

SPECIAL REPORT

# Vancouver Island North

## BRITISH COLUMBIA



SUPPLEMENT TO TRADE & COMMERCE MAGAZINE



# North Island makes the most of emerging opportunities

**E**volution—economic evolution—is underway on the North Island. A vast area, encompassing what is essentially the top one-third of Vancouver Island, the region collectively known as the “North Island” has undergone a dramatic shift in its make-up and economic focus during the past two decades.

“There have been tremendous changes—industries that were central have either vanished or been drastically downsized,” explains Neil Smith, manager of economic development for the Regional District of Mount Waddington. “Forestry, mining, commercial fishing—traditionally these were the engines that drove the local economy.

“Today many of those big players are either gone or are scaled back from even a few years ago. The result is a rethinking, a refocusing on what makes this area special, what makes this area such an attractive one to live in.”

Islanders are also ready to explore new opportunities.

“There is also tremendous excitement around the potential for alternative energy and a North Island Corridor for Energy (NICE). The region is the third largest cluster of independent power proposals in British Columbia. Proponents like Plutonic, Sea Breeze and Brookfield are working hard in the community to deliver projects that will improve supply to

BY DAVID HOLMES

# BRITISH VANCOUVER ISLAND COLUMBIA NORTH



Left: The largest island on the west coast of North America, Vancouver Island is some 460 km long and 80 km wide at its broadest point. Facing page and below: Exploring the outdoors—hiking, sport fishing, camping, sea kayaking, and many other activities, have proven extremely popular.

the communities, bring community benefits to all and realize an expanded transmission infrastructure,” says Smith.

The largest island on the west coast of North America, Vancouver Island is some 460 km long and 80 km wide at its broadest point. With a total population of nearly 750,000 (with nearly half of that found in the provincial capital of Victoria), the top one-third of the island is a rugged, pristine frontier—carved out of the wilderness by resource-based pioneer companies and individuals striving to make new lives for themselves.

Currently, the area encompassed within the Regional District of Mount Waddington has a population of approximately 12,000 scattered in a number of unique hamlets and in four principal communities: the “tri-port towns” of Port Hardy, Port McNeill and Port Alice, and Alert Bay.

“I’m cautiously optimistic about the future,” says Cheryl Jorgenson, manager of the Port McNeill District Chamber of Commerce. “This is a great place to raise a family, to not have to worry about your

children being safe as they come home from school. I’ve raised two children in Port McNeill. I’ve definitely made an absolute commitment to the area.”

Although once thriving industries like mining, forestry and commercial fishing have declined in recent years, the area



has been making economic readjustments and considerable potential remains within the sectors.

“There is still a viable forest industry here. The product is here, the forest is here, we have access to the sea for shipping, everything needed to make this work is here—with the possible exception of a large enough workforce. Our population is in decline, a shortage of skilled, and in many cases even unskilled labour is a genuine concern for our region,” says Smith.

Building for tomorrow—that’s the focus and primary goal of the North Island business, municipal and regional leaders.

“Developing, expanding on what works, that’s key to the growth of the region,” explains Patti Smedley, economic and community development coordinator for the District of Port Hardy.

“We’re working to develop new sectors, to expand on those things that have been proven to work—tourism, secondary processing of forestry and fish products, aquaculture and others.

“An excellent example of this is Hardy Buoys, a custom fish processor located

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Companies like Marine Harvest are key to the success of the North Island economy.

here in Port Hardy where a tourist can literally bring their fresh-caught local salmon in one door, and have it cut smoked or packaged and out the other door. That's a case of capitalizing on the things we already do well."

The rugged beauty of the North Island is another of its remarkable assets.

"People are starting to see the North Island as a destination," says Gaby Wickstrom, past president of the Port McNeill District Chamber of Commerce.

"One of the biggest developments underway is the nearly \$8-million expansion planned for Port McNeill's waterfront. This is going to bring families to the waterfront, making it more of a focal point for the town."

The project will provide berthing space for additional commercial and recreational vessels, create a new public park and is hoped will provide a new social centre for the town and its waterfront.

"We have had great support from

both levels of government and the staff and Board of the Island Coastal Economic Trust," explained long-time Port McNeill mayor Gerry Furney at the time of the announcement of the project. "We look forward to the many benefits this great project will bring to our community and the North Island."

Another new part of the region's economic mix is the Orca Sand and Gravel operation, owned and operated by Polaris Minerals Corporation.

## Brookfield Renewable Power

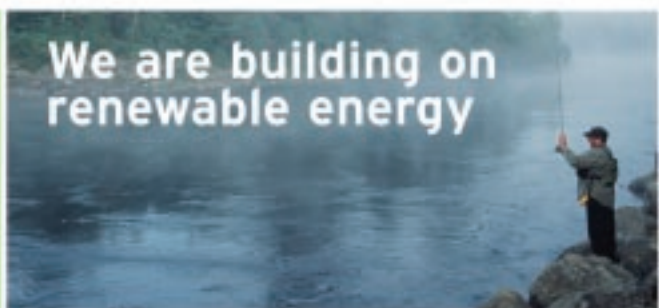
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“Nature, in the form of glacial deposits, has given Port McNeill a huge gravel resource ideal for construction aggregate,” says Mount Waddington’s Neil Smith.

Located just outside of Port McNeill, the Orca Quarry employs about 30 people and provides sand and gravel for ready-mix concrete producers in San Francisco and Vancouver. A specialized ship transports the material to market, making use of Port McNeill’s harbour facilities. The operation is owned 88 per cent by Polaris and 12 per cent by the ‘Namgis First Nation.

The quarry is permitted to produce 6.6 million tonnes of sand and gravel per year. The vast scale of the gravel deposit will ensure continued operation of the facility for many years to come. In addition, the critical role of ‘Namgis First Nation in facilitating this enterprise is a sign of how local First Nations will be a major economic driving force in future. The Quatsino, Kwakiutl and other local First Nations also stand ready for the future.

The third segment of the tri-port is the Village of Port Alice, home to the region’s only pulp mill. With a history dating back to just after the First World War, the Port Alice pulp mill has had its share of owners and economic challenges over the years. Currently owned by Neucel Specialty Cellulose, the mill was retooled from a

facility producing wood pulp for paper products into a sulphite pulp mill, producing a material widely used in many manufacturing products such as celluloid, lacquers and even glue. Situated on the shores of Neroutsos Inlet, Port Alice’s deep water harbour allows ocean going vessels direct access to the west coast of Vancouver

Island and global markets beyond.

Along with forestry and pulp production, the third major sector of the region is aquaculture, with one large finfish processing facility in Port Hardy and dozens of farm sites dotted along the area’s stunning coastline. Shellfish aquaculture is currently an underutilized opportunity



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that requires serious attention from the investment community.

“Lifestyle is something you hear a lot of up here,” says Teresa Bird, publisher/editor of the region’s newspaper, the *North Island Gazette*. “If you’re into the out-

doors, into hiking, or sport fishing, or camping this is definitely the place to be. Tourism, sea kayaking, and many other activities have proven extremely popular.”

In addition, Telegraph Cove Ventures and Nimmo Bay Heli-Ventures exemplify

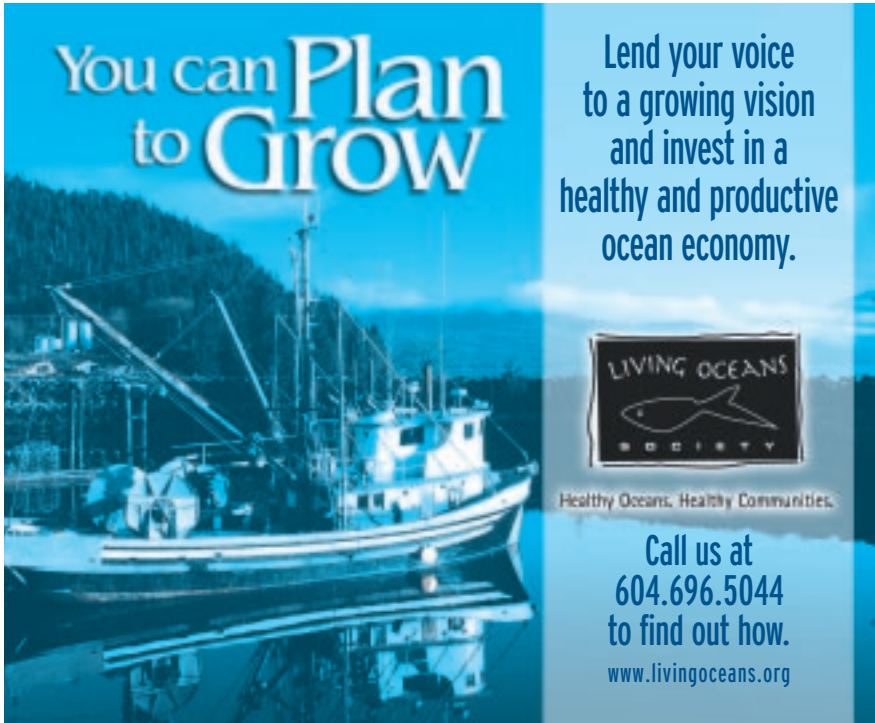
the region’s ability to attract some of the most sought-after clientele in the tourism sector with unsurpassed products and services.

More than anything else, it’s a sense of community, of local identity that is driving the North Island’s economic resurgence. Sustainable economic development is a key consideration too, particularly where the growth of the burgeoning local aquaculture sector is concerned. Working together, not as separate entities, the tri-port towns, the communities of Alert Bay and Sointula on nearby Cormorant and Malcolm Islands and the Regional District are striving collectively to complete the evolution world markets and changing fiscal circumstances have thrust upon it.

“We’re learning to make the most of the emerging opportunities,” says District of Port Hardy Councilor Stan McLennan. “We find the things that work and expand on them.

“We’re literally the Top of the Island, in every way.”

Economic coordinator Patti Smedley sums it all up: “We’ve had our challenges, but like the Energizer Bunny, we just keep on going and going.” ▲



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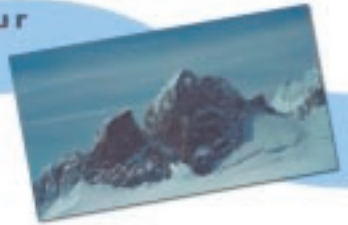
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 Woss Winter Harbour Port Alice Quatsino  
 Holberg Port Hardy Hyde Creek



The Regional District of Mount Waddington is open for business and willing to support the entrepreneur seeking to establish a new business or to expand or diversify an existing one.

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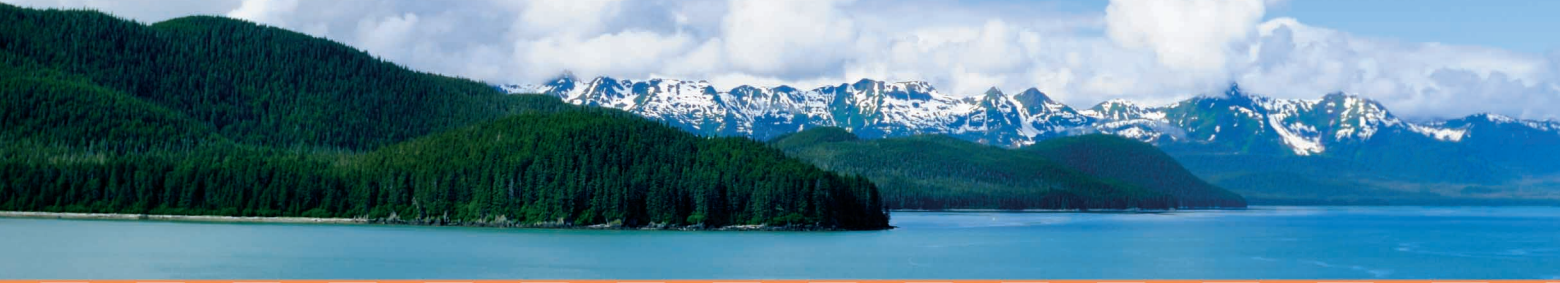
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## **Economic Responsibility**

Mainstream Canada recognizes that economic sustainability must be linked to environmental and social sustainability. Therefore, Mainstream Canada is committed to creating value for our shareholders through sustainable aquaculture. We guarantee that our products are grown and processed under stringent environmental, health and safety standards.