

BUFFALO POINT FIRST NATION, MANITOBA

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Buffalo Point First Nation Resort

Ideally located on the Lake of the Woods in the Canadian Shield and bordering the United States, Buffalo Point First Nation has taken advantage of its natural beauty, diverse ecosystem and strategic location to draw year round visitors from all over North America.

The community had recognized the tourism potential on their land as early as the 1950's, but it was when Chief Jim Thunder hired four consulting firms in 1974 to create a tourist development plan. Due to the limited amount of financial and human resources, development was to occur in stages over time.

With a population of less than 80 people at the time, the community realized the immense task that lay before them. The first thing they did was to build a road leading to the peninsula. Next, they needed financing, however at the time funding was difficult to acquire for First Nations. In response to this challenge, the Chief decided to lease 100 acres of land to an investment group who used it for cottage development. This was beneficial, not only

because it brought in revenue for financing, but also because it created accommodations for the resort. As the resort grew, the First Nation was able to obtain additional funding from a variety of sources; they were no longer restricted to community funds and personal equity. They have received grants from the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the Special Agriculture and Rural Development Act (ARDA) and the Native Economic Development Program (NEDP).

Twenty years later, with the assistance of the Buffalo Point Development Corporation, the community was able to create dozens of successful businesses →



→ including a world class marina with 350 docking slips, 550 cottage, an 18 hole golf course, an RV campground, luxury rental cabins, a restaurant with a video lottery terminal lounge, and trails for hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. These amenities currently gross approximately \$4.5 million per year. Future plans include a hotel resort, health spa, Aboriginal village theme park, a cruise ship for Lake of the Woods, Aboriginal art gallery and a museum showcasing the history and culture of the community. The resort employs 50 people full time year-round, 35 people full-time for six to eight months of the year, and 15 people full-time for three or four months in the summer. Fifty per cent of these employees are Aboriginal.

The resort has also provided a market for many private businesses owned by individual members of the Buffalo Point First Nation. In addition, the corporation reinvests real estate profits from the cottage properties back into the community. The money is used to fund infrastructure developments such as roads, hydro, sanitary landfill sites, fire protection, policing, and building structures.

The keys to Buffalo Point's success have been patience, a clear vision, and a solid development strategy. John Thunder suggests that it is often best to begin by consulting with First Nations who have experience in resort development. The regulations

and bylaws these communities have developed for their resorts can often be duplicated or adapted. In many cases, this might negate the need to hire a consultant or lawyer. In Buffalo Point's case, the Development Corporation has consulted the Sechelt First Nation of BC for advice on tourism development. Also, getting things in writing ensures that there is a clear understanding between both parties.

The Buffalo Point First Nation Resort has been integral in instilling a sense of independence and autonomous decision making within this community.

However, Chief John Thunder notes that, "being able to generate revenues through enterprise development, natural resources, and other means including local taxation on our traditional territory is paramount in finally getting

out from under the Indian Act and this state of dependency. True independence and self-determination for our lives and our community's affairs is a right that is universally and globally accepted." The Buffalo Point community has made significant progress, but it is clear that work remains to be done.

The Buffalo Point First Nation proves that a small community can capitalize on the assets it possesses, develop and put in to action a strategic plan and become a world-class tourist attraction, which benefits the entire community.

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