

Stories of Economic Impact & Resilience in the Cultural Sector

Insights from Five Culture and Heritage Organizations in British Columbia

A Heritage BC and BCMA Project
Research and Report Completed by Accession Consulting
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Introduction	2
Objectives / Methodology	3
Case Study Overview	4
Common Impact Strategies	5
Common Challenges	6
Common Resilience Strategies	7
Beyond Economic Revitalization	8
Next Steps	9
Resources	10
Acknowledgements	11



Sharing Stories of Economic Impact & Resilience

Introduction

British Columbia's (BC) cultural and heritage organizations create significant impact in their communities in diverse and transformative ways. Museums, science centres, archives, historic sites, and geoparks not only educate and entertain, they also connect and lead their communities, whether small villages or major cities. In doing so, they contribute to and, at times, sustain and transform their local economies. However, like other community organizations, their economic impact is often difficult to quantify. Beyond foot traffic and admissions, how can you express the economic value of a cultural institution? Not only does this make it difficult for organizations to express their own value, it also makes it difficult for many cultural and heritage organizations to know how best to increase or sustain their impact.

This project collects stories and insights from five cultural and heritage organizations across British Columbia that not only have had significant economic impact on their communities, but also all demonstrate economic resiliency. In each case study, the community has been through an economic transition, and the cultural institution or heritage site has been central to the economic revitalization of that community. Common strategies and challenges have been gathered from the cases studies and presented here. As every community in BC and beyond rebuilds after COVID-19, the lessons learned from this study are vital as we move forward and rebuild together..



Sharing Stories of Economic Impact & Resilience

Objectives

1. Learn about and document examples of successful cultural or heritage initiatives that had a positive economic impact for their communities
2. Bring together BC's cultural heritage sector to explore opportunities and strategies for creating further impact

Methodology

In partnership with Heritage BC and the BC Museums Association (BCMA), Accession Consulting was contracted to lead the research and analysis phases of this project. We began by reaching out across our networks to identify suitable case study candidates, selecting organizations carefully to ensure a balance of different organizations, business models, and geographic locations. Then, we approached each case study with a design-thinking, human-centered approach. By focusing on stories, lived experiences, and organizational expertise, we were able to capture narratives of growth, change, and lessons learned.

For each case study, we conducted interviews not only with staff, but also with a community stakeholder (town liaisons, business improvement area staff, chamber of commerce representatives, etc.) in order to get a full picture of the organization's impact on the community.

Through interviews and analysis of the data collected, we learned that although each organization has a very different history, background, and community, all employ four strategies to maximize their impact and resiliency.

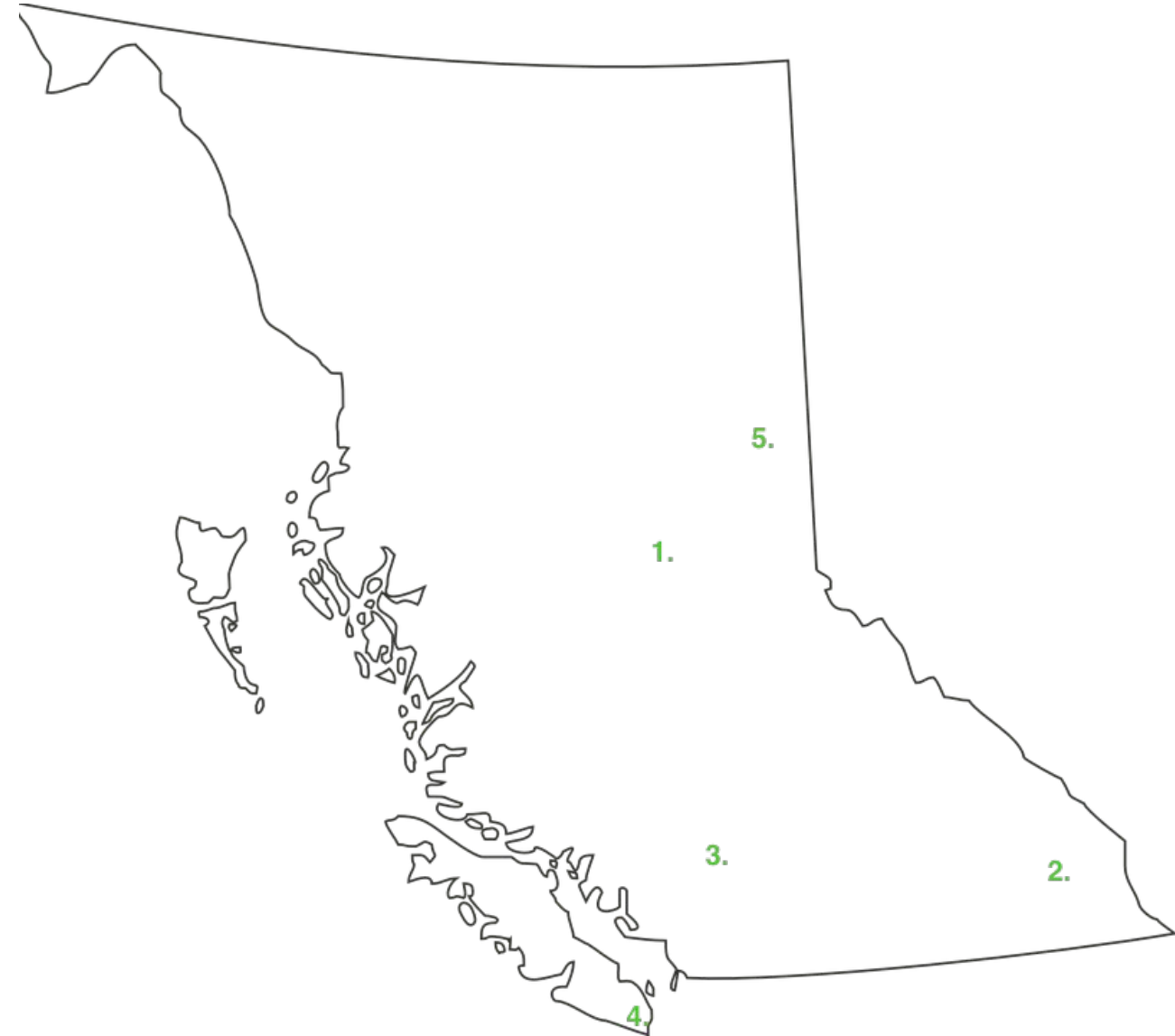


Case Study Overview

This report highlights the stories of five heritage and cultural organizations: The Exploration Place, Kimberley's Underground Mining Railway, the Lytton Chinese History Museum, the Sidney Museum and Archives, and the Tumbler Ridge Global GeoPark. The five case studies speak to five different economic regions across the province and represent urban, suburban, and rural communities of populations from hundreds to thousands. All organizations and communities have undergone significant transition over the past few decades and each case study demonstrates recent and significant positive impact on their local economies.

Case Studies

1. The Exploration Place, Prince George
2. Kimberley Underground Mining Railway, Kimberley
3. Lytton Chinese History Museum, Lytton
4. Sidney Museum and Archives, Sidney
5. Tumbler Ridge GeoPark, Tumbler Ridge





Common Economic Impact Strategies

Through interviews and analysis of the data collected, we learned that although each organization has a very different history, background, and community, all employ four strategies to maximize their impact and resiliency.



- 1. Scale up.** Grow internally and externally, even beyond your comfort zone. Success isn't just visitor numbers; it's also increasing paid staff and volunteers, tracking online metrics, and increasing your offerings. But, growth doesn't just happen within your walls. Case study organizations had most success when they began participating in the community, including at all levels of government, in community-wide festivals, on town-planning committees, and beyond.



- 2. Increase Diversity.** Work to ensure that you are connecting with, engaging, appealing to, working with, and supported by a diverse community. Case study organizations had most success when they began engaging a cross-section of their community, including minority groups, urban and rural communities, several age groups, and a wide-range of interest groups. Many case study organizations have been working with local Indigenous communities for decades or have recently begun partnering with regional First Nations.



- 3. Focus.** Know your strengths and hone in on them. What's your vision and mission? Your collections policy? Engage your community and showcase its story, strengths, challenges. Sometimes success is doing one thing really well, rather than trying everything.



- 4. Train.** Prioritize education and development. The case studies demonstrate the power of education—whether its preschool and after-school programs, geology lectures to university students, or hosting professionalization roundtables. Many case study organizations became an essential service in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing trusted resources and high-quality educational materials online.



Common Challenges

While each case study employed similar strategies to increase and measure impact, the organizations also faced two common challenges that impacted their ability to identify and communicate their impact:

1. Defining Impact

Quantifying economic impact is difficult for heritage and cultural organizations. Each case study organization struggled to quantify their impact, citing various challenges including:

- Focussing on visitor numbers paints an incomplete picture (What about online traffic? Differences for organizations with paid admission? How does this show community impact?)
- Varied funding structures complicate the economic narrative.
- Museums are not solely businesses, therefore income and bottom line don't tell the complete story.
- Smaller organizations don't always have the resources to determine or measure their impact.
- Gaps and lack of specificity in regional economic strategies for organizations to work within make it difficult to express economic impact within a clear regional framework.
- Connecting cultural and economic strategies can be difficult and resource intensive.

2. Setting Baselines

While it is difficult to quantify, measuring and communicating economic impact is important for everything from securing grants and funding to ensuring stable daily operations. Each case study organization stressed that impact is more than quantifiable data, and that often organizations are having a greater impact than they think. Setting baselines is therefore an important step that each case study organization took or is taking in order to better communicate their successes.

Economic impact is quantitative and qualitative. By starting and measuring where you're at, you'll be able to better identify and communicate your value statement and role within your community. This is crucial for everything from collections to communications strategies.



Common Resilience Strategies

Not only do BC's museums collect and communicate stories of past economic resilience, but they are also themselves stories of economic resilience. The majority of organizations interviewed were established decades ago and have experienced periods of growth and decline. Furthermore, all case studies demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity—whether it was their community undergoing a major transition (like a mine closure) or the organization itself experiencing a major hardship (like the loss of its collection due to fire).

Resilience is the ability to cope with a crisis, to adapt, and to return to or improve upon the pre-crisis state. This is not an exhaustive list of economic resilience, but the case studies demonstrated the importance of the following:

- **Community.** All case study organizations were resilient in large part because they knew, worked with, and responded to the changing needs of their communities.
- **Partnerships.** Working with others, whether businesses, other museums, or governments, proved successful in each case study in good times (expansion and development) and bad (responding to economic or other crises).
- **Skilled Teams.** Finding and developing staff and volunteers, especially with good financial and project management skills, was essential to each case study organization and helped them contribute directly and indirectly to the local economy.
- **Communications.** Whether it's good signage to attract visitors or cohesive brand and online strategies, strong and clear communications policies helped each case study not only to attract visitors, but also to lead their communities in times of need.

As community leaders who set an example by closing their doors at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, each case study organization expects to lead the way in rebuilding the community by setting a new normal.

"Knowing our past will help us navigate the uncertain present and future."



Beyond Economic Revitalization in BC

Every community in BC will need to rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic and, in some cases, this may take months or years. While this revitalization may involve difficult changes and adaptations, our cultural and heritage institutions provide us with inspiration and a template for success. Each of the five case study organizations has been through the revitalization and change of their community and their organization already.

While they expressed concern for the future as they navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, each organization also expressed a sense of resiliency and determination; they've worked hard to get where they are, and they can lead the community through troubled times once again. Lessons learned from previous economic transitions will be important, and the key themes including scaling up, increasing diversity, focusing on strengths, and investing in training will be important for all cultural organizations to apply.

Yet, the responsibilities are not only economic. As community leaders, the case study organizations expect to:

- Help community members feel comfortable in public by providing a safe and trusted public space;
- Support parents and teachers with at-home education by providing trusted online resources;
- Inform public dialogue around COVID-19 by providing factual, science-based information;
- Inspire communities by providing stories of past hardships and resiliency; and
- Preserve the memories and stories of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact.



Next Steps

Using the Case Studies

The Case Studies completed as part of this study provide a starting point for conversation. No two organizations are the same, but there are common themes, ideas, and challenges being addressed across the province. We suggest you read through the case studies and think about, or discuss with your colleagues:

- **Strengths:** What successes have other organizations had, and what does your organization do well?
- **Opportunities:** What solutions or resources have others developed that might work at your organization?
- **Aspirations:** What roles, projects, or responsibilities have others taken that might indicate what's coming next for your organization? What do you want to achieve?
- **Results:** What results have others generated, tracked, and measured that have helped them communicate their success? How can you start tracking your results?

A Template for Success

To support other organizations in tracking, measuring, and communicating their economic impact, as part of this project and based on the example of our case study organizations, we've developed a **Template to Communicate Your Economic Impact**. The template provides a series of self-reflective questions you can use to examine your organization, set new baselines, and communicate your success. Using this **Template** in coordination with other tools, including the The Department of Canadian Heritage's The Culture, Arts, Heritage and Sport Economic Impact Model, may help you track and articulate your economic impact to funders, donors, community members, and beyond.



Resources

- **Department of Canadian Heritage's The Culture, Arts, Heritage and Sport Economic Impact Model**
<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/publications/general-publications/culture-arts-heritage-sport-economic-impact-model/user-guide-culture-arts-heritage-sport-economic-impact-model.html>
- **Economic Contribution of Culture in Canada**
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2004023-eng.pdf?st=pVQlqxc9>
- **Making A Case for Heritage: Economic Value (Heritage BC)**
<https://heritagebc.ca/learning-centre/a-guide-to-making-a-case-for-heritage/making-a-case-for-heritage-developing-your-argument/making-a-case-for-heritage-economic-value/>
- **Estimates of the Direct Economic Impact of Culture in the Western Provinces, 2017**
<https://hillstrategies.com/2019/06/19/estimates-of-the-direct-economic-impact-of-culture-in-the-western-provinces-in-2017/>



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