



Embracing the Opportunity Farmers' Markets and Heritage Sites

Above: Visitors stay warm with hot seafood chowder.
Photo credit: Jessie Hebert

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You may not think markets and heritage sites can go hand in hand, but at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site this has proven to be a successful venture for market and historic site alike.

The idea was inspired by activities around the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. The community of Steveston was looking for a way to enliven the village during these winter months. The local community centre had operated a successful summer market for the past few years and felt this offered an opportunity to extend into the winter season.

The Cannery was interested in the market as a means to transition the site to year-round opening. For the

previous 16 years, the site was open from May to October and mainly focused on a tourist audience. The Society saw the market as a way to spread the word about year-round opening to locals and keep momentum going during what is otherwise a slow time.

After seven seasons, the market is now an established success and a signature event for the Cannery. Every second Sunday from October to April, dozens of vendors sell their wares inside the site and at its front entrance. Vendors are carefully selected and must adhere to the “make it, bake it, catch it” credo. Visitation to the site is free on market days with vendor fees supporting the bulk of the event costs.

The vision for the market is not just to facilitate the sale of locally made

items but to provide a place for locals to come and connect during the winter. The market offers a community gathering space where visitors, coffee in hand, can meet up with friends and chat with family.

To help create this atmosphere, local musicians and performers establish a friendly ambiance and create a unique theme to each market day. For many, it is an opportunity to showcase their talents to a new audience or try out new pieces. These performers and other programming activities create value added opportunities for visitors.

Hosting the market has brought many benefits to the Cannery and its community. Most importantly for the Cannery, it created a new means for visitors to engage with the site. Market attendance averages 14,000

Top left: Vendors offer local products with a smile.
Photo credit: Jessie Hebert

Top right: Locals come back every market for fresh baked goods.
Photo credit: Jessie Hebert

Bottom: The start of a market day at the Cannery.
Photo credit: Gulf of Georgia Cannery Society



visitors each season. This is roughly 25% of annual visitation and largely visitors who would not come otherwise.

Many market attendees are locals who knew of the Cannery but only came when they had out-of-town visitors. These infrequent visitors often become repeat market goers who know staff and volunteers by name. Some newcomers aren't generally interested in heritage but are enticed by the idea of a unique shopping experience. However, once inside the site and with purchases in hand, many take the opportunity to browse the exhibits or even go on a tour during their stay. The Cannery goes to extra effort to make these experiences available every market day.

Volunteers play a significant role in offering these experiences and keeping the market running. Each market day, dozens of locals come to the site bright and early to help set up for the event and greet vendors. Different teams of volunteers help with promotion, greet visitors or offer tours and site information throughout the day. In all, as many as 40 individuals volunteer throughout each season to support the market, and in doing so, develop strong ties to the Cannery and its history.

Through these volunteer positions, the Cannery greatly increased its relationship with local youth. High school students are attracted to the regular volunteering opportunities

the market offers throughout the school year. This relationship has been so successful the Cannery developed a youth leadership program offering development opportunities to local high school students who want to volunteer with Cannery events. The Cannery offers these youth resume building opportunities, and they bring a fresh perspective and help spread enthusiasm for history to a new generation.

While the Cannery considers the market a success today, it has not come without challenges. Those in the museum world understand the trials of offering an event with ready-to-eat food and thousands of visitors. Allowing visitors with food in the site requires constant supervision. Volunteers act as ambassadors to help provide this oversight while offering information about exhibits at the same time.

One key to success in managing issues around food and high traffic is educating vendors about the importance of the site and rules of its use. Offering the market in a heritage site is promoted as a unique benefit to be valued by vendors, volunteers and visitors. The Market Manager ensures that vendors and volunteers understand the history and significance of the site they are operating in. These people become advocates in preserving this heritage and participate in keeping it safe from harm.

In its fourth season, the Cannery took over operating the market

from a local community group. This allowed subtle changes which integrated the event into the Cannery's mission rather than the site being merely a venue space. The key to the success of this was hiring a Market Manager who not only understood how to run a successful market, but also appreciated the unique heritage of the Cannery. This person bridges the gap between vendors and volunteers who often expect the usual market arrangement and the unique experience this market offers.

Although not without challenges, the Cannery Farmers' Market has helped the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site achieve many things. Increasing attendance through reaching new audiences, connecting with locals through volunteer opportunities and bringing a heritage site to life during the coldest winter months only scratch the surface of what has and can be in this unique relationship.

Rebecca Clarke has worked in BC's museum sector for twelve years. In her latest role as Gulf of Georgia Cannery Society's Executive Director, she was central in developing the Cannery Farmers' Market. Rebecca's passion for sharing history with the public is a product of her background in education.

