

Festival Frenzy: When Christmas comes in July

by Michelle Hancock

It was summer 2005, and tens of thousands of hyped country music fans cheered as Tim McGraw took the stage at the Merritt Mountain Music Festival. They'd come from all over Canada, the US, and Europe to hear the hot talent perform.

What McGraw saw was a sea of upturned faces. What fans saw was amazing BC landscape and a country music legend — the cherry on top of a string of great performances. What townspeople saw was Merritt's population of 7,000 exploding at the seams to more than five times its usual size. And what local businesses saw was year 13 in a string of highly acclaimed, revenue-generating, annual festivals that has made Merritt an international tourist destination.

Perhaps Merritt Mayor David Laird encapsulates the phenomenon best by calling it, "Christmas in July."

Across BC, festivals are in full swing. Some sound a little bohemian, like Chaminus' summer-celebrating Festival of Murals, or the Edge of the World Music Festival in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Others, Grandma would surely approve of, like Abbotsford's Berry Festival in July or the Pacific Rim Whale Festival in Ucluelet on Vancouver Island. But whatever your taste, one and all can play a valuable role in community sustainability-socially, culturally, environmentally, and economically.

The Meadowlark Festival in Penticton combines all these elements. Originally, a small group of people thought a birding festival was a great idea, but "it's escalated into a festival that celebrates not only birds, but many other species of plants and wildlife," says Jacquie Likins, festival events coordinator for the Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Alliance (OSCA), a non-profit organization.

A CAUSE TO EMBRACE

This year, Meadowlark's eleventh from May 15th to 19th, there were fun events like grassland tours and bat workshops led by biologists, botanists, and nature lovers to raise awareness about one of Canada's most diverse.

British Columbians flock to festivals



This year's Whistler Wellness Week, between May 31st and June 7th, will include about 140 workshops on everything from yoga to greening your home, the latter in an increasing effort to focus on environmental sustainability.



The Meadowlark Festival, this year from May 15th to 19th, attracts hundreds of visitors to Penticton to celebrate the area's unique and special plant and animal life. The mushroom hunt is a popular event.



The Merritt Mountain Music Festival is testing a new format this year during its 15th annual event July 10th to 13th. Usually six days long, the festival will span four days and will include a golf component. To date, headliners include Hank Williams and the Judds.

and endangered, habitat areas.

"The festival isn't about advocacy," explains Likins, "but we focus on conservation issues related to urban development and agricultural expansion."

Fifty-eight percent of the area's rare antelope brush ecosystem, for example, has been lost since 1938, says Likens. Ministry of Environment wildlife biologist Orville Dyer adds that this brush is especially important because the larvae of a threatened type of butterfly feed on it.

Over five days, more than 2,800 people of an increasingly out-of-town persuasion ate, drank, and learned about "tread-lightly" concepts. Those on vacation generally spent \$150 to \$200 per person per day, contributing significantly to local economies.

FISCAL FIGHT

Besides being a worthy cause, the Meadowlark festival has succeeded because of the numerous sponsors who have contributed financially-everyone from Environment Canada and BC's Ministry of the Environment, to the Penticton Herald and The Bike Barn.

But some festivals don't make it, particularly smaller ones, notes Lindy Sisson, executive and artistic director of the Vancouver International Children's Festival and western representative for the Canadian Festivals Coalition. "Funding is a continual challenge," she says. "You always have to make your case to keep current funding levels where they're at. We want grants and funding to keep up with inflation at the very least, which they don't."

The federal government did allocate \$30 million per year in support of Canadian festivals in March of 2007, but smaller festivals don't see much of that money. Ironically, though, it's those smaller BC communities that are stepping away from "resource-based" economies to what the BC Arts Council 2006/2007 Annual Report describes as "knowledge-based creative."

In other words, communities are finding local favour, and are celebrating it.

ARTISTS, TOURISTS, AND TRAVELLERS

Cultural tourism is the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry, contributing to many regional developmental plans. A 2006 BC Arts Council socio-economic report notes that for every dollar spent, an additional \$.83 to \$1.00 is generated. And for every job in the arts and cultural sector, approximately 0.3 to 0.5 additional jobs are created in the economy.

For Glenn Isles, vice-president of Wellness Events, supporting local business was one of the reasons he got involved in Whistler Wellness Week .

"This was a way we could increase visitors to Whistler and ultimately create economic sustainability during off-peak periods," says Isles, "We felt there was an opportunity to let the world know what Whistler has to offer in terms of health and wellness opportunities."

This year, the third Whistler Wellness Week included about 140 workshops on everything from yoga to greening your home, the latter in an increasing effort to focus on environmental sustainability. At the same time, by sticking to a solid, constant rate of growth, Isles has been careful not to succumb to another common pitfall of small festivals: poor succession planning, whereby festivals grow too fast and collapse under the pressure.

NEXT STEP FOR A SUCCESS STORY

To the northeast, producers of the Merritt Mountain Music Festival have certainly done a good job of nurturing Mountainfest, as it's now called-and its host town of Merritt.

The Canadian Country Music Association (CCMA) recently anointed Merritt as the new home of the CCMA Hall of Fame. A Walk of Stars where bronze hand imprints of legends like Johnny Cash and the Dixie Chicks are displayed throughout downtown, providing additional aesthetic and tourist appeal.

Still, as with all good festivals, times change. There will be several differences with this year's Mountainfest, said Lynn Robertson, vice president of Active Mountain Entertainment Corp, which has organized the festival since its humbler beginnings. They're scaling back from six to four days, reducing the festival area and tickets sold, and are developing a golfing community resort-changes that will hopefully appeal to a more mature demographic.

Between July 10th and 13th, as artists including Sara Evans and Sugarland take the stage, the city will help out as usual by providing traffic control and drinking water service.

Mayor David Laird, for one, is looking forward to it. "It's a good change," he said. "I guess we'll find out what people who come on a regular basis think."

Vancouver writer Michelle Hancock discovered the beauty of the spring season when she lived in Japan. She's now a new volunteer for the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival.