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“We moved here for the lifestyle”: A picture of entrepreneurship in rural British Columbia

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In many rural communities, employment in the natural resource-based sectors is declining. In response, individuals and communities are examining the potential of entrepreneurship to support economic development. However, little is known about these entrepreneurs who operate in often constrained environments. By understanding this, place-specific programs can be developed that support and sustain them. This paper contributes to this discussion with research focused on a rural and remote British Columbia region. The survey results suggest that individuals often start businesses for lifestyle reasons and continue to operate them even when financially marginal. Further, despite perceptions that the rural environment is hostile, entrepreneurial opportunities and resources exist and support local community economic development. Communities, governments, and other support organizations can use these results to develop site- and context-specific policies and programs.

Keywords: small business; entrepreneurship; rural areas; economic development; British Columbia

Dans de nombreuses communautés rurales, l'emploi dans les secteurs basés sur les ressources naturelles est en déclin. En réponse, les individus et les communautés examinent le potentiel de l'entrepreneuriat pour soutenir le développement économique. Cependant, l'on en sait peu sur ces entrepreneurs qui exercent leur activité dans des milieux aux possibilités souvent restreintes. Le fait de comprendre cela permet d'élaborer, en fonction des lieux, des programmes spécifiques capables de leur apporter soutien et appui. Le présent article contribue à cette discussion par une étude axée sur une région rurale et éloignée de la Colombie-Britannique. Les résultats de l'enquête suggèrent que les individus démarrent souvent une entreprise pour des raisons de mode de vie et continuent à la faire fonctionner même lorsqu'elle n'est que marginalement rentable. De plus, malgré le fait que le milieu rural soit perçu comme hostile, les possibilités et les ressources existent en matière d'entrepreneuriat pour soutenir le développement économique des collectivités locales. Les collectivités, les gouvernements et les autres organismes de soutien peuvent utiliser ces résultats pour élaborer des politiques et des programmes spécifiques en fonction des lieux et des contextes.

Mots clés: petites entreprises; entrepreneuriat; zones rurales; développement économique; Colombie-Britannique

Introduction

In many rural and remote communities, residents have relied on employment in the natural resource sectors, which themselves have been undergoing structural and market

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changes resulting in job loss. Faced with declining populations, the communities and remaining residents are exploring the potential of entrepreneurship to create economic development by capitalizing on opportunities grounded in the local geography and culture (Apedaile 2004; Dinis 2006b; Canadian Rural Partnership 2007).

While much is assumed about rural businesses (Buss and Lin 1990; Stathopoulou, Psaltopoulos, and Skuras 2004; Shields 2005), little is actually known about these entrepreneurs and their reasons for business start up and ongoing operations in environments that are often hostile and constrained (Covin and Slevin 1989; Brush and Chaganti 1999; Kodithuwakku and Rosa 2002). As a result, the often urban-based governments and various support organizations may face difficulties appreciating the challenges facing these individuals, meaning that programs and policies may not respond to a region's specific needs (Polese and Shearmur 2002; Mochrie and Galloway 2004; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012). In many cases, programs developed to encourage and sustain a growth-oriented, urban-based enterprise are not likely appropriate for those lifestyle-oriented, rural-based ones whose geographical location places constraints on growth and profit potential.

This focus on place-specific policies and programs requires a fuller and deeper knowledge of these rural small businesses, their owners, and communities than might be gained through assumptions, macro-level statistics, and even research from other countries. As will be discussed below, while there are commonalities between rural areas, the uniqueness of each area, stemming from local geography, distance from urban areas, economic opportunities, and other factors, requires understanding and exploration drawn directly from the perspective of the small business owner (Shields 2005). By way of comparison, much of the published research on rural small business has been conducted in the United Kingdom (Kaikkonen 2005), an arguably very urban country with few places more than an hour's drive from a larger urban center (Curran and Storey 1993; Townroe and Mallalieu 1993). By contrast, distances between communities in rural and remote Canada can be very large and with many only accessible by air, water, or temporary roads (Polese and Shearmur 2002). Further, the economic base of many parts of Canada's rural and remote areas is based on forestry, fishing, and other natural resources, rather than agriculture, the focus of many studies on rural businesses (Carter 1998). Consequently, efforts must be made to understand location-specific differences and their impacts on business owners, their businesses, and communities.

This paper will contribute to this understanding of specific place with an exploration of Vancouver Island region in British Columbia by reporting on a survey conducted with business owners. This research examines the characteristics of these owners and their businesses, reasons for start-up and continued operations, and their challenges. With this knowledge, policy makers and support organizations can develop more place-specific programs that will support these owners, their businesses, and communities in their community economic development efforts.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the rural context will be defined with an examination of the resulting impact on both opportunities and constraints for rural businesses. Next, the findings from a survey of rural/remote region of British Columbia, Canada will be outlined with a discussion of owner and business characteristics as well as their perceptions of opportunities and challenges operating in their specific location. The paper concludes with general policy prescriptions that can support owners, communities, governments, and similar organizations in their work with communities in their economic development efforts.

The rural and island context

A starting point for the discussion of rural economic development is defining ‘rural’ (Dinis 2006a) and understanding the particular socio-economic and geography of a place (Markey et al. 2005; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012; Vannini 2012). However, this is not without its challenges. At one level, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between rural and urban locations as lifestyles in both become increasingly similar and more interaction between them occurs (Atterton 2003; Labrianidis 2004; OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] 2006). At the same time, much variety exists between rural areas in terms of industrial bases, economic opportunities, community makeup, climate, and proximity to urban areas. Ultimately, this constrains one’s ability to create a general definition of rural (Stathopoulou, Psaltopoulos, and Skuras 2004; Dinis 2006a). Despite this, agreement exists on the several factors that tend to be characteristic of rural areas. These places tend to be located some distance from urban areas, and have a low population density and an economic dependence on nature resources and agriculture (Apedaile 2004; OECD 2006).

In many rural areas, the issue of determining distance from larger centers, where customers, suppliers, banks, and other important infrastructure tend to be concentrated, is complex and contributes greatly to the type, scope, and scale of potential economic opportunities. Distance is not only the absolute mileage between the rural location and an urban one but also a consideration of the actual time needed to transverse a particular distance given physical barriers such as water, mountains, and road networks. This calculus includes driving and waiting time for transportation such as ferries and airplanes, money and the effort required to complete the trip (Scottish Executive 2004).

In this regard, islands present unique challenges because of issues of access related to moving goods and people by water (Beer 2004; Baldacchino and Fairbairn 2006). These ferries add a certain complexity to life and movement on and off island as outlined by Vannini (2012) in his ethnographic account of life of living on islands and to challenges associated with business operations (Baldacchino 2005). By way of example, Beer (2004) found that island-based business owners often had to budget two days’ travel for a one-day meeting on Scottish mainland when ferry schedules and weather were considered. Internet and virtual presence have not yet replaced the need for face-to-face meetings. Further, Byrom, Medway, and Warnaby (2001) show the complex ferry routes crisscrossing the Western Isles of Scotland. Ultimately, these measures for mileage/kilometers, time, and effort become proxies for accessibility; the closer in terms of distance and time, the more accessible a place may be (du Plessis et al. 2002). According to the OECD (2006), rural areas must find ways to address “the handicap of distance from markets” (52).

Moving beyond the physical characteristics of a rural area, consideration must also be given to community demographics. In particular, rural and island areas tend to be characterized by both small community sizes and low population density which translates into relatively small local markets and labor pools and gaps in necessary business and social infrastructure. Further, given historical reliance on larger employers in nature resource-based industries, communities do not often have the necessary perspectives and experience to support small businesses in their efforts (Hoy and Vaught 1980; Polese and Shearmur 2002).

Compounding these factors, owners tend to lack experience in starting and running enterprises, which in turn are small in terms of income, profits, and employee numbers (Phillipson et al. 2002). This suggests a certain limit on the owner’s and their business capacity to respond to various external shocks and other global market forces, such as exchange rates, weather, and economic downturns (Woods 2011; Markey, Halseth, and

Manson 2012). For example, British rural firms had to greatly scale back operations and lay off staff in response to the foot-and-mouth disease that essentially closed rural UK in the mid-1990s to limit spread of this highly contagious disease (Irvine and Anderson 2004; Phillipson et al. 2004; Bosworth 2012). Ultimately, rural businesses often face contexts that are potentially more challenging and hostile than those in urban settings (Covin and Slevin 1989; Westall, Ramsden, and Foley 2000; Dabson 2003).

Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, rural businesses and their owners have great potential for resiliency and innovation (Buss and Lin 1990; Smallbone, North, and Kalantaridis 1999; Anderson, Osseichuk, and Illingworth 2010). Many individuals are capitalizing on their area's unique geography and culture to develop tourism operations, local products, and various niche markets (Lane and Yoshinaga 1994; Lordkipanidze, Brezet, and Backman. 2005; Woods 2011). Rather than aspirations to high growth and profits, many are interested in meeting lifestyle objectives and perhaps with 'making do,' rather than 'making it big' (Tregear 2005; Smith 2006; Lewis 2008). Despite their lack of glamour (Brush and Chaganti 1999), these enterprises and their owners are often the economic and social backbones of their communities and contribute to economic diversity and the overall resiliency in formally single-industry towns (Joseph and Krishnaswamy 2010).

While much of the above is drawn from the macro-level and focuses on more commonalities than differences, it is important to understand the diversity that exists within these rural areas (Phillipson et al. 2004; OECD 2006). From this understanding, individuals, communities, and various levels of government can co-design programs and policies that meet the local needs (Stathopoulou, Psaltopoulos, and Skuras 2004; Labrianidis 2006). While some research has been done on rural development in Canada (NRE2 2003; Coasts Under Stress 2004) generally speaking and northern British Columbia more specifically (Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012), little has been done to understand the local context in other parts of the province where the geography grounded in islands creates different opportunities and constraints (Fischer and Encontre 1998; Baldacchino 2005). Baldacchino's (2002) review of Prince Edward Island and PEI Preserve Co is one exception. This paper will contribute to that discussion with a focus on Vancouver Island and surrounding Gulf Islands in British Columbia, Canada.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger project to explore the types of challenges faced by rural business owners, the methods they use to mitigate them, the resources upon which they draw, and the nature of the impact of Canada's rural geographical diversity on owner and business demographics, challenges, and responses. This particular research is focused on developing descriptive demographic statistics and further information about challenges faced and methods used to mitigate these by small businesses in rural and remote areas of Vancouver Island and the surrounding smaller islands.

Building from themes found in two earlier rounds of in-depth interviews (Siemens 2007; 2009, 2012b), a survey was developed in the Fall 2010–Spring 2011. To allow comparison with other rural areas, questions were duplicated from earlier surveys (Keeble et al. 1992; Townroe and Mallalieu 1993; Raley and Moxey 2000; Phillipson et al. 2002; Galloway and Mochrie 2006; Stone and Stubbs 2007; Ateljevic 2009). Besides collecting basic demographic information about themselves and their business, owners were asked about challenges that they encountered, family involvement in the enterprise, and community support for the business.

As found in other studies of rural businesses (Raley and Moxey 2000; BC Stats 2005b), it can be difficult to compile a complete list of enterprises that operate in these rural remote locations. No single source exists with information about all businesses in a particular region. Further, some enterprises may not be on official lists because they are not incorporated or have employees. Finally, some may be informal in nature and not necessarily see themselves as ‘real’ businesses (Williams 2008), meaning that they do not appear on formal lists. The end result is that it will be difficult to determine the specific representativeness of the completed surveys (Raley and Moxey 2000). Consequently, a database of enterprises was created from community, tourism, and chamber of commerce websites and directories in communities outside the larger urban centers on the island (Victoria/Capital Regional District, Nanaimo, Campbell River, and Courtenay/Comox). In Spring 2011, the survey was then distributed by email to the 1372 businesses directly plus an additional 11 requests for participation through email lists of chamber of commerce and other support organizations. However, not all businesses that were invited to participate are still in existence. Ultimately, 141 usable responses were provided, approximately a 10% response rate. As a result, the responses tend to be from businesses which are still operating and able to negotiate their challenges and succeed, albeit on their own terms.

The responses were analyzed using statistical software package known as SPSS. Besides generating basic descriptive statistics, further analysis was completed to evaluate the challenges, responses, and resources across owners’ and their businesses’ demographic information. The open-ended answers were analyzed using a ‘grounded theorizing technique’ (Anderson 2000) which focused on the themes that emerged from the data. This involved organizing, reading, and coding the data to determine categories, themes, and patterns which was then checked against the analysis from the closed questions and literature. This activity was first undertaken by a research assistant and then confirmed by the primary researcher. Overall, the process was an iterative process, involving movement between data, codes, and concepts, constantly comparing the data in the various forms to itself.

Geographical context for study

This section provides the context for this study with a focus on Vancouver Island and surrounding smaller islands’ geography, population distribution, economic base, and available transportation infrastructure.

Located on Canada’s west coast, Vancouver Island, British Columbia is a relatively sparsely populated island with the majority of the population concentrated in the south-eastern part of the island. Communities in the rest of the island and on the small islands tend to have full-time population of less than 10,000 residents (BC Stats 2013). Summer populations may be higher. The region can be seen in [Map 1](#).

In terms of transportation infrastructure, Vancouver Island itself has one major highway and one secondary highway that connects the communities on the island’s eastern side, as seen in [Map 1](#). Unpaved roads, used primarily for logging activities, connect the rest of the communities. As seen in [Maps 2](#) and [3](#), BC Ferries, a crown corporation, and private boats connect the smaller islands to the Vancouver Island, which in turn is accessible by BC Ferries and plane to the rest of the province and beyond. The ferry schedule tends to vary by the day and across seasons, with some communities having reduced or no ferry access in the off-season (Vannini 2012). These communities also face regular



Map 1. Map of Vancouver Island with roads and communities indicated (Tourism B.C., n.d.).



Map 2. Ferry connections between Vancouver Island and the Mainland. (BC Ferries 2012).



Map 3. Ferry connections between Vancouver Island and the southern Gulf Islands. (BC Ferries 2012). Written permission was obtained from BC Ferries for the use of these maps in this article.

road closure, ferry cancellations, power outages, and other shortages during severe weather (Hume and Fong 2006; Kines 2006).

Traditionally, the region's economic base has focused on the natural resource industries, such as forestry, fishing, and mining (Rajala 2006; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012). However, these industries have seen layoffs stemming from global forces (GSGislason & Associates Ltd. 1998; Hayter 2000; Rajala 2006). As a result, many communities, especially those in the northern part of the island, saw families and young men leave for employment elsewhere and began looking for economic alternatives (Hayter 2000). Some of these communities have seen some population growth as retired people move in to enjoy the relatively mild climate, especially in comparison to other parts of Canada (BC Stats 2005a).

While large corporations dominate the nature resource sectors (Marshall 2000), most businesses on Vancouver Island and surrounding islands are small with fewer than 20 employees and not associated with large chains (Malinick and Matthews 2005; BC Stats 2012) with concentrations in retail, tourism, manufacturing, aquaculture, and the public sector, beyond traditional industries. In particular, tourism, with its associated businesses such as accommodation, food services, transportation, and other activities, has been

growing in numbers (Western Economic Diversification and Government of British Columbia 2006).

Survey findings

Analysis of survey results provides demographic information on the owners, their businesses, the challenges that they encounter and their reasons for business start up and continuation.

Table 1. Owner demographics.

	Owners (<i>n</i>)
Own the business (141)	Yes: 88% No: 12%
Length of time owning the business (129)	Less than 1 year: 7% 1–5 years: 32% 6–10 years: 27% 11–20 years: 19% 21–30 years: 12% More than 30 years: 3%
Gender (136)	Male: 43% Female: 54%
Age (135)	20–29: 2% 30–39: 10% 40–49: 21% 50–59: 37% Older than 60: 30%
General level of education (135)	Some high school: 4% High school graduate: 30% College graduate: 33% University graduate: 19% Postgraduate: 18%
Formal training in your industry (134)	A certificate: 26% A diploma: 17% A bachelor's degree: 6% A postgraduate degree: 6% None: 50%
Original before present location (136)	From here: 16% Other place on Vancouver Island: 16% Other place in BC: 24% Other Canadian provincial/territory: 33% USA: 7% Other: 10%
Length of time in the community (135)	Less than 1 year: 2% Between 1 and 5 years: 13% Between 6 and 10 years: 22% Between 11 and 20 years: 29% More than 20 years: 31% Born and raised here: 4%
Involvement in community organizations (117)	Chamber of commerce: 87% Rotary: 5% Lions: 8% Local government: 14% Other: 32%

Owners

As seen in [Table 1](#), the survey respondents tended to be the owners with two-thirds owning their business for less than 10 years (though the business may have been in operation for much longer). The majority of the respondents tended to be older than 50 years and women. While the majority had some post-secondary education, most did not have any formal training in the industry in which their business was situated. When asked about the factors that lead them to their involvement in their business, they highlighted the ability to live in a rural and/or remote area (94%), achieve an ambition (82%), work from home (81%), achieve a secure income (72%), and make the most of a commercial opportunity (71%).

For the most part, these respondents were in-migrants to their community with the majority residing there for over 10 years at the time of the survey. Most came from other parts of British Columbia and beyond. They are very committed to their communities and are actively involved in the various local organizations, such as chamber of commerce, volunteer fair departments, artist guilds and other arts organizations, and tourism advisory boards.

Business characteristics

As seen in [Table 2](#), these businesses tended to be sole proprietorship and started by the owners themselves drawing upon their own and/or family savings. Very few used government programs and/or loans as financing. They are concentrated in hospitality type businesses, including service, tourism, arts and crafts, and other similar enterprises. Most are open all year round with most business occurring in the summer. The slower seasons tend to be spent building the product line for the next season, recuperating, and working at another job.

Further, these enterprises are small as measured by income and employees. Almost 50% have less than \$50,000 in business income and a further 17% is between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Most enterprises have less than five employees who are often family members and employed on a seasonal and/or part-time basis. For the most part, these businesses have also survived the challenging first year of operation with over 50% being older than 10 years. Of note, several operations have more than \$1,000,000 in business income and between 51 and 100 employees, making them medium-sized operations.

As seen in [Table 3](#), either by necessity or opportunity, these businesses had a varied customer base, drawing locally, from Vancouver Island and the small islands, from BC, across Canada, the US, and beyond. In supplement, some are also developing online customer base. The same trend can be seen with regards to suppliers in [Table 4](#).

Family involvement in the business

As seen in [Table 5](#), the family is highly involved in the business with co-ownership with spouse/life partner for almost half the respondents. A majority of the businesses are operated from the family property and contributed some portion of family income. For a quarter of the respondents, the business is of a sufficient size to contribute 100% of the family income. Spouses/life partners, children, and parents are also active in the business as employees, whether on a part-time, full-time, or seasonal basis and tend to be paid at market rates, as shown in [Table 6](#).

Table 2. Business demographics.

	Business (<i>n</i>)
Type of ownership (132)	Sole proprietorship: 50% Partnership: 18% Corporation: 32%
Type of business (141) ¹	Service/hospitality: 30% Tourism: 19% Arts and crafts: 13% Retail/hospitality: 11%
Length of time in operation (130)	Less than 1 year: 4% 1–5 years: 22% 6–10 years: 21% 11–20 years: 25% 21–30 years: 13% More than 30 years: 15%
Business start-up versus purchase (133)	A start-up by owner: 47% A start-up with spouse/family/friend: 23% Purchased: 22% A takeover from a friend: 3% A takeover from family: 7%
Funding of initial opening of/initial investment in the business (136)	Personal savings: 62.5% Family savings: 18% Investment from other partners: 7% Business loan: 18% Government grant: 3% Other: 24% Did not need funding: 4%
Business income levels last year (139)	Less than \$50,000: 48% Between \$50,000 and \$100,000: 17% Between \$100,000 and \$200,000: 12% Between \$200,000 and \$500,000: 12% Between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000: 8% More than \$1,00,000: 4%
Number of employees (75) ²	Fewer than 5: 75% Between 6 and 10: 11% Between 11 and 20: 7% Between 21 and 50: 5% Between 51 and 100: 3%
Year round business operations (140)	Yes: 77% No: 23%
Season in which business income is the highest (134)	Spring: 6% Summer: 83% Fall: 9% Winter: 2%
Off-season activities (132) ³	Second job: 24% Second business: 21% Take courses/focus on education: 21% Build product base for the next season 49% Take care of the house while family members work: 20% Do nothing/relax/travel: 28%

¹Top 4 responses.²Approximately, 45% of respondents indicated that they did not have employees.³Respondents could select more than one answer.

Table 3. Who are your customers (clients)?

Locations	Always (N)	Often	Rarely	Never	N/A	Total responses (N)
Local	0	16	9	4	0	29
other places on Vancouver Island/ the other islands	3	19	10	0	0	32
other places in BC	1	25	6	0	0	32
other places in Canada	0	21	10	0	0	31
across the US	1	16	13	1	0	31
Elsewhere	4	13	14	0	0	31
Online	2	11	4	4	6	27
other businesses	0	6	10	6	5	27
government organizations	0	0	11	12	4	27

Perspectives on challenges and business success

The respondents were asked to identify their primary challenges and the regularity with each they experienced them. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most common challenges centered around the access to trained and reliable staff, supplies/suppliers, cellphone coverage¹, customers, and government supports were focused on a seasonal basis. These individuals also identified time availability, level of taxes, profit levels, and the rural nature of their community as challenges, as outlined in Table 7.

The respondents provided further elaboration of some of the challenges when asked whether their business might be more successful if they operated elsewhere. As one respondent indicated 'If we were located in a slightly larger area, or had better access (not ferries or planes) then it might be easier to bring in more customers.' Another provided a detailed list of some of the challenges with

it costs more to live in a rural area, higher costs for supplying water via CRD² as we are on lake water and the filtration system supplies 128 residences but cost for doing business w CRD is 2.5 million shared for these few home/businesses. Also property tax higher, getting supplies here is costlier, delays in delivery due to location, can not access some cost effective items like IKEA furniture in a cost effective manner due to location. Cost of fuel higher for vehicles. Dealing w any rural governing body is a time consuming and a MAJOR inefficient endeavour, usually fruitless.

Table 4. Where are your suppliers located?

Location	Always (N)	Often	Never	Rarely	N/A	Total responses (N)
Local	4	21	1	5	0	31
Elsewhere on Vancouver Island	3	19	3	2	2	29
Elsewhere within BC	1	11	3	7	3	25
Elsewhere in Canada	0	7	6	10	4	27
Elsewhere in the United States	0	6	8	11	3	28
Elsewhere	0	2	10	6	5	23

Table 5. Family involvement in the enterprise.

Family involvement (<i>n</i>)	
Ownership with spouse/life partner (136)	Yes: 46% No: 54%
Located on the family property (141)	Yes: 59% No: 41%
Percent that business contributes to family income (141)	Less than 25%: 33% Between 25% and 50%: 20% Between 51% and 75%: 13% Between 76% and 99%: 12% 100%: 25%
Family members as employees (141)	Yes: 57% No: 43%

For others, challenges lie with the local community. One respondent said ‘This community has little to attract visitors, and actively discourages them through our local Trust Council’s bylaws. Some Vancouver Island communities have done things to deliberately attract tourism, but not this one. Island visits are negatively impacted by rising ferry and transportation costs.’ Another respondent noted

The main issue is the local government—Islands Trust and the lack of support for business - even one such as mine that helps make this a self sustainable island. This is changing with a growing number of business minded residents who are beginning to work with the Trust members to educate them on how the businesses do want to protect the beauty of our island.

Issues with transportation infrastructure were common complaints. For some, the ferry is a continued frustration with ‘huge increases in ferry costs and high Canadian dollar has almost eliminated tourism from our business. Texada Island requires people to take 3 different ferries to reach our island from both Vancouver Island and Vancouver.’ For others, the road infrastructure could be problematic with ‘the nearest city of 10K+ is a 3 hour drive away, half of this is on a gravel logging road. Our location is rugged and remote, this is part of the appeal, however, it limits our customer base.’

While the owners realize that their businesses might be larger and more financially secure in an urban location, it becomes clear from their reflections that there is more motivating them than just business success. As one highlighted, a larger center would provide a ‘larger market place with more people, responsive and favourable local gov’t (sic).’

Table 6. Family members as employees.

Family member	Part time (<i>N</i>)	Full time	Seasonally	N/A	Total responses (<i>N</i>)
Spouse/partner	32	18	10	4	64
Siblings	1	3	4	10	18
Children	18	4	14	7	43
Parents	5	3	1	6	15
In-laws	2	0	0	8	10
Aunts/uncles/cousins	0	0	0	9	9

Table 7. Frequency of challenges.

Challenge	Weekly	Monthly	Seasonally	Never	Total responses
Access to trained and reliable staff	16¹	10	47	41	114
Access to funds necessary to retain trained and reliable staff	11	8	28	53	100
Access to employee development and training opportunities	10	6	29	54	99
Access to supplies/suppliers	19	18	29	51	117
Access to broadband internet	21	3	10	79	113
Access to reliable cell phone coverage	51	10	11	45	117
Access to customers	27	8	45	35	115
Access to business and other supports	18	15	24	44	101
Access to necessary government supports	29	12	22	41	104
Access to necessary mechanical/electrical supports	12	14	16	55	97
Access to business markets	16	15	31	40	102
Other business owners in the community	7	4	16	74	101
Access to social community	8	9	14	67	98
Having enough hours in a day	43	6	32	24	105
Lack of previous business/industry/management experience	9	8	21	60	98
Cost of rent	12	18	8	59	97
Cost of taxes	24	14	26	41	105
Making enough to keep the business open	27	18	40	28	113
The rural nature of the community	25	11	29	39	104
Other opportunities for myself/for my family members	29	10	26	33	98

¹The top answers are highlighted in bold.

However, many realize that this would come at a cost, often in the form of more competition. One owner stated that ‘A small bookstore and gallery does fairly well in a small community of dedicated readers and supporters of local businesses and artisans. In Victoria or Vancouver, a similar business would be lost in a sea of similar businesses.’

While the rural nature is a challenge, some owners have designed opportunities around the rural location itself. As one stated, ‘this bussiness (sic) is selling the experience of being in this rural environment.’ Another reflected, that ‘it does’t (sic) get any better than the comox valley.’ For others, the rural location brings other benefits:

the workspace that I have here is affordable and large. Something I could not have in the city. Also the island is a destination for people to come and buying my product is part of their overall travel experience. There is a built in community here to support the work I do.

Another stated

I don’t want it to be somewhere else. I guess if I lived in another community I could work more but I don’t want to. I want to balance family time and my financial needs. Living in my community means sacrafcing (sic) conveniences and added income.

One owner focused on the balance that often must be made with ‘I don’t know. We moved here for the lifestyle... Would I be more successful if I were more stressed, but had access to more customers?’ Another reflected that ‘Our business runs primarily to enable the family and our employees to live on Salt Spring.’ Ultimately, operating a business in a rural and/or remote location becomes a series of trade-offs as noted by one respondent who noted ‘Important strength and key to stability is being based on the island. However it does place a controlling cap or limit on market size or options to expand off-island.’

For the most part, these owners are optimistic about next year’s business profits. Of the 76 respondents who indicated that they expected business profits to be higher in the next year over the last, 61 provided more detail on their belief. About one-third attributed the expected growth in profits to factors outside their control, such as weather, improved economy, chance, and optimism. The remainder identified changes in their own business strategies, such as new locations, marketing strategies, and new products, as reasons for the anticipated higher profits. As one observed, the business ‘was very run down when we bought it and we have improved and built up repeat clientele (sic) each year.’ As one respondent commented as they explained their answer, they are ‘ever the optimist.’ At the time of survey, many of the businesses were already booked for the summer season, drawing on repeat business and word of mouth advertising. For others, they were hopeful the weather would improve over the previous year. One respondent lamented that ‘Last year we had one of the coldest summers on record. Our organic vegetable production was down because the required heat and sunshine were missing.’ With great emphasis, another commented that ‘WEATHER WAS PARTICULARLY BAD LAST SUMMER. IT RAINED A LOT PEOPLE WENT HOME RAHTER (sic) THSN (sic) BE WET AND COLD.’³

For those who anticipated that profits would be lower, most identified external factors, rather than their own actions, as the reasons. Some owners recognized that rising ferry costs were both deterring tourists from visiting as well as increasing transportation costs. For others, the economy continued to be a concern. One suggested that ‘While our business has grown each year, we are cautious in our projections this year to the still-soft economy in Canada and in the U.S. (both our strongest market for visitors).’ Another commented that their island ‘is penalized by a huge increase in ferry costs, and the US dollar is low so we are getting fewer visitors from the US, and they are a substantial part of my client base.’

Discussion

These participants and their businesses reflect many similarities of those in other rural areas. While a few businesses report significant business income (greater than \$500,000) and the ability to contribute 100% of the family income, most are small with less than \$100,000 and contribute less than 50% of family income with little potential for growth and high profits (Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012). Further, these businesses are not the ones associated with the ‘heroic, individual entrepreneur’ (Oughton, Wheelock, and Baines 2003, 331) but rather with an owner’s ability to find ways to use their capabilities to create employment for themselves, their family, and community members while remaining living in a desired location (Smith 2006). For most of these respondents, this location is a deliberate choice given that they have relocated from elsewhere (Kalaritaridis and Bika 2006; Stockdale 2006; Stone and Stubbs 2007). In many cases, these businesses facilitate the economic and social objectives of the owner, their families, and the

community (Irvine and Anderson 2004). These owners realized that they might be more financially successful elsewhere; however, that success would come at a cost in terms of stress, time, and work effort and less desirable location. At the same time, they realize that their geographical location – rural and island – provides marketing advantages which allows them to compete with larger enterprises in less ‘romantic’ locations (Siemens 2013).

As found in other research, these results suggest that rural families take a household approach to family income. The family participates on many different levels, from use of the family property and savings to being employees (Aldrich and Cliff 2003; Oughton, Wheelock, and Baines 2003; Alsos and Carter 2006; Markantoni and van Hoven 2012). Further, the family does not necessarily expect that the business will generate 100% of the household income but rather will be one piece to be supplemented by other sources (Baines, Wheelock, and Oughton 2002; Phillipson et al. 2004). Consequently, it becomes difficult to consider the business as a separate entity from the family. Rather, as suggested elsewhere, the business is embedded in the family and draws upon and contributes back to its resources (Habbershon and Williams 1999; Aldrich and Cliff 2003). Despite their micro size and relatively marginal financial success, these businesses are providing something beyond financial rewards, which includes psychological benefits such as family security, self-confidence, lifestyle, and fringe benefits (Wheelock and Baines 1998). The family’s participation allows these often financially marginal enterprises to continue operating because their involvement is critical to the achievement of family goals (Wheelock and Baines 1998; Getz, Carlsen, and Morrison 2004).

These results also suggest that these owners are not merely focused on themselves, their family, and businesses but also to the community itself and have been for many years. These owners are active members in community business and social groups (Bruce and Halseth 2004) and hire and buy locally. And just as importantly, the community serves as a stable and core customer base when outside markets are impacted by factors beyond the owners’ control (Kirby 1987; Morrison 2006; Young 2010).

These respondents provide attention to the fact that, given the businesses’ relatively small size and challenges associated with transportation and other infrastructure, these enterprises are constrained in their ability to influence outside factors (Fischer and Encontre 1998; Baldacchino and Fairbairn 2006). As a result, a sense of vulnerability exists among these respondents and many other rural businesses (Phillipson et al. 2004). While these communities and individual business owners are creating potentially sustainable enterprises outside natural resource sectors, they are still very much small players in a global tourism market and continue to be subject to decision makers who are located some distance from these communities (Markey et al. 2005). Even small changes in exchange rates, global economy, government policy, transportation availability and accessibility, weather patterns, and even diseases can have big impacts on these businesses and their communities (Baum and Hagen 1999). The earlier example of the devastating impact of foot-and-mouth disease on rural farms and businesses alike and challenged their ability to survive in both the short term and longer (Irvine and Anderson 2004; Phillipson et al. 2004). However, despite this situation, island and ‘islandness’ provide advantages to those who are prepared to be flexible and nimble (Baldacchino 2002; 2005).

This study reinforces the tyranny of water for coastal and island communities and a key barrier for businesses to overcome in order to be successful. Water transportation often remains the only cost effective method, even as the cost of truck and rail transportation has been decreasing (Bollman 2007; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012). These

respondents reflected on the ongoing tension between island communities, the rest of the province, the provincial government, and BC Ferries about the place of salt-water ferries within the transportation network, the extent to which users, residents, and visitors, should bear the full cost of the service, and the resulting impact on these communities as fares continue to increase while service decreases (Denman Island Residents Association 2011; Island Trust Council 2012; Kirk & Co. Consulting Ltd. and Mustel Group 2013). It should be noted that inland ferries do not operate under the same expectations and are in fact fully subsidized by the provincial government, an ongoing frustration for these island communities (BC Ferry Commission 2012; Government of BC n.d.).

At the same time, there is a sense of resiliency among this group (Phillipson et al. 2004) and perhaps, even taking advantage of ‘incentives to adapt’ as suggested by Baldacchino and Bertram (2009). Many of these businesses have been in operation for a significant length of long time and survived the always challenging first year. This demonstrates that these owners have found strategies and aligned their priorities to at least survive, if not to thrive. They draw upon family members and property and are focused on a household approach to income (Oughton, Wheelock, and Baines 2003; Salmi 2005; Markantoni and van Hoven 2012). Further, they have ensured a diversified client base without an over-reliance on community members or customers from the outside. For those who attract tourists to their enterprises, they have found a way to offset transportation costs, time, and efforts to visitors (Baldacchino 2002, 2005). Finally, the owners stay active in the off-season with a focus on improving their business by exploring other products and markets, maintaining a loyal customer base, running other businesses, holding other employment, and even enjoying free time with a scaled down or closed business (Jussila, Lotvonen, and Tykkyläinen 1992; Baum and Hagen 1999; Getz and Nilsson 2004; Phillipson et al. 2004; Kines 2006). Ultimately, these owners are committed to their communities and a certain lifestyle and their businesses provide a means to do so (Tregear 2005; Lewis 2008).

Conclusions and recommendations

This research contributes – both to a specific understanding of small businesses in a specific context of British Columbians, as well as more generally to rural small businesses and their owners – important knowledge for the development of appropriate place-based policies and programs which will assist with efforts by residents, communities, and governments alike to achieve economic and community growth and diversification (Bradford 2005; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012). Economic opportunities exist in these regions and people want to continue to live and work there as well as visit.

These respondents remind decision makers that policies must be viewed through a rural lens to ensure that urban models are not transplanted without thought to rural and island areas (Bosworth 2012; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012). Further, decision makers need to experience a particular rural context over an extended period of time, rather than read a report or visit for a meeting, to fully understand the particular context (Beer 2004; Markey, Halseth, and Manson 2012).

This raises questions on how communities, governments and support organizations can best work with owners, their businesses and communities to support economic and community development. What are the appropriate intervention points within a place-based policy for rural areas generally and Vancouver Island region more specifically?

At a beginning point, within a coordinated approach (Policy Horizons Canada 2011), all levels of government need to look beyond traditional granting programs as forms of

economic development. As supported in earlier research (Siemens 2008), these rural entrepreneurs are relying on personal and family savings, rather than government funds to start up and operate. Instead, government can play a role increasing resiliency and the ability to respond to external forces among these and nascent owners through locally delivered training and capacity building (Mazzarol, Reboud, and Tye 2006; Siemens 2012a). These efforts would focus on the primacy of non-financial goals, idea recognition and evaluation, the need for multiple income sources and market diversification for business sustainability, and the availability of local resources, including the family and community, all within the context of a specific geographical environment (Siemens 2012a).

At the more local level, the community plays several important roles that strengthen these small businesses' ability to be resilient and sustainable over the long term. First, by shopping local, the local residents can provide a stable, core customer base which can sustain the business when outside markets are less than robust (Kirby 1982, 1987). Second, the community along with tourism associations, chambers of commerce, and other like-minded organizations can cooperate to promote businesses and the community to the benefit of both (Anderson, Jack, and McAuley 2001; Baldacchino and Fairbairn 2006; Dinis 2006b). Finally, local and regional governments should review laws to ensure that they are supportive of community and economic development objectives.

Attention must also be given to ensure that various government ministries and departments are working in concert to economic and community development. Given the island nature of the region, the transportation infrastructure becomes particularly important and under much debate as the ferry system is under review, a process which will likely see continued increase in fares and decreases in schedule, particularly to the smaller islands (Carmeron 2013; Kirk & Co. Consulting Ltd. and Mustel Group 2013). For many islands, necessary social and businesses services, such as hospitals, schools, banks, and many others, are accessible only through ferry trips. The ability to easily access these services will influence the decision of whether to stay long term in a community (Halseth and Ryser 2004; Baldacchino 2005; Getz and Carlsen 2005). This consideration for improved transportation infrastructure also extends to those communities accessible only by unpaved road (see Map 1). Building on past successes that facilitated tourism with improved roads in communities such as Tofino, the provincial government has paved roads between Sooke, Port Renfrew, and Lake Cowichan to create a driving trip for visitors (Super Natural British Columbia 2013). Residents have taken advantage of these improved roads to access goods and services located outside these small communities. This infrastructure and access to it become important tools of economic development, not just the purview of ministries of transportation.

While this research only focused on understanding a relatively small region in rural and remote Canada with a focus on successful enterprises, it points to the need for more exploration of other similar regions in British Columbia, Canada and beyond to ensure that economic and community programs and policies address the specific context. For example, what is the experience of small businesses operating along in communities such as Powell River, Bella Bella, and Bella Coola which are accessed only by ferries further north along the British Columbian coast? And how about northern communities which are only accessible by ice roads in the winter and airplane in the summer? Do they face similar or different types of challenges and opportunities? What policy responses would be most appropriate to support these owners, enterprises, and communities? And there is one last set of voices to be heard, namely those who no longer operate their businesses in these island and rural locations; these voices were not heard in this study. What were their experiences? What challenges did they face? What impact did transportation

infrastructure, or lack thereof, have on business operations? What could have been done to better support these owners, enterprises, and communities? With answers to these questions, government and communities alike can work together to craft place- and space-specific policies that best support owners, enterprises, and communities.

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Notes

1. Large parts of the region are still not serviced by cellphones.
2. CRD is the Capital Regional District.
3. Emphasis in the original quote.

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