

Population and Economic Growth in Remote British Columbian Resource Communities

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Background



Northern Rockies RM

Est 2009

Northern Rockies RM is BC's first regional municipality covering an area roughly the size of the country of Austria (Northern Rockies Rm, 2023; Nations Online, 2018). Historically its economy was based on logging and milling. Its economy went into a downturn following the 2008 Recession; however, its effects were mitigated at first by a boom in the oil and gas industry. Unfortunately, this boom did not last, and the municipality's economy is struggling (Parfitt, 2020).



Valemount

Est 1962

Settlement in the Valemount area expanded in 1914 after the railroad's arrival through Yellowhead Pass (Valemount Museum, 2023). Its historical industries focused on logging and forestry processing with sporadic mega projects fueling population growth (McCracken, 2015; Village of Valemount, 2021). Over time the community's mills were consolidated and sold until a single mill remained. This mill closed in 2006 (Village of Valemount, 2021). Its economy is now based mainly on tourism.



Kitimat

Est 1953

"Hewn out of the unknown wilderness," Kitimat was constructed quickly in a remote part of British Columbia to house a workforce for Alcan's newest aluminum smelter (Cross, 2016). It was revolutionary at the time, transforming the process of company town creation. It helped to inspire the future "instant towns" due to its layout and the way it was rapidly constructed (Cross, 2016). It was designed to grow to a population of 50,000 people; this population never materialized (Thorne, 2018).



Port Alice

Est 1965

Port Alice originated as a company town for a pulp and paper mill in 1913 and continued to exist for around 50 years (Bradbury, 1977). Later the original townsite was abandoned and demolished for the creation of a new townsite in the 1960s. This new townsite in 1965 became the first incorporated "instant town" in the province, meaning that it was a planned community, politically independent from a company, and gained full municipal status upon its completion (Government of British Columbia, n.d.).



Mackenzie

Est 1966

Due to the construction of the W.A.C. Bennet Dam in the early 1960s, the area was deemed a good candidate for creating a forestry complex. Thus, Mackenzie was envisioned (Mackenzie and District Museum, 2021). Like Port Alice, it was an instant town, and the town was based around a pulp mill and two sawmills. Like Northern Rockies RM, the town was hard hit by the 2008 Recession, and four mills were closed, with multiple never to reopen following economic recovery (District of Mackenzie, 2014).

Research Questions

1. What growth strategies have these communities attempted?
2. How does the community define success? Is it trying to grow or stabilize the population?
3. Were they successful? Why or why not?
4. Are there any commonalities between the strategies or their associated outcomes that these communities have attempted?

Census Analysis

- The 1996, 2006, 2016, and 2021 Censuses were utilized
- Census data is a valuable source that provides unbiased empirical data
- The primary metrics taken from the census data include population, population percentage change, median age, industry-sectors, and unemployment rate
- It is impossible to attribute the data to a specific strategy outlined in the official community plan; therefore, it is unknown if a particular strategy is the cause of the changes in census data or not

Research Methods

Document Analysis

- Not all communities have the same types of reports and publications available
- A coding framework for analyzing the official community plans was developed to create comparisons and establish trends between the communities

Community	Type of Document				
	Official Community Plan	Annual Reports	Economic Development Strategy	Tourism Strategy	Age in the Community Strategy
Northern Rockies RM	X	X	---	---	X
Valemount	X	X	X	---	---
Kitimat	X	X	---	---	---
Port Alice	X	X	X	X	---
Mackenzie	X	X	X	X	X

Interviews

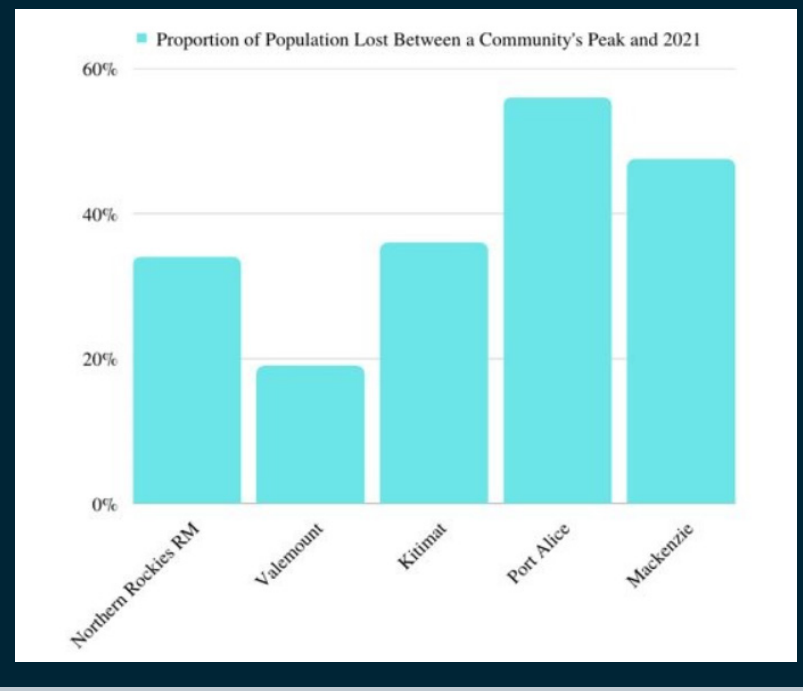
- Key informant semi-structured interviews were utilized
- Interview questions consisted of:
 - What is your professional role in this community?
 - How has this community changed in the time that you have worked here?
 - Has the local government established any goals for the future of the community such as whether or not the community wishes to grow or stabilize its population?
 - What are some the strategies that the community has implemented to achieve these goals? (IE development plans, growth plans, economic development plans)
 - Were they successful? Why or why not?
 - How did the community settle on this strategy?
 - Are there future plans for strategy implementation? If so can you please describe them?
 - Looking at documents such as the community's economic development plan, the official community plan, and the council strategic plan, has the community met the timelines laid out in these reports?
 - Are the goals attainable in the timeframe prescribed by the reports?
 - Have any of the goals already been attained?

Findings

Census Findings

- Each Community's population declined
- The median age in each community increased
- The proportion of the workforce working in manufacturing decreased

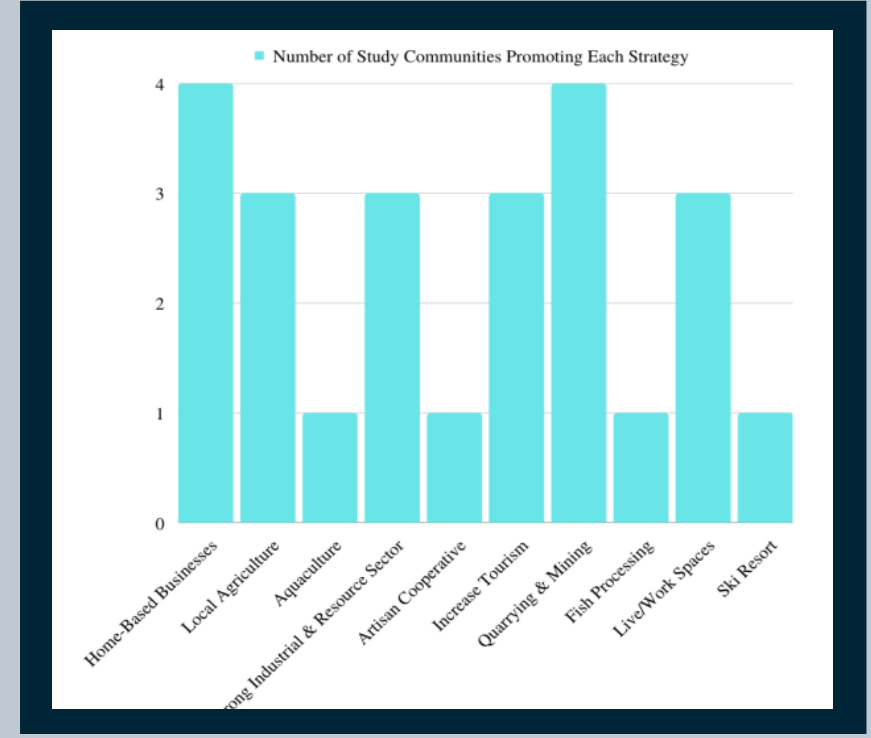
Population Lost by Each Community



Document Findings

- 64 codes were generated, which were applied 160 times uniquely in the 5 official community

Strategies for Economic Diversification Identified in Official Community Plans



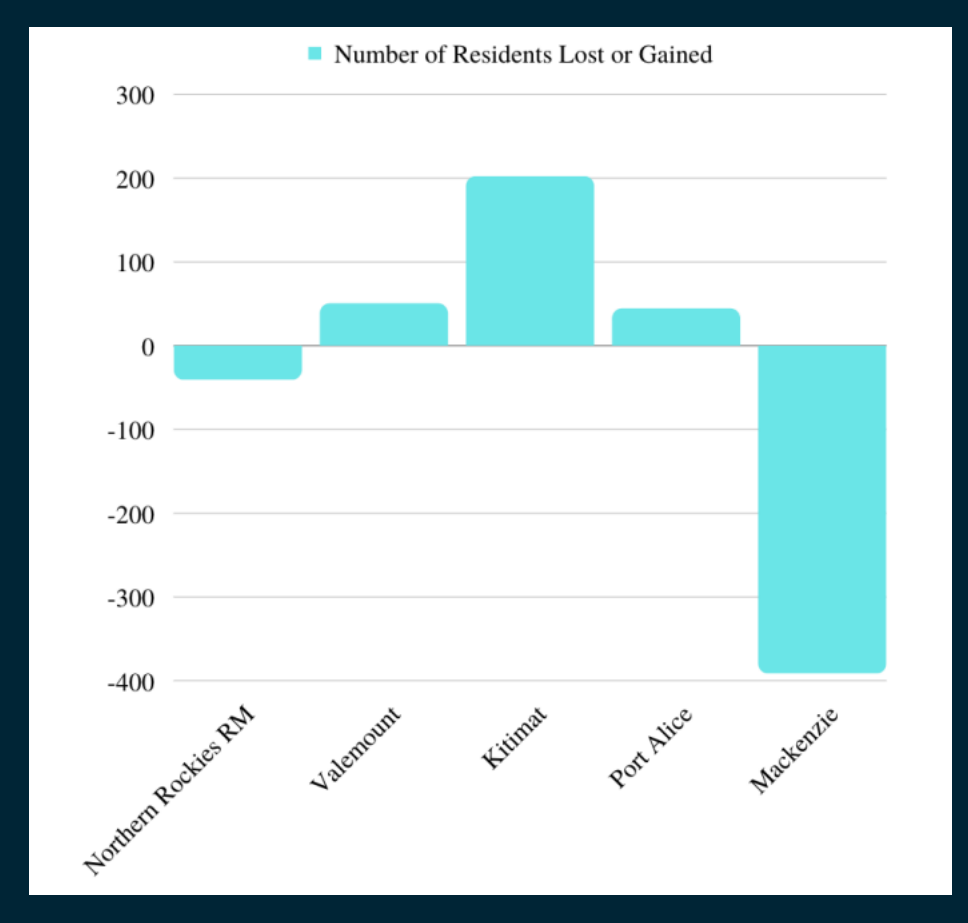
Interview Findings

- 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom
- All 5 communities noticed impacts caused by Covid-19 which ranged from a reduction in community services to an increased rate of migration
- There are currently large construction projects occurring in Kitimat and Valemount which has caused an influx in population. These communities aim to convert some of the temporary residents into permanent residents
- Each community has identified projects that are priorities to help grow the community's population and economy, however, finding funding for these projects is a barrier
- Multiple study communities were built in short periods of time leading to aging infrastructure that needs to be repaired and replaced.

Analysis

- **Common Challenges**
The 5 communities are facing many similar common challenges including difficulties in accessing affordable high-speed internet, mill closures and changes in forestry legislation, aging housing stock and infrastructure, and Covid-19
- **Common Strategies**
Similar to the communities facing similar challenges, they are approaching challenges in similar ways such as through diversifying the economy, placing an emphasis on tourism, investigating geothermal, developing an affordable and diverse housing stock, and improving infrastructure and services for aging residents
- **Are the Communities Succeeding in Stabilizing or Growing?**
In the last two to three years, Kitimat, Valemount, and Port Alice have stabilized their populations in the short term and even grown slightly. Mackenzie and Northern Rockies RM have struggled to stabilize their populations, however, current projects and initiatives may help

Changes in Population Between 2019-2021



Recommendations

- **Starlink**
Starlink is an internet provider that uses a variation of satellite internet. It could provide comparable or better service in 4 out of 5 study communities
- **Seek to Maintain and Promote Relative Affordability**
A critical attractive feature of the study communities is their relative affordability compared to larger population centres in British Columbia
- **Improve Access/Maintaining Regular Flights**
Getting to the 5 study communities can be difficult and expanding air service will have positive effects for both the residents and tourists
- **Improve Seniors' Resources**
the demographics of resource communities are aging, and the communities are not equipped to allow many of their aging residents to stay in the community
- **Geothermal**
Both Valemount and Northern Rockies RM currently have geothermal energy projects in the works at varying stages of development. There is potential that geothermal energy could also be beneficial to Mackenzie, Port Alice, and Kitimat.

Images: (Fortnelsoninfo, n.d.; Tourism Valemount, 2023; Mstar Hotel, 2023; Village of Port Alice, 2023; District of Mackenzie, 2023)