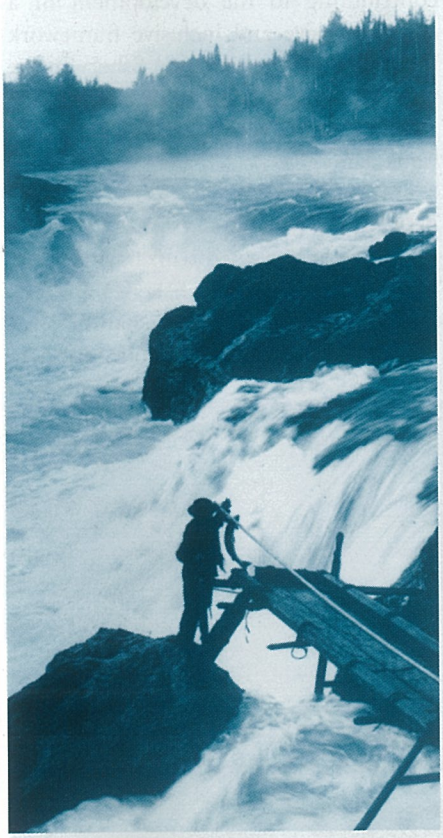

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR Rural Sustainability

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IN THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS THE BATTLES BETWEEN FORCES FOR AND AGAINST GLOBALIZATION HAVE GATHERED WORLD WIDE ATTENTION. THESE BATTLES HAVE INCLUDED THE "THE BATTLE FOR SEATTLE" AND THE RECENT PROTESTS IN ITALY. FOR SOME TIME NOW, SMALLER, LESS SENSATIONAL BATTLES HAVE EXISTED. THESE BATTLES HAVE OCCURRED IN SMALL RURAL RESOURCE-BASED AND AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES OF CANADA. OFTEN THESE BATTLES ARE FOUND IN COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE BEEN SEVERELY IMPACTED BY THE INDUSTRIAL GLOBALIZATION AGENDA, THE COUNTERATTACK BY THE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNITY AND THE SIGNIFICANT DOWNTURN AND CHANGES IN THE RESOURCE INDUSTRY.

One area whose communities have been involved in such battles is the West Coast of Vancouver Island, a rural area of B.C. comprised of fourteen First Nations politically aligned through the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council and seven city and municipal governments represented by the Regional District of Alberni-Clayoquot, consisting of a total population under 40,000. In the early eighties, the largest center in the region, Port Alberni, had its secondary forest product workforce cut to a third of its original size as the largest forest company in the region, MacMillan Bloedel, shifted its secondary production to cheaper labour pools or totally cut secondary processing altogether. At the same time, Federal fisheries policies, focused towards privatization and consolidation, resulted in the rich fishing grounds adjacent to the west coast communities being disenfranchised from the local fishermen and community processors. In 1992, a major environmental battle over Clayoquot Sound left the logging communities in the Region in further economic turmoil. In 1999 the Sockeye Salmon Crisis meant, for many, the end of their livelihood. Continued downturning of the resource industry has left the rural communities in the region, like so many others in coastal B.C., struggling to survive.

Citizens recognized that the catalyst for rebuilding a viable, sustainable future in these West Coast communities had to come from within the communities themselves. The critical question remained, "are there enough people with energy or spirit left to rebuild and fight back?" Changes of this magnitude are often so devastating that, for those remaining in these communities all energies are focused on staying alive financially. Political action and community rebuilding become luxuries few can afford. However, the passion of those wanting their communities to survive serves as the fuel towards this rebuilding effort. It was this passion that sparked the spirits of the West Coast citizens to battle for their communities.

On the West Coast, one of the major responses to the significant changes that occurred was to have native and non-native leaders put their differences aside and

begin meeting to discuss how to fight for the sustainability of their communities. The Coastal Community Network hosted its first conference in Port Alberni in 1992, focused on the controversial Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy enacted that year by the federal government. This strategy created severe racial tensions in many fishing communities along the B.C. coast. One of the aims of the conference was to find common ground in the face of these tensions as an effective response to this strategy. These coordinated and collaborative efforts by native and non-native groups and sectors were critical to responding to the devastating impacts of the changes.

Over the next few years a series of local regional conferences were held which focused on principles of social economic sustainability and native/non-native and sectoral cooperation and collaboration. One of the outcomes of these conferences for the West Coast was to form a Regional Fisheries Board that would allow communities a voice in the resource policies that were negatively affecting their communities. Two organizations were formed regionally to promote this concept – the West Coast Sustainability Association (WCSA) and the Regional Aquatic Management Society (RAMS). These organizations focused on coordinating federal, provincial and local government agencies to support social and economic solutions to the transition and changes experienced by communities within the Region.

The purpose of the Area Based Management Board was to act as a protective policy umbrella as a variety of regional economic and sustainability initiatives unfolded. Problems were experienced as the ongoing policy initiatives of the federal government, particularly the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), ran counter to the policies needed and promoted by community. The result was lengthy delays in the formation of the board and slow implementation of the initiatives. A number of large industry organizations also put significant pressure on government to stall the process, as they saw their power to influence policy diminishing under a more consensus-based shared decision-making model. As of this writing, the board had still not being fully implemented. Several individuals and coalitions on the West Coast, in an attempt to get government attention to the crisis occurring in B.C. rural coastal communities, held hunger strikes, rallies and letter writing campaigns. These actions finally led to a review of the decision-making process within the DFO, whose own mandate called for community consultation.

However, the actions taken by these individuals and coalitions did not result in the implementation of community solutions, such as that offered by an Area Based Management Board. The review resulted only in yet another report. Another impediment to implementing the Area Based Management Board and other solutions has been the recent HRDC crisis which has caused local offices to cut funding, so that small non-profits such as WCSA have been forced to shut their doors.

What are the solutions for communities struggling to regain their balance after major economic changes, manage their difficult transitions and rebuild their social and economic viability in a sustainable and resilient manner? Certainly history and experience tell us that collaboration, coordination, planning and diversification are necessary components to resiliency and sustainable rebuilding. A regional community approach is likely to be stronger than a single community response. Support from local, provincial and federal governments is necessary, but in a timing and a manner that is driven by community priorities, not by government, industry or individual agendas. Although B.C. does have small successes to celebrate in their work towards achieving community transition management and sustainable social economic viability, the long-term outcome of rural communities in B.C. remains a question in most people's mind.

In B.C. the governments' continued support of industry consolidation into the hands of a few trans-national companies, the continued push towards individual quotas in fisheries, the support of raw log experts and the consolidation of access to resources into the hands of fewer and fewer absentee landlords are examples of activities and policies that do not support rural community sustainability principles. Continuation of these actions and policies will most likely lead to rural bankruptcy and at the very least to an increase in the urban/rural divide and the economic disparity between those who have and those who have not.

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The longer the delay in supporting and working with communities to implement principles of sustainability the more will be forever lost. There are many countries around the world where rural resource communities are now ghost towns or merely tourist traps with the remnants of the resource industry. B.C. is likely to follow this path if the provincial and Canadian governments continue in their present direction and do not respond or enact policies that support sustainability principles.

Is it too late? For many individuals in rural communities, yes it is, as the last few years of government ineptness have bankrupted them and left them on the beach. But in the words of Leonard Cohen, "some hope can always be found to allow those of us left to soldier on … Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything and that is how the light gets in."

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The Coastal Community Network is a not for profit Society committed to the sustainable economic and social well being of coastal communities in B.C.