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Farming for sustainable communities

Siska Traditions providing jobs

When the Siska First Nation was looking for employment opportunities for its members, it decided to start in its own backyard. Over the last couple of years, the Siska First Nation has turned its traditional harvesting techniques into a viable commercial operation – Siska Traditions.

"The first year was an experiment," says production manager Bernard Gilchrist. "We had to learn what we could make from the raw materials we had, and what could be processed into presentable final products."

This year Siska Traditions is making seven natural soaps, eight different teas and a range of jams and jellies, incorporating plants such as juniper, roses and various herbs. Several people work in the business year-round. Employment rises in peak season with up to 50 people from the band and neighbouring communities harvesting resources. Completed items are sold at the Siska Art Gallery and other local venues.

Working with nature has its challenges, and the company has had to plan its product line to accommodate seasonal fluctuations. "We need to be flexible and have sufficiently diverse products so that we can still produce according to our goals," says Gilchrist.

The First Nation also emphasizes that it must work within nature's limits so as not to deplete the resources in the Siska watershed and surrounding areas. "In our area we have to create our own economy. We look to the gifts of the Creator to do this. We treat these gifts with respect, as they will sustain us into the future as in the past," says Chief Fred Sampson.

With the recent hiring of a marketing professional, Siska hopes to have product on the shelves of specialty outlets in large centres in the near future.



Trish Munro and Albert Michell show off Siska Traditions products sold at the Siska Art Gallery outside of Lytton.

First Nations explore niche markets

Quick. Name the owners of the province's biggest sheep farm. What about B.C.'s biggest hazelnut producer? Stumped? The answer in both cases is: Seabird Island First Nation.

Aboriginal people have always lived close to the land. Today, as they work to rebuild the self-sufficiency eroded by a century of *Indian Act* restrictions, the land continues to be a source of sustenance and strength.

Across B.C., First Nations are weaving together traditional knowledge and practices with new technologies, new ideas and a renewed sense of hope for future generations.



Seabird Island Sheep Farm

Do-it-ourselves attitude has Seabird looking to invest in spinning machine

B.C. is famous for its natural resources, but these days, we're not just hewers of wood and drawers of water. Whether it's wood or fish or fruit – or any of our abundant resources – the emphasis is increasingly on value-added products. And no one knows that better than the Seabird Island First Nation.

With two farms near Agassiz, Seabird is British Columbia's single largest producer of both sheep and hazelnuts. And Economic Development Manager Brian Jones says they're taking a good look at the whole value-added model.

It started with wool. "Two years ago, on the open market, we received 95 cents a pound for raw, unprocessed 'grease' wool," Jones says. "Now we're washing, picking, carding and drying it." The end result? A premium product and a market price that's almost 10 times higher.

Seabird Island Sheep Farm is finding ways to work with the environment that make good business sense as well. For example, the phosphate-free water from the washing operation is re-used on the hay fields, which provide ninety per cent of the feed for the operation.

The next step, Jones says, is to invest in a spinning machine, which could increase the value of their wool on the market by another 300 per cent or so. Their high quality wool production is also setting the stage for a revival of the traditional Salish spinning tradition. Classes will be held this fall and, eventually, the First Nation plans to diversify further into handmade woolen crafts.

"We're looking to do our own processing and adding value, whether it's the meat or the hazelnuts, we're looking to do it ourselves."



St. Mary's Indian Band proves native plants are good business – and just good sense

In recent years, gardeners and landscapers have started to discover the benefits of native plants. Indigenous species tend to be hardier, looking good while needing less care. They also provide better habitat for birds and other wildlife when compared with their imported counterparts.

The Ktunaxa Nation saw the trend coming. One of its member bands, the St. Mary's Indian Band in the Kootenays, has started growing native plants for sale. And this is just the latest chapter in the story of the band's successful nursery.

It started when the Columbia Power Corporation announced plans for a right-of-way in Ktunaxa traditional territory. Often, after clearing vegetation, power companies replant with introduced grass species, not native ones.

The Ktunaxa Kinbasket Treaty Council suggested an alternative. Replant with native species. It's easier on the soil, better for local wildlife and means fewer weeds and less costly upkeep.

The company agreed and the band started the Aqam Native Plant Nursery.

Ethno-botanist Mike Keefer oversees the operation and recalls how they started from scratch. "We had no greenhouse. We had no grower. All we had was a business concept."

Today, thanks to investments by the band and a contribution from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, they have a full-fledged greenhouse operation, a major contract with Aquila Power, and plans to expand beyond their current large-scale industrial focus.

"There is a real public appeal to this," says Keefer, pointing out that certain native grasses grow more slowly and need less water, making them an excellent alternative for urban lawns. On power line rights-of-way and other, more rural settings, the native plants provide an even greater return.



Bernie Morigeau prepares a flat of transplants at Aqam Nursery, outside Cranbrook.



Besides the benefit to the environment, this operation means a more diverse array of jobs for the First Nation members.

Says St. Mary's Band Councillor Jim White Head: "It's interesting to work with clients and customers from forestry, mining, ranching and other sectors. We're restoring damaged habitats, providing meaningful employment opportunities, and we're building a successful business."

We're restoring damaged habitats, providing meaningful employment opportunities, and we're building a successful business.

Jim White Head

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Saturday, Nov. 1 - Economic Partners

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