

## Pivoting in the Tourism Sector: COVID-19

Rebecca Wilson-Mah  
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management  
Royal Roads University

Kathy MacRae  
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management  
Royal Roads University

Correspondence email: [Rebecca.wilsonmah@royalroads.ca](mailto:Rebecca.wilsonmah@royalroads.ca)

### Authors:

Rebecca Wilson-Mah is an associate professor in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management. Drawing on her education and personal and professional experience, she strives to create authentic and participatory approaches to learning and problem solving. Rebecca is an award-winning case writer and reviewer and associate editor for tourism and hospitality cases for The International Journal of Instructional Cases. She researches and writes cases that present applied and factual organizational problems for students to analyze and then aim to resolve.

Kathy MacRae is the executive director of the Commercial Bear Viewing Association, advocating for the bear-viewing industry in British Columbia, Canada. Kathy is also an associate faculty member at Royal Roads University where she teaches tourism students to understand how organizations can partner for change. Kathy works with both government officials and others in the tourism industry to ensure a viable and regenerative tourism industry.

A concise case from the *International Journal of Instructional Cases*

[www.ijicases.com](http://www.ijicases.com)

Copyright 2022: International Journal of Instructional Cases

This case is only intended for use by the purchaser within a pedagogic setting and sharing with other third parties, or republication, is expressly forbidden.

## Pivoting in the Tourism Sector: COVID-19

Rebecca Wilson-Mah  
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management  
Royal Roads University

Kathy MacRae  
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management  
Royal Roads University

Correspondence email: [Rebecca.wilsonmah@royalroads.ca](mailto:Rebecca.wilsonmah@royalroads.ca)

### Acknowledgement

*Kevin Smith and the case authors, acknowledge that this case is a shared story about five entrepreneurs Kevin Smith, Russell Markel, Randy Burke, Ross Campbell, and Eric Boyum and the First Nation communities of Kitasoo Xai's/xais, Gitga'at, Heiltsuk, Wuikinuxv, and Nuxalk. (added on request of Maple Leaf Adventures).*

On April 8, 2020, Kevin Smith, the owner of Maple Leaf Adventures, headquartered in Victoria, BC, thought back to when tourism was flourishing. The Maple Leaf Adventures brand was established and represented an extraordinary ecotourism experience in a marine environment. Smith had spent much of the morning reflecting on March 12, the date that British Columbia, a Canadian province with 22.1 million arrivals, had closed its borders. Smith remembered how he had focused on the news from early March. He had listened to what Health Minister, Adrian Dix, and the Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry along with the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau said about COVID-19. Smith still found it hard to come to terms with the change that had happened since early March. All trips had been booked, with the crew packed and ready to shove off. The small ship marine tour operators had been in for a banner season with sold-out trips, great crew and a summer of adventures that made sailing the coast of Alaska and British Columbia "Super, Natural"™. Today, less than a month later, he needed a plan. He was stuck and very concerned about his business and his employees. He needed to do something to pivot his business and needed to do it now.

### The Past Month

Over the past month Smith had spent each waking moment trying to figure out how this new virus would impact his tourism business. Maple Leaf Adventures and other marine tour operations were learning quickly that refunds to guests due to trip cancellations and closing parts of the tour season were needed. Faced with a new operating issue every day, Smith reflected that he was in the greatest challenge of his career as a small ship tour operator. Parks where he operated his trips had also closed. Today, First Nation communities where his boats operated had closed their communities (see Exhibit 1). People throughout British Columbia

were told to hunker down and not go anywhere. And the worst part for Smith was the uncertainty.

An added burden was deciding when to cancel trips that were booked and paid for. Operations for remote small ship trips had begun months in advance and had included: secured park use permits, collaboration with First Nations, the scheduling of trips, aligning crew schedules and communicating with guests about trip preparedness (see Exhibit 2). Well before that, key overhead and capital spending had occurred and had included expensive winter maintenance, as well as ongoing marketing, communicating with other stakeholders involved, transportation, arrangements for hotels for pre and post trip stays for guests, and orders with food and beverage suppliers. Smith also thought about all the pre-work and investment that had already gone into making the 2020 season a success and associated worries about his insurance policy and if the pandemic would be covered. He, as well as several colleagues, had also recently invested millions of dollars in expansion projects and these capital costs were meant to be paid down over several years. Significant decisions had to be made on how to support his team who were now in a precarious position due to the potential of significant trip cancellations. He needed to find a way to keep them working in the industry (and not switch careers) so that these very skilled employees would be available when a restart happened. Smith had trust that their exceptional guest relations focus would help them continue to foster loyalty.

### **Maple Leaf Adventures**

Maple Leaf Adventures was a small ship tour operator known for taking guests to remote places on the British Columbia and Alaska coast. An old friend of Smith's had owned the SV Maple Leaf and was one of the first people to explore the coast as a tourism company. Seeing the success, Smith purchased Maple Leaf Adventures in 2001 and had worked tirelessly building relationships with competitors and other tourism operators, as well as First Nations communities and conservation organizations along the coast. He had also worked hard to build different industry associations. He believed that there was an advantage to having an industry voice lobby on your businesses behalf. Maple Leaf Adventures had three boats: a 138-foot Catamaran Cascadia; Swell, an 88-foot Tug; and Maple Leaf a 92-foot Schooner. The boats were of heritage design with advanced equipment to make the boats as environmentally friendly as possible. Operations for the marine tourism industry typically ran between March and October, with closure in winter due to the roughness of the seas and the weather on the west coast of British Columbia. Maple Leaf Adventures held a reputation as a leader in ecotourism and was a founding member of the Gwaii Haanas Tour Operators Association, Commercial Bear Viewing Association (CBVA), and Small Ship Tour Operators Association, as well as an executive member of the Wilderness Tourism Association of BC (see Exhibit 3).

On April 8, 2020, Maple Leaf Adventures employed 12 full time staff and over 60 part time seasonal crew, all experts in their fields as naturalists, chefs, captains, and bear viewing guides. With guests coming from all parts of the world, Maple Leaf Adventures prided itself on being an ambassador to the coast and welcomed people from Canada, the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia and many other countries. Trips ranged anywhere from five to 10 days and averaged approximately \$8,000 per person.

### **Smith's Approach to Working in the Coastal Marine and Land Environment**

With a history of working on the coast, Smith knew when he bought Maple Leaf Adventures 20 years earlier, he was going to give back to the marine ecosystem. As a backcountry/marine park ranger for a decade, Smith had always given extra effort to protect and educate about the environment, from bears to beach clean-ups. He worked hard over the 20 years to build a successful company, one that was known to be a steward of the land and sea, and that worked ethically for the environment. Another part that Smith was proud of was the relationships he formed with First Nations communities over the years. These relationships were not only important to his operation but important to those in whose traditional territory he was operating (see Exhibit 1).

Years before the British Columbia government legislated the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) Smith, along with other small ship tour operators, approached First Nations in the Great Bear Rainforest to establish protocol agreements governing their tourism operations in those territories. These agreements recognized it was the Nations' territory and they set up economic benefits to the communities' stewardship programs (like taxes the companies pay), as well as agreements on stewardship and employment. Smith had stepped forward and sought permission from the Coastal First Nations and developed what was known as protocol agreements to work in traditional territory. Smith knew that he had to look past his own needs for a successful operation and look to see what would help to make others successful as well.

While sitting on his deck thinking about his company and employees, Smith said, *"there has to be something we can do to make it through this!"*

At that moment, Smith realized that Maple Leaf Adventures was probably going to lose the business season ahead. Smith also recognized that a way ahead was one he would not be able to figure out for his business alone.

### **The Eco-Tourism Community in BC's West Coast**

The ecotourism entrepreneurs and association members all shared a passion for the marine environment. This passion had been a driving force in the life choices they had made and how they had created their businesses, and was a shared value deeply held by all. As eco-tourism businesses they had expertise that could be used to fund other provincially or federally funded projects for the public good. The eco-tourism businesses provided attractive future growth potential as well as jobs, social and environmental responsibility and prestige for Canada.

Smith always believed that small businesses needed to work together, and past projects with the Wilderness Tourism Association of British Columbia (WTABC) and the CBVA proved that when multiple businesses work together, things happened (see Exhibit 3). In 2016 the CBVA, while working collaboratively with other groups, successfully closed the grizzly bear hunt in British Columbia. Smith worked closely with Kathy MacRae, Executive Director for the CBVA, an accomplished lobbyist who had been integral to the grizzly bear hunt closure (see Exhibit 4).

From this experience, he knew her contacts in the government ran deep and he could gain from her expertise. Smith, as the President of the WTABC, worked with Scott Benton, Executive Director for the WTABC (see Exhibit 4), also a former senior level manager for BC Parks. Smith knew that his experience managing government contracts would be invaluable, and his relationships with the different First Nations would be another piece to this puzzle. Smith had advocated for years for working protocol agreements with First Nations and a relationship that would be mutually beneficial, now was no different.

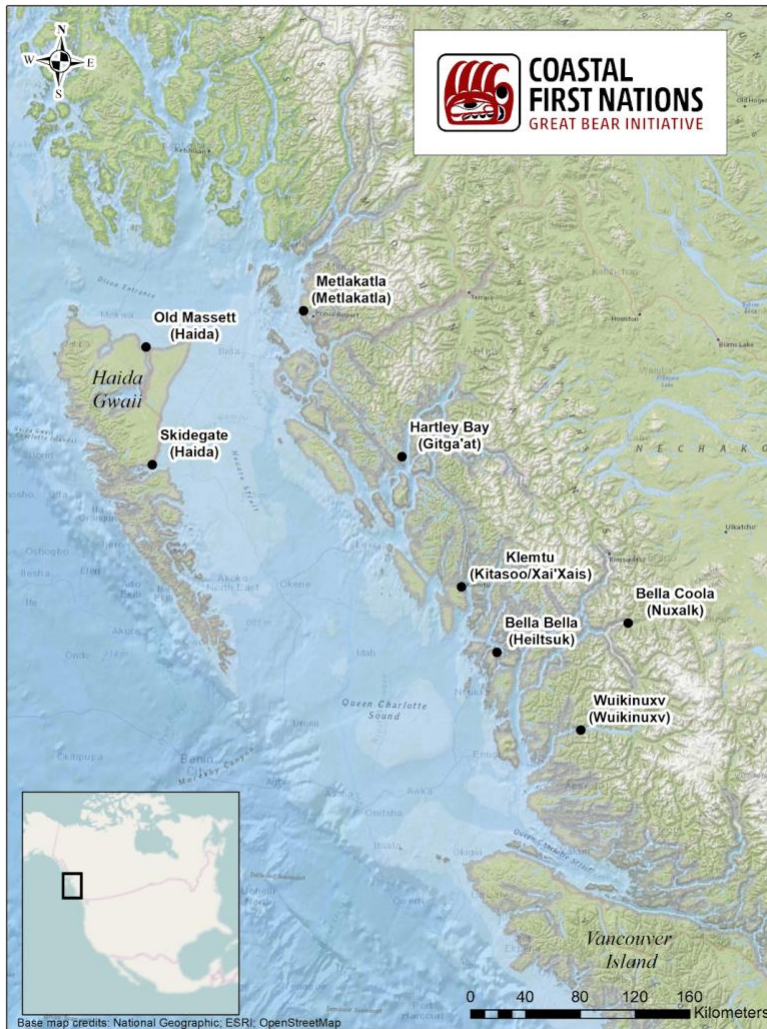
Smith wondered if he could find some way forward, including his contacts and not have to work alone. He needed to find a plan to save his business because there was no hope in sight of COVID-19 going away. Smith wanted to get something started, so on April 8, 2020, he picked up the phone and called his colleague Russell Markel, owner of Outer Shores Expeditions (see Exhibit 4). As seasonal marine tourism operators, their window of opportunity was small, so any plan was weather-dependent. They talked about their crews who suddenly did not have jobs, and most likely would not because of the seasonal aspect of their businesses. The hardest part for the coastal marine operators was the uncertainty. No one knew what the future was going to hold.

Smith and Markel decided they needed to bring all stakeholders together and fast so they could build on their strong connections and trust to explore options together. All the stakeholders needed to have a hand in identifying and navigating potential new paths for mutual benefit. How might they pivot?

## Exhibits

### Exhibit 1: Coastal First Nations Communities

Map of Coastal British Columbia and the North and Central Coast in the traditional territories of the Kitasoo Xai's/xais, Gitga'at, Heiltsuk, Wuikinuxv, and Nuxalk First Nations.



**Source:** Coastal First Nations Great Bear Initiative (n.d.). <https://coastalfirstnations.ca/our-communities/>

**Exhibit 2: Operations – Maple Leaf Adventures and Outer Shore Expeditions**

	<b>Maple Leaf Adventures</b>	<b>Outer Shores Expeditions</b>
<b>Number of vessels</b>	Three	One
<b>Number of Full Time Employees</b>	12	Two
<b>Number of Part Time Employees</b>	60+	Two
<b>Technical Equipment</b>	Schooner, Tugboat, Catamaran, 4 zodiacs, 2 landing craft, office space, dock space,	Schooner, zodiac, office space (released during COVID), dock space
<b>Background</b>	20 + years of operation	Since 2011
<b>Prior to the pandemic, bookings for 2020</b>	Sold Out	Sold Out
<b>Revenue loss at onset of pandemic on April 8, 2020</b>	loss of 100% revenue	loss of 100% revenue
<b>Clients</b>	Canada, USA, UK, Australia	Canada, USA, UK, Australia
<b>Trip duration</b>	Average 5-10 days	Average 5-10 days
<b>Trip Cost</b>	Average \$8,000 per person	Average \$5,000 per person

Source: Primary research with Kevin Smith

### Exhibit 3: Tourism Associations

**Small Ship Tour Operators Association** - The Small Ship Tour Operators Association of British Columbia had seven members, all of them 100% Canadian owned and operated, small-ship based travel companies that specialized in providing niche wilderness travel experiences for small groups of 6-24 passengers, along the British Columbia and Alaska coastline. In particular, they operated in the Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii, and Great Bear Rainforest regions. This association formalizes the way these colleagues have historically worked together to solve issues greater than themselves. The Association members were Kevin Smith, Maple Leaf Adventures; Randy Burke, Bluewater Adventures; Russell Markel, Outershores Expeditions; Ross Campbell, Mothership Adventures; and, Eric Boyum, Ocean Adventures.

**Wilderness Tourism Association** - The Wilderness Tourism Association of British Columbia (WTABC) supported BC's world-class wilderness-based tourism operators. Working with industry, government, and non-government organizations the association addressed threats and opportunities for a healthy industry and environment. Specific areas of advocacy and policy development included forestry stewardship, pipelines, land tenures and open-net salmon farms, strategic alliances with government and tourism organizations and ongoing communication with wilderness tourism operators. The association included wilderness tour companies, destination marketing operators and wilderness tourism industry experts. The WTABC assisted tour operators to address threats and opportunities.

**Commercial Bear Viewing Association** - The Commercial Bear Viewing Association of British Columbia (CBVA) was formed to promote sustainable bear viewing in British Columbia and aid in the protection of wild bears and their ecosystems. The CBVA was committed to continuing to evolve and develop the industry by updating the viewing techniques and strategies as new research and experience dictate, developing best practices and developing a guide certification program. They also helped to fund important, professional research on human-bear interactions.



#### **Exhibit 4: Small Ship Tour Operators and Association Members of WTABC and CBVA**

**Maple Leaf Adventures** – Owner & Captain, Kevin Smith had over 20 years of experience including coordinating remote beach clean-ups on north-western Vancouver Island for BC Parks, working as a fisheries patrol officer and backcountry park ranger, and Maple Leaf Adventures celebrated 20 years in operation in 2021.

**Outer Shores Expeditions** - Owner, & Captain, Russell Markel had a PhD in Marine Ecology and extensive experience leading and coordinating large interdisciplinary projects. Markel was owner and captain of the 70-foot Schooner Passing Cloud. Outer Shores employed two full-time employees and two seasonal employees. It was a small yet significant tourism provider for these small ship tours.

**Bluewater Adventures** - Owner, & Captain Randy Burke had a degree in education and extensive experience taking guests on adventures along the BC and Alaska coast. He had sailed across the Atlantic and Pacific on tall ships. Burke was an outward bound instructor with a 500-ton Masters license to captain large boats.

**Mothership Adventures** - Owner and Captain, Ross Campbell, was a former tugboat captain with 17 years' experience as a helicopter pilot. Since 2005 he had skippered the Columbia III in summer and upgraded her in the winter. He was familiar with the BC coast and like the other small ship tour operators he made safety a priority.

**Ocean Adventures** - Owner and Captain Eric Boyum was known cared deeply about humans, animals, and the flora and fauna. The Great Bear II offered trips to remote and spectacular settings on BC's coast. Qualified and experienced Boyum educated guests on coastal ecosystems.

**Scott Benton** - Executive Director of the Wilderness Tourism Association since 2016 Benton was actively involved in resource, recreation and tourism management in British Columbia for over 30 years. He had previously worked for the Province of BC in technical, management and senior management positions responsible for environmental management, land use planning and parks governance and management. Benton was passionate about working with people to create practical solutions for positive social, environmental, and economic outcomes.

**Katherine MacRae** was Executive Director for the Commercial Bear Viewing Association of BC. With over 30 years of experience in the tourism industry and a Master of Arts in Tourism Management from Royal Roads University, Katherine brought a passion for the industry to everything she did. Through Katherine's work, she was a strong advocate for wildlife in BC and was instrumental in closing the grizzly bear hunt in December 2017.