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Denman Island's Awkward Relationship With Tourism

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While, regretfully, I missed the recent spectacular display of the Northern Lights I was compensated on Friday May 17 as I witnessed, in person, the arrival of the tourist season at Buckley Bay — a place where I am usually 30 to 40 minutes from my home on Denman Island. A seemingly endless line of vehicles with kayaks, canoes, and bicycles strapped to them celebrated the new season by lining the shoulder of the highway to the south of the ticket booth while waiting their turn to enter the ferry parking lot. I joined them shortly before 4 o'clock when I huddled on the shoulder and watched as the dog owners among them gave their pets an opportunity to mark the occasion on the roadside. Two and a half hours later I pulled into my drive-way on Denman Island.

The 'tourist season' is one that has created challenges for residents of many communities on the west coast and Denman Island is no exception. Even, back in 1971 when the population was a mere 250, feelings were intense and apparently well-known for it was then that the Regional District of Comox-Strathcona published a 60 page report titled "Denman Island Planning Study" which included the statement: "Tourists are seen as causing inconvenience with the ferry service, disturbing the peace of the residents and as contributing little or nothing to the welfare of the island." The report went on to suggest one of the ways the community of Denman Island could be more 'socially responsible' and welcome tourists was to 'upgrade' Fillongley Park. And, over the course of the next few years, despite the lack of support from the community, distant authorities continued to develop plans to increase the capacity of Fillongley Park to accommodate more campers and picnickers. Local opposition overflowed in 1979 when a plan to develop 53 campsites, 87 picnic tables and parking for 100 cars was released and the community's vigorous opposition convinced the Parks Branch of the provincial government to withdraw the plan.

One of the consequences was the formation of an ad-hoc committee of the Denman Island Ratepayers Association and the local Islands Trustees in 1980. Together, they agreed to explore ways of dealing with the summer tourist traffic that would find widespread support throughout the community. Following the circulation of a questionnaire and a community meeting the committee released a preliminary report which, by its somewhat vague and cautious wording, demonstrated the complexity of the task they had taken on. They favoured the adoption of, what they called, "cottage industry tourism" by which the tourist would be encouraged to take on the characteristics of a visitor and become "integrated" into the population of "the community in small, dispersed groups."

Though details of how such a gentle approach to tourism might be encouraged and maintained were challenging to put on paper it was felt that a majority of the community supported the concept. A majority, but not all; as in the summer of 1983 *The Comox District Free Press* reported that a sign at Buckley Bay welcoming tourists to Denman Island while urging them to "please help preserve it's beauty and tranquility" became the focus of attention when it was vandalized. This, the reporter concluded, was evidence of a 'tourism feud' on Denman Island.

Nevertheless, a few years later when a widely distributed visitor's guide titled "the Undiscovered Islands (Denman and Hornby Islands)" was initiated, the introductory wording reflected a majority of the Denman Island community's views, though it would be presumptuous to say that

it also reflected the views of Hornby residents “The residents of Denman and Hornby Islands are proud and protective of the high quality of their rural/island life.” It declared. “Great care has been taken to see that the changes incurred by the growth of population have been in harmony with both the fragile nature of the islands and the rights of the individual residents.”

It is noteworthy that when the design and publication of the visitor’s guide titled: ***the Undiscovered Islands of Denman Island and Hornby Island*** passed from Denman Island to Hornby Island it was printed on a glossy paper stock and renamed, simply: **Hornby & Denman Islands** and omitted any suggestions of how the visitor/tourist might tread lightly.

As of this date the community of Denman Island has continued to resist creating infrastructure to attract tourists. Fillongley Park has 10 camp sites, the same number it had 50 years ago, the number of B & Bs on the island has not changed significantly over the course of the last twenty or thirty years. Nevertheless, as Friday May 17 demonstrated, the tourist season has its impact on residents of Denman Island.

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