

initiatives

Innovation Happens in Manitoba

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: THE INTERNET AND THE FIRST NATIONS

SEPTEMBER, 2002 – FISHER RIVER, MB –

There are more than 40 students currently registered in post-secondary training. As far as they are concerned, the Community Connections public-access computers are a vital service.

There's a ring of excitement to the voice of Russell Kirkness as he thinks out loud about computers and the Internet and the Fisher River Cree Nation.

He's the supervisor of employment and training. On a daily basis he sees the benefits of the seven computers now available to the residents of this reserve, 2 1/2-hours' driving time north of Winnipeg.

"The Internet is directly helpful to our current students for they now can reach out to the world. It's helpful to our mature students for it enables them to write their assignments, and conduct their research.

"It is helpful to the entire band for it makes it possible for us to make contact with other bands, something that was difficult before we had the benefit of electronics."

Russell Kirkness says there's an awakening interest in education in the Aboriginal world. In mid-May, at the convocation of the University of Manitoba, he saw 130 Aboriginals in the graduating classes. He made special note of the accomplishments: of that 130 Aboriginal graduates there were five masters' degrees and two doctorates.

Some case histories about the Internet in "rural and remote" communities are as follows.

At Dinorwic, Ontario, the Wagiboon Lake First Nation has a successful wild rice enterprise. They found a ready market when they offered this ancient Aboriginal food on the Internet. They now sell it, both retail and

wholesale, from Switzerland on one side to Japan on the other.

At Fort Smith, NWT, the Salt River Band has a team of young volunteers who are assembling an Internet mailing list of band members who are scattered around the globe. In the week of my interviews with them, they had just tracked down one family that had settled in northern Australia. The objective is to be a periodic electronic newsletter which carries news from the ancestral home.

The Lennox Island Band, PEI, operates a successful peat-harvesting plant and sells thousands of tons annually in Japan. The band has an enviable record in education; 60 per cent of their high school grads go to college or university and the course of preference is business administration. There's a strong heritage factor on the Lennox Island web pages. Band students have collected the history of their reserve from archival sources and their research is on their web pages.

Russell Kirkness has enthusiastic plans for the Fisher River band and the Internet. Today there is a satellite service that he rates as excellent. Russell now has the first 40 names on an electronic mailing list and he has plans to extend this with the help of summer students. Another thing Russell Kirkness has in mind is a plan to have some of his students trained as technicians so he'd have local assistance when his computers need a little attention.

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