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H. John Selwood et John C. Lehr

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# TOURISM IN MANITOBA "NORTH OF THE FIFTY-THIRD"

H. John Selwood and John C. Lehr

*On a per capita basis, Manitoba's tourist industry contributes more to provincial gross domestic product (GDP) than that of many provinces which are more noted as tourist destinations. Though Winnipeg, the provincial capital and largest metropolitan center, is the single most important destination in terms of tourism receipts, the more remote northern areas of the province contribute a significant amount of tourism revenue. Nature tourism and ecotourism are already two important northern niche markets, but the potential exists for more effective exploitation of the region's attractions. Churchill and its environs are reasonably accessible, providing visitors with an opportunity to experience the North at a relatively southern location. However, distance and accessibility are at the same time assets and deterrents to the further development of northern tourism resources. Poor transportation linkages and tourism infrastructure result in relatively high access costs to attractions and nationally significant sites. Shortage of accommodation is also a constraint, especially in more remote centers where capital investment is discouraged by the brevity of the tourist season and the vagaries of the climate. Paradoxically, these limiting factors contribute to the region's sense of place, attracting many tourists in search of a northern experience involving less time and at lower cost than incurred in visiting Canada's high Arctic.*

The Canadian North is an elusive concept. As Peter Usher (1998: 357) has noted, a part of Canadian mythology is that its identity and purpose lie in the North. The North is the country's "last frontier and our last wilderness." However, the limits of the North are difficult to define. Lines of latitude, territorial and provincial boundaries mean little. Geographers and social scientists have used bioclimatic criteria to define the North, but for most people, the North is a cognitive region defined according to their own personal constructs (Heinimann, 1993). Indeed, Louis Hamelin (1978: 9) has argued that the North is essentially a state of mind: "[it] is more than an area, it is a passion." It will be defined differently by those living in various parts of the region, and differently again by those living outside its limits. Using a wide variety of social, environmental and spatial criteria, Hamelin de-

rived an index of *northernness*, which he termed *nordicity*. The northern region which emerged from Hamelin's analysis bore little relation to latitudinal or political criteria. Using the *nordicity* index, the southern limits of the North extend to within a few hundred kilometers of Winnipeg in Manitoba, whereas in Alberta the North's southern boundary retreats well north of Edmonton, even beyond the Peace River district.

To most people who live outside the region, the North connotes inaccessibility, a heavy reliance on resource exploitation, a sparse population, a high ratio of aboriginal to non-aboriginal people and a *frontier way of life*. Many would distinguish between the subarctic and the arctic, or between the Near North and the Far North, and base the distinction on the presence of the boreal forest, taiga or tundra, but there still re-

mains a perception of the North as possessing many social, cultural, and spatial attributes of a frontier region in common.

## NORTH OF THE FIFTY-THIRD

Manitoba's North is marketed on this basis. Remoteness and inaccessibility are portrayed as positive elements, guaranteeing exceptional opportunities for hunting, fishing, wilderness adventure tourism, and wildlife observation. Travel Manitoba (1999a), the tourism branch of the provincial Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism, accepts the common local interpretation of the North as being anywhere "north of 53°," that is, anywhere in Manitoba lying above parallel 53° N, or roughly coincident with the province's northern boundary until 1912, when its territory was extended northward to the Hudson Bay (see Fig. 1). Manitoba's "North" therefore penetrates southward from its northern boundary at latitude 60° to include a large amount of territory that cannot even be considered subarctic. Even Churchill, billed as *Manitoba's Arctic Seaport*, at roughly latitude 58° N, is well south of the arctic circle, falling squarely into the high subarctic ecoclimatic zone. Most of the province north of 53° lies within the subhumid high boreal ecoclimatic zone (Scott, 1996: 44). However, the area contains barely 8% of the provincial population, and apart from the few resource towns, is populated chiefly by native people (Kienetz, 1996), thereby conforming to the *nordicity* criteria.

The *nordicity* factor receives further recognition from Travel Manitoba in that the northern portion of the province is now

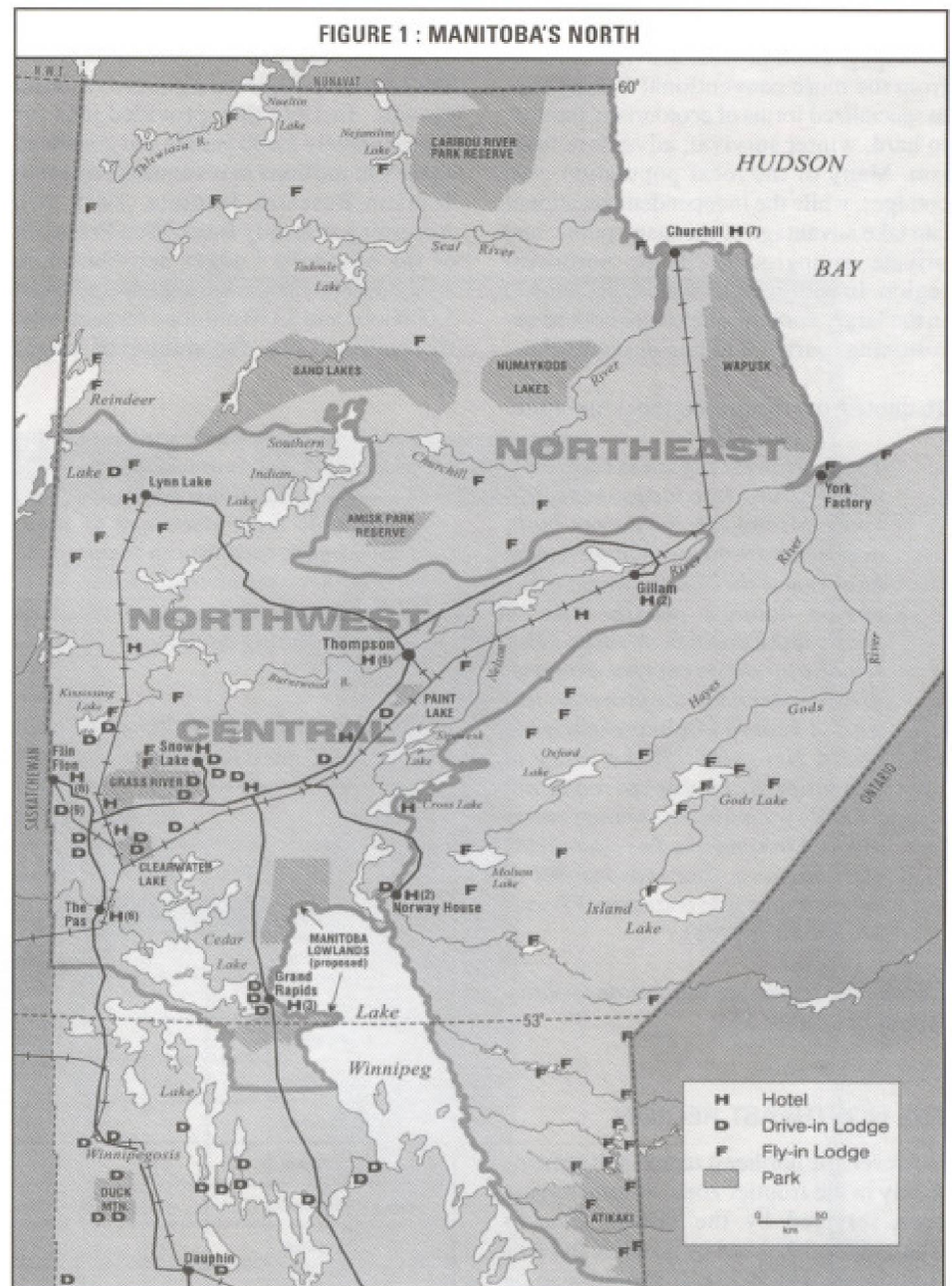
subdivided into two different sectors based on accessibility, the level of development, and the recency of exploitation. The two districts are: the northwestern/central region, which takes in the Grass and Saskatchewan River systems (see Fig. 1), and the more northerly northeast region, which includes the Churchill, Nelson and Seal River systems, along with the Hudson Bay lowlands.

## THE NORTHWEST/ CENTRAL REGION

The northwest/central region (Travel Manitoba, 1999b) is much more accessible, being serviced by rail, highways, and a network of roads. These communication systems were put into place largely to help develop the mining and hydro-electric power resources in the region. Scheduled air service is also more widely available and the shorter hops are much less expensive than traveling to the more remote parts of the province. The northwest region contains a number of important urban communities, such as: The Pas, Flin Flon, Thompson, Lynn Lake, Grand Rapids and Gillam, each with its various mining and other tourist attractions. Some of these towns have had a relatively long history and they augment their contemporary *industrial* touristic value with a range of *heritage* attractions and *events*.

The Northern Manitoba Trapper's Festival at The Pas has been celebrated since 1916, making it "...Manitoba's oldest festival and one of Canada's oldest winter festivals." (Lambert, 1988) The festival was first seen as a means of helping to entertain and control the trappers who gathered in The Pas for the Fur Exchange, to provision themselves, and to trade. Originally known as The Pas Dog Derby, the now week-long festival continues to feature dog sled races, but incorporates a *variety of traditional northern survival events* including tree felling, wood cutting, wood splitting, canoe packing, flour packing, muskrat skinning, tea boiling, bannock baking, moose calling, goose calling, and the like. The overall winner of the competitions is crowned King Trapper to complement the much longer established Fur Queen contest.

The other northern Manitoba towns have also introduced annual festivals as attractions to tourists as well as local popula-



Compiled from Travel Manitoba data

tion. Thompson's *Nickel Days*, extending over several days in June, is northern Manitoba's largest summer festival. The *King Miner* competition, which includes a range of mining skills, highlights the town's major industry. The *Flin Flon Trout Festival* is a longer-lived, more traditional event. It features a month-long catch and release lake trout derby during June that culminates in a week-long celebration and *Main Street Extravaganza* (Travel Manitoba, 1999b).

Hunting and fishing have been the mainstay of northern tourism for many decades and the participants continue to be a major

market target for outfitters, lodges, and camps. Travel Manitoba (1999c) lists 38 lodges in the northwest region. Not all are accessible by road, but the great majority are strung out along the highway system, or on lakes that are serviced by road. They also tend to be clustered relatively near to population centers (Fig. 1). Individual lodges vary widely in size, with accommodation ranging from 11 to 90 bed spaces, and an average capacity of around 34 people. All told, the lodges provide some 1,250 bed spaces in the region.

Significant numbers of limited service outfitters also operate in the area, although

some of them are based as far south as Winnipeg. These provide activities ranging from the more conventional fishing trip, to specialized forms of ecotourism, through to hard, winter survival, adventure tourism. Many of the local population own cottages, while the independent vacationer can take advantage of the many public and private campgrounds in the northwest region. In addition, several hotels located in the larger communities cater both to vacationing tourists and business travelers.

To quote from the promotional literature:

*The Northwest region is one of the oldest fishing territories in the province. Strong ties have been built, over generations, with anglers who have found their place to get away amidst nature's pristine mix of tundra and Canadian shield [...] This region also shows many newcomers, to the sport and to the province, just what a superb angling experience offers. Here you'll find a range of recreational activities to round-out a family vacation. The major centres of Flin Flon and The Pas offer all the conveniences, and seasons full of celebrations and festivities (Travel Manitoba, 1999c).*

Clearly, this region has become *denordified* (Hamelin, 1978: 37).

## THE NORTHEAST REGION

However, the northeast region still remains firmly in the frontier zone, despite having been serviced by the railway line to Churchill in 1929 and by air since the 30's (Lundgren, 1995: 53). It should also be noted that in the easternmost part of the province this zone extends appreciably further south than latitude 53°. Although there are almost 50 lodges listed for the area in the Travel Manitoba (1999d) promotional material, the great majority of these are *fly-in* camps in isolated and remote locations (see Fig. 1). Most of these camps are small, with an average 24 spaces available. Many of them have very limited capacity, several with as few as 8 bed spaces, with the largest providing accommodation for 54 people. Nevertheless, even when discounting the *out camps*, the listed lodges provide a total bed capacity of 1,200 for the region, virtually the same number as in the northwest region.

Recent estimates of the contributions made by the outfitters and lodges to the Manitoban economy indicate a pattern of rapid growth. In 1994 they provided jobs for approximately 2,600 people and generated some \$90 millions in revenues (Canadian Tourism Research Institute, 1995: iii). According to Randy Bean, Vice-President of the Manitoba Lodges and Outfitters Association, these figures have risen to 5,000 jobs and \$350 millions respectively. According to him, the number of lodges has been

*[...] relatively stable at about 150 for the last 10 years. However, the number of outfitters has soared from about 80 three years ago to about 250 today, largely as a result of the province allowing farmers to supplement their incomes with part-time outfitting operations (McNeill, 1999: B3).*

In 1994, more than 90% of the fly-in lodge and outfitters' guest days and over 50% of

drive-in guest days were generated by US visitors. Given that this pattern has not changed appreciably, a very substantial proportion of these figures would have been generated by northern operators. According to Bean, business continues to boom in 1999, with most of the lodges already booked up before commencement of the fishing season (McNeil, 1999). Although some of the outfitters and lodge operators have begun to turn to ecotourism as a form of livelihood, the hub of this sector of the industry is based in Churchill with its very considerable range of attractions.

## CHURCHILL

The origins of tourism at Churchill and Hudson Bay really begin with the Hudson Bay Company's operations (Lundgren, 1995: 43). Modern, organized tourism however can be said to have begun very soon after completion of the railway to Churchill and construction of the port

FIGURE 2 : CHURCHILL ATTRACTIONS

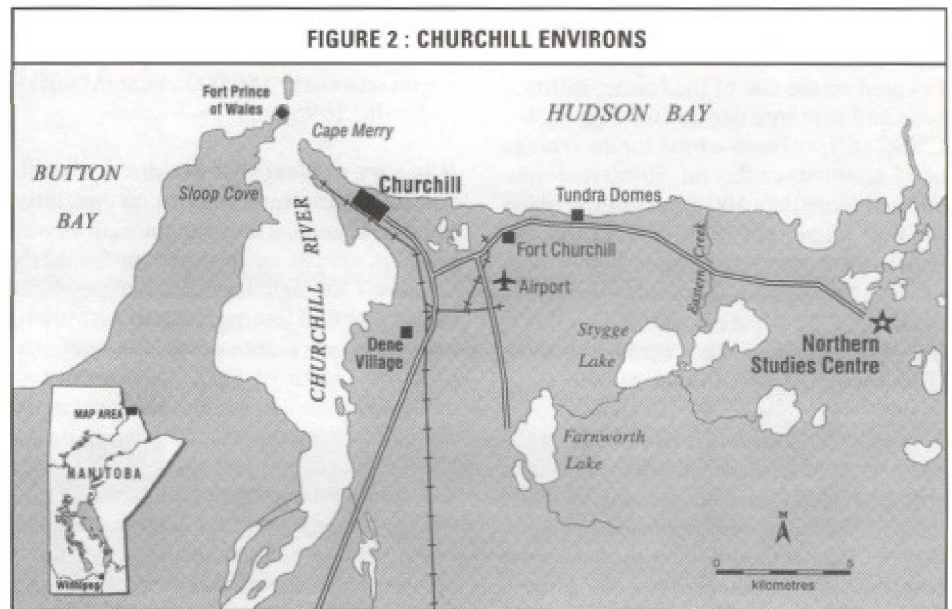
	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Northern Lights												
Seals												
Birds												
Boreal Gardens												
Cape Merry												
Tundra Florals												
Fishing												
Prince of Wales Fort												
Sloop's Cove												
Scuba Diving												
Beluga Whales												
Port												
Autumn Colours												
Polar Bears												
Goose Hunting												
Eskimo Museum, Northern Studies Centre, Parks Canada, Town Centre												
Average Temp. (°C)	-26.9	-25.4	-20.2	-10.0	-1.1	6.1	11.8	11.3	5.5	-1.4	-12.5	-22.7
Insects												
Rainfall (mm)	0	0	0.7	1.9	13.3	40.2	50.7	60.5	46.4	20.0	1.4	0.2
Snowfall (cm)	20.1	15.4	19.6	22.9	18.8	4.2	0	0	6.2	29.2	39.8	23.8
Mean Wind Speed (km/h)	24	23	22	22	21	19	18	19	22	24	24	22

Modified from Travel Manitoba. Weather data from Environment Canada

facilities shortly thereafter. By 1932, travelers were able to take advantage of a single annual summer train organized principally for bird-watchers. However, it was only after the decline of the military base and growth of the polar bear population during the 60's that tourism grew rapidly in importance. By 1980, tourism had become Churchill's major industry, largely because of the autumnal concentration of polar bears in the immediate vicinity of the townsite and development of the *tundra buggy* which permitted safe viewing of the bears at close range (Haglund, 1993). The number of tourists grew dramatically as Churchill's varied attractions became more widely known, accessibility improved, facilities expanded, and the area more effectively marketed.

As Figure 2 indicates, the principal attractions are extremely diverse, ranging from the industrial port facilities to the spectacular displays of the aurora borealis that can now be viewed from the comfort of plexiglass *tundra domes*. Churchill's claim to being "Polar Bear Capital of the World" cannot be challenged. The area is a favored massing place for the bears, where as many as 150 pass near to the town during the fall freeze-up en route from their denning area to the seal hunting grounds. During the short summer up to 3,000 beluga whales enter the Churchill River area shortly after the ice breaks up. More than 200 species of birds gather in the locality in the summer and fall, including the Ross's Gull and the Arctic tern. Churchill is also a convenient location to view the more than 400 species of plant life native to the tundra. And because of its historic importance as a native and European gathering place, the area has considerable heritage value (Travel Manitoba, 1999f).

Northern Manitoba is intimately associated with the Hudson Bay Company and the fur trade. Many settlements in northern Manitoba were founded as fur trade posts: Norway House, Oxford House, and York Factory are among the better known. Although many of the structures built by the HBC were small and ephemeral, the Company did create some remarkable structures which have survived to become Provincial and National Historic Sites. Several of these lie on the shores of Hudson Bay at the mouth of the Churchill River and are therefore relatively accessible (Fig. 3). Prince of Wales' Fort, the most northerly stone fortress in North America, is a



National Historic Site located on the Churchill West Peninsula across from the Port of Churchill. Sloop's Cove, a former docking place for Hudson Bay Company's vessels now rendered high and dry by isostatic rebound, is also a National Historic Site. Across the river, adjacent to the townsite of Churchill, Cape Merry, a gun position and magazine, is another National Historic Site. The sites are staffed on a seasonal basis, in an intermittent fashion, to coincide with train arrival days. Within the town, Parks Canada (now the Department of Canadian Heritage) operates an interpretive center and associated programs. Few tourists come to visit these sites only, but when coupled with other privately operated sites such as the internationally known Eskimo Museum, it is sufficient for a few day's exploration of the area's historic legacy. Churchill also serves as a jumping-off point for more remote locations such as York Factory at the mouth of the Nelson River and is being promoted as a link between southern Canada and the Kivalliq region of Nunavut (Kenny, 1999).

The Churchill West Peninsula has a plethora of archeological sites representing pre-Dorset, Dorset, Thule, Inuit, as well as European cultures. Although not able to lay claim to having the best example of a site representing any one culture, the area is unique in that no other locality can boast of such a rich representation of all these cultures. Furthermore, due to isostatic rebound since the retreat of the ice sheet some several thousand years ago, and because most peoples located their dwell-

ings on the shoreline of the time, these sites are all sorted by elevation with the oldest sites occupying the highest elevations. In the 80's the Provincial Heritage Council recommended pursuing a World Heritage Site designation of the area, partly as a strategy to boost Churchill's tourism potential. Excavation of sites is still proceeding but whether a World Heritage Designation will eventually be pursued is open to question.

Even so, it is not surprising that Churchill has become a most favored destination for the ecotourism market, although as Figure 2 shows, the principal attractions are highly concentrated into a few months of the year. According to a recent estimate (Weaver and coll., 1995), more than 12,000 people per year are now visiting Churchill, giving an annual local economic impact from ecotourism valued at around one million dollars. Another study indicates that more than 80% of Churchill's visitors took part in "an organized wildlife viewing tour," with more than 90% of October and November visitors taking in a polar bear-watching trip. Overall, people who visit Churchill are far more likely to be ecotourists than those visiting other parts of the province (Mackay and coll., 1996).

The Churchill Northern Studies Centre (CNSC), a distant descendant of the scientific space research program established in the early 70's by the National Research Council, continues to attract the scientific community and now makes an important contribution to the educational component of ecotourism. Study topics vary according

to the season, but they focus on the diverse local physical and human environments. Located on the site of the former military base and research center (see Fig. 3), the CNSC still serves as a base for an average of 15 scientists each year, 50-60 researchers, and more than 500 other guests. Many of the latter are participants in the Elderhostel study programs which now operate throughout the year, effectively exploiting the aurora borealis which is at its best during the winter months (Elderhostel, 1999; Lemelin, 1999).

A profile of Churchill visitors identifies some interesting contrasts when compared with Manitoba tourists in general. Whereas most of the latter were domestic in origin, nearly 70% of Churchill's visitors were foreign, 55% of them from the United States, and another 13% from overseas. Only 32% came from other parts of Canada. The great majority of Churchill's tourists were also first-time visitors, with 80% identifying the place as their main destination, although a mere 14% spent their entire trip at Churchill. Evidently, foreign visitors incorporated other destinations into their itineraries and were constrained by limitations in transportation scheduling.

Travelers to Churchill also had different motivations than did other Manitoba tourists. Although Manitoba travelers at large did express some interest in educational experiences, learning about culture and history, going to new places, and seeing new things, they did not rate them as highly as did the Churchill visitors. Conversely, the Manitoba tourists' motives for travel were weighted more heavily than the Churchill visitors toward wanting to be pampered, entertained, and to rest and relax (MacKay and coll., 1996).

Socioeconomic characteristics of the Churchill visitors were also significantly different from those of Manitoba at large. The Churchill tourists were older, wealthier, and more educated. Whereas only 36% of Manitoba tourists were 55 years of age or older, virtually 50% of the Churchill visitors fell into that cohort. Similarly, nearly 70% of the Churchill visitors had some university education, compared with only 45% of the Manitoba travelers. Although household incomes were relatively high amongst all tourists, with both sets having more than 50% of those surveyed with annual incomes over

\$50,000, the Churchill group were somewhat more affluent with nearly 30% boasting incomes over \$80,000 a year (MacKay and coll., 1996).

It is very evident that Manitoba's north country relies very heavily on specialty tourism segments and that the majority of northern tourists are from beyond Canada's borders. Although the traditional pastimes of hunting and fishing are still extremely important in the more accessible southerly parts of "north of 53°," the northwest/central region has been at least partially denordified, with there now being a significant degree of conventional vacationing and indulgence in more urban-based tourism activities by relatively large numbers of local people. Further north, the much less accessible northeastern region still retains its image as a remote, pristine part of the country, catering to a self-contained, self-sufficient set of hardy frontiersmen, an image that is somewhat belied by the often very luxurious accommodation that is available in the more heavily capitalized fly-in fishing and hunting camps. These isolated camps rely very heavily indeed on patronage from the United States. Finally, there is Churchill, the jewel in the crown, with its unique blend of attractions so symbolic of the Arctic and Canada's heritage, yet reasonably accessible at a not outlandish cost. It attracts a broadly international set of visitors who are seeking an ecotouristic experience.

## PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

As is the case with most other locations that rely heavily on tourism, questions arise as to the potential for growth, impacts on the environment, and sustainability. At present, most of the tourism-based industry in Manitoba's north country is operating at or near capacity during the short summer season. Business in the lodges has been extremely good recently, and numbers of them are close to fully booked for a couple of years ahead (McNeil, 1999). Prices do not appear to be much of a deterrent, especially with the strength in the American dollar; lodge prices vary fairly widely according to levels of service, transport, and luxury, with an all inclusive American plan, weekly rate posted at around US\$3,000 per person (Seal River Heritage Lodge, 1999). Accommodation in Churchill is also at a premium during the summer, and particularly the fall, when the polar bears are moving through the district. A return economy flight from Winnipeg to Churchill costing CDN\$1,100 is relatively expensive, although cheaper fares are often available. It is cheaper by rail, costing (with sleeping accommodation) nearly \$700 return, yet the thrice weekly trains are fully booked in high season. However, beyond Churchill, prices rise dramatically, flights are less frequent and more unreliable, and it becomes increasingly difficult to find convenient



Photo J. Lehr

schedules. For example, it costs at least \$1,500 return to Rankin Inlet, \$2,300 to Coral Harbour, and \$3,350 to Iqualuit, with less than daily service. There is also a dearth of facilities in the Far North, where accommodation is very rudimentary, limited, and often unavailable to vacationers due to its being occupied by officials or construction crews (Johnson, 1999a).

Even in the vicinity of Churchill accessibility can be a problem. To reach Sloop's Cove and Prince of Wales Fort, visitors must cross the Churchill River by boat and be guided to the sites by an armed escort lest the party encounter a stray polar bear. Tours are also dependent on tides and weather conditions. Sloop's Cove is some distance from the Fort, making tour operators reluctant to spend the time needed to hike there overland. Because the site lacks permanent docking facilities, many choose to exclude Sloop's Cove from the tour.

The other National Historic Site on Hudson Bay, York Factory at the mouth of the Nelson River, is virtually inaccessible except by canoe, float plane, or helicopter. With airtime for helicopter charter running to \$450 an hour and over, few tourists are prepared to visit the one site for just a few hours. Whereas in 1993-94 103 people visited York Factory, in 1996-97 and 1997-98 fewer than 10 tourists visited, reflecting the closure of the airstrip. Even the relatively accessible sites in Churchill receive only modest visitation and the annual totals have been declining for the past few years. In 1993-94 Prince of Wales Fort had over 17,000 visitors, but numbers have declined steadily to a little more than 10,000 in 1998. The decline in visitation was proportional for Cape Merry which dropped from 6,882 in 1993-94 to 3,949 in 1996-97, and only 648 in 1997-98. These figures reflect reductions in staffing to some degree, but evidently there has not been growth in the system (Reis, 1999). To this point then, Lundgren (1995: 59) is correct in stating that, in Canada:

*The demand/supply/consumption relationships [...] so far have activated high-priced, specialised, smaller travel markets, with limited potential for larger volumes in the future, weak scale economy and high prices. This characterisation becomes more pronounced the further north the tourist travels [...]*



Photo Travel Manitoba

From the sustainability perspective, the status quo has some merit. Relatively low numbers of visitors are less likely to disrupt or destroy the fragile ecological balance of the northern environment. Various northern administrators and scholars are already expressing concern over the ability of the region to accommodate increased levels of visitation. Restrictions on hunting and fishing bag limits and season lengths have been in place for years. However, there are also calls for the development of additional controls on the numbers and movements of people wishing to observe the polar bears (Haglund, 1993). With increased polar tourism, there is also a growing need to develop appropriate guidelines, codes of conduct, and visitor regulation strategies for the North (Hall and Johnston, 1995; Johnston, 1997; Johnston, 1998).

While these measures are necessary, there are also pressures for further development of the industry. The new territory of Nunavut "has the welcome mat out" for tourists and is looking for ways to improve its infrastructure to that effect (Crary, 1999). A suggestion has been to extend the highway from its present terminus at Gillam, northward to Churchill. Kivallik Air, a division of Keewatin Air, now has scheduled passenger flights from Winnipeg to Churchill and beyond (Wilson, 1999). Perhaps more importantly, connections with the United States have recently improved with the inauguration of Air BC/Air Canada direct flights into Winnipeg. The Manitoba Lodges and Outfitters Association is looking to broaden its marketing efforts in the western United States in response to this initiative (Ans, 1999). Travel Manitoba is also intensifying

its efforts to attract tourists, and is in the process of establishing a Manitoba-Nunavut Tourism Working Group "to facilitate industry working with industry in the two jurisdictions and to strengthen tourism marketing through partnerships" (Elliot, 1999). As the travel industry matures, there is some prospect of greater coordination and cooperation between the different sectors as they come to appreciate the benefits of partnerships and joint marketing efforts (Ans, 1999; Johnson, 1999b). In the meantime, northern tourism remains vulnerable to the short season and the difficulty of expanding or even maintaining services and infrastructure when tourist numbers are so constrained.

*John Selwood is a professor of geography at the University of Winnipeg. He has diverse academic research interests that include geographical aspects of the sex trade, studies of urban development and rural settlement processes, and tourism. He is particularly interested in cottaging and domestic holidaymaking both in Canada and Australia, which he frequently visits.*

*John C. Lehr is a professor of geography at the University of Winnipeg. His research interests lie in the field of historical geography and embrace early recreation and tourism in western Canada, heritage resource development, and agricultural pioneer settlement in the New World.*



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