

Vancouver Island Discovery Centre



BEYOND BROCHURES: REGIONAL VISITOR CENTRES ADDING VALUE FOR VISITORS AND BUSINESS

VISITOR NEEDS, AND EXPECTATIONS

are evolving, and ICET has supported a proactive approach through investments in regional Visitor Centres in Cowichan, Port Alberni, Nanaimo, and the Comox Valley as well as mobile visitor units and Visitor Information parks in more rural or remote regions.

These regional visitor centres are flourishing, with record numbers of visitors coming through their doors, a surprising fact in this digital information age. One of the reasons is the broad mandate they have embraced, which goes beyond traditional visitor information to include services that support new business and resident attraction.

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The Cowichan Regional Visitor Centre – co-located with the BC Forest Discovery Centre – is a prime example of this new focus. The centre features nine displays highlighting some of the key sectors in the region such as wineries, agriculture, ocean and outdoor adventures, providing an opportunity for tourism operators and local businesses to connect with visitors. In addition to traditional visitor information, staff handed out more than 340 Cowichan relocation packages in 2016.

“We have seen the number of visitors double since our move into the new facility, and we are providing a broader range of services and information,” explains Sonja Nagel, Executive Director of the Duncan Cowichan Chamber of Commerce, operator of the Cowichan Regional Visitor Centre. “We are impressed by the number of visitors looking to relocate to the Cowichan Valley, especially when they come back to thank us for the relocation packages and tell us that they have purchased a home or a business.”

In the Comox Valley, the Vancouver Island Visitor Centre draws and engages visitors with interactive displays such as a shellfish touch tank, a climb-up tree, and a Vancouver Island Marmot den. A multi-media exhibit gallery boasts

stunning displays that promote the area’s tourism, cultural and heritage products and experiences, presented through the region’s four environments alpine, forest, rural and ocean.

“The ultimate goal of a visitor centre is to create a quality visitor experience, increase the length of stay, the spending, the number of referrals to family, friends and co-workers, and to increase return visits,” said Calum Matthews, Community and Industry Specialist with Tourism Vancouver Island. “Visitors should always leave here wanting to return because there is something they haven’t done.”

Many entrepreneurs discover a potential for relocation during a vacation, and Visitor Centres are a key resource for business attraction.

“We’ve interacted directly with several people who moved to Port Alberni specifically to build a business and life here,” said Bill Collette, Executive Director of the Alberni Valley Chamber of Commerce, operator of the Visitor Centre. “Every day, we provide information to visitors who want to move here, and it’s become such an important part of what we do, that we now track those numbers.”

In Nanaimo, the Northfield Rotary Park Visitor Centre is also pushing into new areas of contact and service. With a strategic location and compact footprint, the centre is exploring the area where traditional visitor centre services intersect with social media support. As a pilot project participant in Destination BC’s Social Media Visitor Services Program, the centre is augmenting the increase in visitors to their new physical location, with social media and online support services which rank third in the province (behind Kelowna and Whistler).

From creating mobile visitor centres that go to where the crowds of tourists are, to aiding in the attraction and relocation of new businesses, the modern Visitor Centres across the ICET region are demonstrating how they can play a significant role in community economic growth and diversification.

PROJECT PROFILE

VISITOR CENTRES



Northfield Rotary Park Visitor Centre



Alberni Valley Visitor Centre



Cowichan Regional Visitor Centre Official Opening

\$7.7 MILLION
TOTAL BUDGETS (ALL)

\$2.2 MILLION
ICET CONTRIBUTION (ALL)

2010-2014
COMPLETION DATES