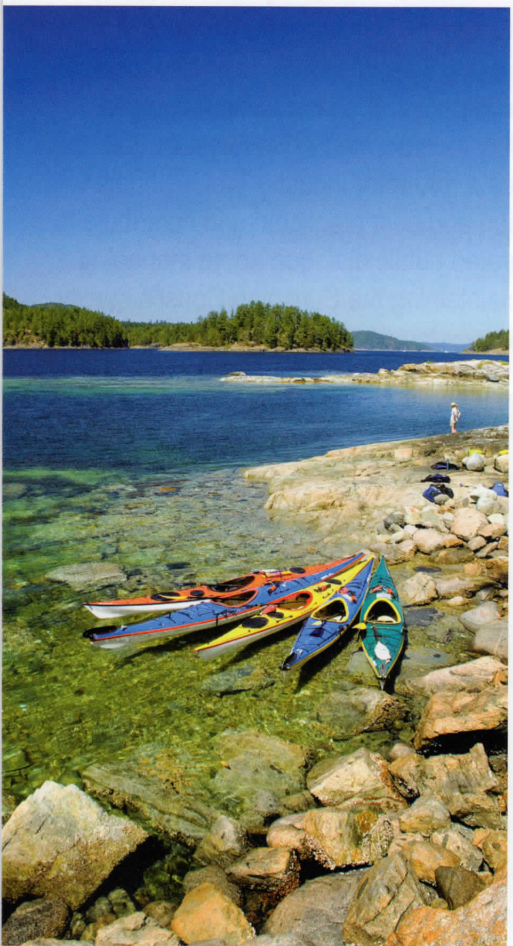


A Great Place to Meet

by Linda Wegner • Photos by Darren Robinson & Kelly Funk



These days there's another light shining on the Sunshine Coast. Thanks to the initiatives and cooperation of communities, businesses and individuals from Howe Sound to Desolation Sound, Sunshine Coast Meetings and Retreats Project is no longer a mere glimmer of an idea. Over the course of more than a year funding was secured, a project committee formed and partnership agreements set in place.

The project is initiated, managed and executed by Sunshine Coast Tourism (SCT), the official destination marketing organization for the Sunshine Coast. As this area is already an excellent option for hosting executive meetings, business retreats, health and wellness getaways and even weddings, the project is about setting a collaborative and collective strategy to effectively reach these markets. The SCT is putting together the necessary tools to capture the attention of executive meeting planners, event organizers and small- to medium-sized corporations and associations.

"We are hoping to attract a new group of visitors who will come for meetings, experience the Sunshine Coast and then return to vacation on a leisurely basis," says Judy Spears, SCT president and member of the project's advisory committee.

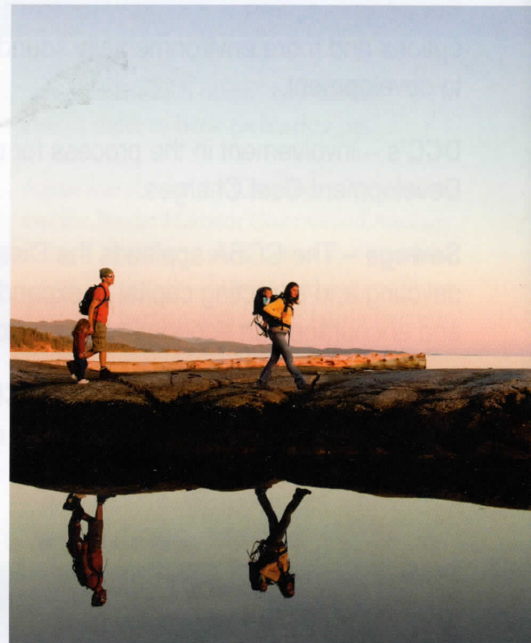
Darren Robinson, project coordinator and executive director of Tourism Powell River Society, agrees: "This is mostly about marketing the destination as an amazing place to hold a wide variety of group functions."

Charlene SanJenko, SCT treasurer and professional corporate event planner, is so committed to the possibilities that exist to sustain, expand and create new economic investment up and down the Coast that she has limited her volunteer commitments to primarily focus on this initiative.

"In this economic environment, corporate meeting/event planners need an entirely

new way of thinking," she says. "Where do you take people to tap into the greatest level of creativity? Where do you take them out of their comfort zone? We need to do something that isn't the same old, same old."

Noting the wealth of artistic creativity in the area, she continues: "How can we capture that level of inspiration found in the arts community and transfer it to the business community – and do it 'smart' with a low carbon footprint? Ever since I



moved here six years ago it has been my passion to actively work towards getting ready for this to happen. Our greatest asset is the Coast itself and what it can bring to the people. There's a clear message that has to go out: we can never compete with cities where there are huge facilities and amenities, but they will never be able to compete with us in terms of creativity, inspiration and natural beauty."

Add to the inspiring locales in which to hold business and social gatherings benefits that include shorter distances and travel times, less hassle at airports, and the security of being in a low-crime area and, according to Robinson, it doesn't get much better. "The Sunshine Coast stands out on

its own because of the unique offerings of each community – but common to the entire Coast is the chance to experience an isolated, middle-of-nowhere feel when you're not really in the middle of nowhere. You can get authentic, rugged west coast wilderness and still have access to common amenities that groups and event planners are looking for.”

In its preliminary stages, the project is garnering input from a variety of stakeholders, and a comprehensive marketing strategy will be ready to launch later this year or in early 2011. “We are in the process of creating an assortment of tools to help market our destination to groups that are literally at our doorstep,” Robinson continues. “For those wanting to invoke real inspiration and provide truly memorable experiences for their delegates, the Sunshine Coast boasts some wonderful opportunities to do so. We have all the service providers necessary to do this, including dining and catering, accommodations, audio/visual, teambuilding facilitators and endless recreation options.”



Spears, Robinson and SanJenko all speak of the support of business owners from Lund to Langdale. The committee is made up of representatives from the local business community – including people from the hotel, marketing and event planning industries and the number and quality of letters of support during the fundraising efforts was outstanding.

Spears says that the idea for capitalizing on the tourist market sparked enthusiasm and commitment more than a year ago when support from UBCM (Union of British Columbia Municipalities) became available through the City of Powell River and the Powell River Regional District. Additional funding leveraged by Tourism Powell River and SCT came from various stakeholders, including grants received from Tourism BC with the support of Vancouver Coast and Mountains Tourism Region, Lower Sunshine Coast governments (Town of Gibsons, District of Sechelt, Sunshine Coast Regional District and Sechelt Indian Band), from Community Futures-sponsored REDI-BC (Rural Economic Diversification Initiative) and from Island Coastal Economic Trust (ICE-T).

“The important thing is that the project has the potential to be a huge economic driver – that’s why we got the money we did,” Spears says. “It can create opportunities on the Coast including retention and expansion of current businesses, the establishment of new businesses leading to job creation, and new product development and services.”

Currently, an inventory of facilities and service providers has been collected, as well

as a list of meeting and event planners in accessible target markets. Also underway is the acquisition of new and exciting photography and a variety of collateral, including a new website, and the production of high-definition destination videos.

As an example of the kind of group-related retreats that can be built upon, Powell River will host *Coast in Focus* May 28-30. Professional photographers will be presenting two days of workshops, seminars and field instruction with the goal of improving the photography skills of event participants. Providing revenues for the local hospitality sector, it’s a perfect example of how the project is designed to function.

So why then is the extra marketing organization required to attract visitors to such an idyllic place? SanJenko says the answer is simple. “There are lots of reasons why there haven’t been more companies here, but one is clear: no one has asked them. During my career I worked for one corporation with an events-planning budget of \$250,000. I thought the Sunshine Coast was on the other side of Vancouver Island.”

With a smaller budget than that, but a passion for the message that couldn’t be bought at any price, plans are well underway to tell the world. Organizational structure is in place and functioning well; marketing strategies are being developed; and local professionals have been hired to design, build, photograph and invite the world to look for the sunshine – from Langdale to Lund. •