources will aid in identifying, prioritizing, and implementing economic diversification initiatives that balance diverse values/interests for the provincial land base.

A strength-based approach to economic sustainability using the human, cultural, and environmental assets of local First Nations communities has the potential to turn the MPB challenge into opportunity.

Unlike some resource communities that go “bust” when a specific resource dries up, First Nations people will endure because of their interconnectedness with and interdependence on the land base of their traditional territories. By promoting a sustainable social economy, revenues from economic diversification opportunities can flow back to MPB-affected First Nations communities. This access to capital through co-operative joint ventures, micro-credit programs, and First Nations-owned businesses creates a strategic roadmap that encourages an atmosphere for partnerships and collaboration on major economic development projects. A strength-based approach to economic sustainability using the human, cultural, and environmental assets of local First Nations communities has the potential to turn the MPB challenge into opportunity, and thus, supports Indigenous economic independence, self-reliance, and community members’ spiritual and experiential connections to the land.

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Test Your Knowledge . . .

An Indigenous perspective on economic sustainability in mountain pine beetle-affected communities

How well can you recall some of the main messages in the preceding Perspectives?

Test your knowledge by answering the following questions. Answers are at the bottom of the page.

1. Approximately how many First Nations communities in British Columbia are currently affected by the MPB infestation?
 - A) Over 30
 - B) Over 50
 - C) Over 100
 - D) None of the above
2. What activities are considered traditional economies for many MPB-affected First Nations communities?
 - A) Fishing
 - B) Wild harvesting
 - C) Trading
 - D) Gathering
 - E) All of the above
3. An Aboriginal holistic approach to economic sustainability centres on First Nations communities advancing . . .
 - A) Financially driven initiatives regardless of their cultural needs
 - B) Culturally driven initiatives regardless of their financial needs
 - C) A combination of environmentally and culturally driven initiatives
 - D) A balance of financially, culturally, and environmentally driven initiatives

ANSWERS

1. C 2. E 3. D