



Indsights

A Window into the Indigenous Economy

Case Study

Aurora Heat

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Aurora Heat

Meet Brenda



Meet Brenda

Brenda Dragon is the president and founder of Aurora Heat — an Indigenous-owned apparel company that produces and sells reusable warming products made from sheared beaver fur. Aurora Heat is located in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories in northern Canada. Before founding Aurora Heat, Brenda spent time travelling the north working as an ophthalmic technician delivering primary eye care to residents in the region. She credits this work as the foundation of her business philosophy, which is to help as many people as she can. It also allowed her to develop her love and wanderlust for travelling and connecting with others in the community.

Brenda has a degree in tourism and spent time working with the Government of the Northwest Territories as a consultant, helping them develop their Indigenous tourism policies and strategies for the region. She holds a deep connection to the region and instills these values in her family and business whenever she can.

Inspiration Behind Aurora Heat



Inspiration Behind Aurora Heat

Brenda and her family have been wearing fur for as long as she can remember. Indigenous Peoples in the north rely on fur to stay warm during the frigid winter months. She recalls her family using fur from their traplines to make hats, mittens, moccasins, and parkas. With fur being a big part of her childhood, it was a natural fit for Brenda to start Aurora Heat. After her father passed, the realization of starting a business with fur as the primary material developed even further.

“When my father passed, I realized that there might not be anyone in our family that would continue to hunt and trap in the way that he did, and I was thinking and wanting to do something with fur.”

Furthermore, Brenda’s son is an avid snowboarder and saw firsthand that his snowboard apparel was not keeping him warm on the slopes. As any concerned mother would, Brenda began finding clever ways to incorporate fur into his snowboarding gear to keep him warm.

“My son is a snowboarder and I wanted to keep him warm out there and I recognized that all these fancy names, brand names were not keeping him warm, and [I was] adding fur into all his outerwear. It just made me realize how important it really was, so I put it all together into a product.”



Community Profile

Smith's Landing First Nation (SLFN) is an Indigenous community located on the northeastern boundary of Alberta and the Northwest Territories. This community is considered remote because it is located about 750 kilometres south of Yellowknife, the nearest urban centre. As of 2023, Smith's Landing First Nation had a registered population of 377, with over half of their members living off-reserve (57%) (Government of Canada; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada; Communications Branch, 2021).

They are signatories of Treaty Number 8 and the descendants of the traditional Tthebatthi (meaning "above the rapids," referring to the first set of rapids on the Slave River) Dēnésułiné (flowing from the land) Peoples of the south Slave region (Smith's Landing First Nation, n.d.).

The Tthebatthi Dēnésułiné Territory encompasses northern Alberta, Wood Buffalo National Park (WBNP), the Northwest Territories, northern Saskatchewan, northern Manitoba, and southern Nunavut. SLFN has ten reserves south of the 60th parallel (in Alberta and WBNP) (Smith's Landing First Nation, n.d.).

Indigenous languages are still spoken by a handful of community members. According to Statistics Canada data from 2016, approximately 22% of the population knows an Indigenous language, with another 22% claiming it as their first language. The language that is most frequently spoken within the community is known as "Denesułiné." It is one of the approximately 23 languages comprising the Athabaskan language group. Due to the vast distances between communities in this northern region, variations exist in how the language is spoken (Hay, 2005).



The community's political structure is led by a Chief and a Council selected through their own Customary Election Regulations (CHIEF & COUNCIL | Smiths-landing-fn, n.d.). The Chief and Council, consisting of one Chief and four Councilors, are elected officials who serve a three-year term. They are directly accountable to the membership for their overall success and must ensure short-term goals align with the long-term vision and mission of the community. They also provide leadership and direction, govern local operations, create policies, and oversee administrative activities to ensure that the programs and services are delivered to the membership in a fair, equitable, and efficient manner.

Community Profile Map



Community Profile

Brief Historical Overview

Like all Indigenous groups existing on Turtle Island before contact with European colonizers, the Nations in this region had their well-established system of governance, trade routes, trade relations, and ways of life that supported them since time immemorial.

While it is incredibly important to acknowledge the presence and lifeways of Indigenous Nations before contact, for this community profile, this case study will focus on historical events that directly impacted SLFN.

Many resources describe their contact with settlers and the significance of the Treaty 8 region to the Canadian colonial project. Treaty 8 was signed between Indigenous Peoples inhabiting areas of what is now known as northern Alberta, northwestern Saskatchewan, northeastern British Columbia, and the southwest portion of the Northwest Territories and the Queen of England in 1899. The discovery of valuable natural resources, like gold, and the need to expand colonial settlement for newcomers during the late nineteenth century spurred renewed interest in claiming this land, previously deemed worthless by colonizing entities, from the Indigenous Peoples.

The Indigenous signatories of Treaty 8 agreed to its terms for reasons of peace and friendship, ensuring what they believed would be a lasting partnership. The Indigenous signees were mistaken in this assessment of British motivations for treaty processes. Like elsewhere in Canada, the British Crown used the Numbered Treaties to justify the disenfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples and extinguish their land claims in the region by taking

control of their land through deceptive negotiation tactics. Treaty 8 is the largest of the Numbered Treaties, covering a land mass of approximately 840,000 square kilometres.

It is generally accepted that no Indigenous signatory would have agreed to sign if they had known that it would impede their traditional way of life. More information on Treaty 8 articles can be found here:

<https://treaty8.ca/articles-of-treaty-no-8/>

Contemporary Community/Business Profile

Today, 39 distinct First Nations inhabit Treaty 8 territory, including SLFN. Members of SLFN operate businesses in a variety of industries, including manufacturing, retail trade, and transportation and logistics. The First Nation has many training and subsidy programs that can assist entrepreneurs in getting their businesses started and eventually maintaining themselves while scaling up.

Some of these programs and support offerings include a harvester's support program that provides a fuel subsidy of up to 45 litres for community members that harvest, trap, or hunt; educational resources including bursaries, financial assistance, and school supplies; family and mental wellness programming; and an Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program (ISET) that assists community members with resume building, job application processes, capacity building, skills development, and internet access.

Products

Aurora Heat sells various warmers that are primarily made from beaver fur. These include hand, thumb, wrist, feet, cell phone warmers, and a natural fur cleaner. They make products for both adults and children. Recently, Aurora Heat started selling eco-friendly gift wraps and earrings.

Sustainability

Sustainability is at the heart of all of Aurora Heat's products. Aurora Heat prides itself on using all parts of the beaver fur and does not waste any of the pelts. Fur lasts longer than single-use, fast fashion, and synthetic-based materials.

Aurora Heat works with ethical trappers who use humane methods to trap animals. They use traps that minimize distress and check their traps frequently to ensure the animal is not suffering. Ethical trappers follow the Canadian Government's recommendations on hunting and trapping beavers and ensure that they are following laws, regulations, and government conservation efforts. Beavers are abundant in the wild and often overproduces, which can cause overpopulation. Responsible and ethical hunters help create a balance in wild beaver populations to ensure there are no boom and bust situations within the beaver population.

"They're [beavers] always producing more than themselves. In that way, when beavers are trapped by people that are responsibly harvesting — you can create an abundant situation, because the beaver population can be affected by overpopulation, and so the trapper actually kind of manages them in their trapping areas."



Beaver fur is extremely durable and can last for an extended period — for instance, it is common for an Aurora Heat product to last as long as seven years, if not longer. Most hand warmers on the market are designed to be single-use and are disposed of immediately after they lose their heat-omitting capabilities. They are wrapped in plastic and made from non-biodegradable materials. By offering products that use high-quality materials, Aurora Heat is helping remove unnecessary waste that will eventually end up in a landfill. These efforts are ensuring the viability and sustainability of not only the beaver fur industry but our planet as well.

Successes

Successes

Aurora Heat has been in business for over seven years and has had many successes along the way. Brenda is extremely proud that Aurora Heat has worked to change the perception of using animal fur in its products. The use of fur is often a contentious issue that clashes with traditional Indigenous ways of life, and Brenda recognizes that Aurora Heat has played a critical role in helping educate her customers and community members.

“More and more acceptance of people who buy our warmers. Some of the comments, from some of the customers that are vegetarians. They really thought about whether they would purchase our product and then decided by looking over the website and reading all the explanations that we have on our sustainability page that they could justify and support using a reusable fur warmer. Made from an animal when prior to that they were not at all open to it at all. So, I think it’s remarkable that we are helping people go along the journey to recognize what is sustainable and what is not.”



Challenges

Challenges

When initially launching Aurora Heat, there was pushback from the public regarding the use of fur as the source of their warmers. The use of animal fur and pelts has long been a controversial issue within the fashion and retail industry due to its inherent conflict with ethical considerations often attributed to ecocentrism or the notion that animals are not to be consumed or utilized for human benefit. These challenges were particularly difficult in the early stages of Aurora Heat, resulting in Brenda having to employ resiliency and professionalism when dealing with those who object to the use of fur. Brenda looks at the broader issues of our modern, capitalist, and consumerist society as the root cause of our unsustainable ways of life and the criticism faced by those who challenge those ideologies or ways of life. Brenda recognizes the role that she and Aurora Heat can play in helping us restore society to a more harmonious and natural way of life.

“How do you change that behaviour? So, for me, I take it upon myself and our business to educate about sustainability and I think it’s making a difference to some people. I’m not interested in preaching about it, but I do recognize that people must make some behavioural changes if we’re going to continue to live on this planet, and I don’t mind being part of the voice that is helping people towards sustainability.”



Market Background

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples have practiced fur harvesting, and in recent centuries, fur manufacturing has played a significant role in Canada's economy, making it part of one of the country's oldest and most influential business sectors (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). The country has gained worldwide recognition for producing high-quality furs from over 25 wild species, with beaver and muskrat being the primary and most sought-after sources (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). Canada's fur trade brings in nearly one billion dollars domestically and 30 billion dollars internationally each year (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.; International Fur Federation, n.d.).

In Canada, wild animals that are caught and harvested from non-Indigenous people need to be purchased from licensed trappers (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). On the contrary, Indigenous Peoples who hunt and harvest wild animals do not require a license as the federal government has enshrined traditional hunting and fishing rights in various treaties.

After harvesting, buyers and dressers typically purchase these furs from an auction house (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). Professional dressers who specialize in preparing animal pelts for use ensure the fur's quality and readiness for further processing (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). Fur manufacturers will then source pelts through the dressers after determining their suitability for their specific requirements (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). Through this process, manufacturers will use creative design techniques to produce fur products, such as garments, clothing, art, and accessories for consumers (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2023; Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.).

Fur manufacturing in Canada follows strict policies and regulations that promote responsible practices in the industry. The Fur Institute of Canada, supported by the Canadian federal government, is one of the few leading organizations dedicated to helping guide a humane fur trade (Government of Canada, 2022; Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). It collaborates with organizations such as the International Fur Federation, representing over 40 countries involved in the fur industry, supporting sustainability efforts in the trade of furs and fur products (International Fur Federation, n.d.). Organizations like these are relied upon to provide valuable insights and research into furthering conscious and transparent harvesting and use of fur (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). Its guidance helps to shape policies and regulations in Canada, which vary across each province (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.).

Why Beaver?

Beaver fur is valued for its durability and is the most desirable fur exported from Canada worldwide (Fur Institute of Canada, n.d.). The thick fur has a soft texture that is highly sought-after for creating garments and accessories, and its unique insulating characteristics offer extra warmth during winter weather (Fur Council of Canada, n.d.).

In 1975, the beaver was recognized as Canada's official national symbol, representing the country's independence (Government of Canada, 2023). However, the beaver has long been a symbol of Canadian identity, playing a significant role in the Indigenous economy since time immemorial and as a facet of the settler fur trade since the 1600s (Foster & Eccles, 2019). This trade

Market Background

expanded in the 17th to the 19th centuries when beaver pelts were increasingly in demand for making hats and other garments (Government of Canada, 2023). Indigenous Peoples would often provide furs to European traders in exchange for manufactured goods during this time (Foster & Eccles, 2019). As a result, the fur industry grew exponentially and became a foundational element in Canada's early economic growth (Foster & Eccles, 2019).

It is important to note that the growth of the fur industry (past and present) often came at the expense of Indigenous Peoples. The fur trade was rampant with notions of exploitation, deceit, and the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from their own economic development. As history has shown, trade with settler Europeans was not characteristically collaborative by nature and often lacked any reciprocity and mutual respect for Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Evolving Perspectives

Indigenous Peoples hold a strong connection to the industry, recognizing fur as a sustainable and dignified material used for a variety of purposes beyond commercial practices (Berthelette, 2023). Their historical involvement in the fur trade has emphasized a shared commitment to reciprocity, rooted in strong family values and the pursuit of harmony, which they have advocated for throughout the centuries of building the trade (Berthelette, 2023). Fur industry activities such as manufacturing provide economic opportunities and support traditional lifestyles in Indigenous communities (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2023). Maintaining fur's position in the Indigenous economy is vital to their cultural heritage and lifestyle (Beaulne-Stuebing, 2023).



Organic fur, being a renewable and biodegradable material, aligns with the Canadian fur industry's principles of sustainability (Sustainable Fur, 2023; FurCanada, n.d.). When looking at its ecological footprint, real fur is generally less damaging to the environment in comparison to its synthetic alternatives (Sustainable Fur, 2023). However, fast fashion alternatives have emerged as a prominent trend, emphasizing rapid production and marketing of garments that are easily disposable (Marquis, 2021). It caters to large audiences through its convenient and affordable options, building more textile waste each year (Marquis, 2021).

The negative environmental impacts of businesses operating on these strategies have led to a more conscious consumer with a growing demand for more sustainable trends, focusing on high-quality materials that can last for an extensive period (Marquis, 2021). This shift presents an opportunity for fur manufacturers operating in this industry to further expand their businesses. With a commitment to responsible and ethical practices, fur manufacturers can navigate this evolving landscape and gain further success in the industry.



Future of the Business

Brenda would like to see Aurora Heat continue to grow and reach new customers. She believes in the value of the product and the sustainable aspects of the business. Consumers are more sophisticated than in the past, and many recognize that the products they purchase have a direct impact not only on their local communities but also foster interconnectedness among various businesses and industries across Canada. Brenda sees Aurora Heat as a catalyst in helping the fur trade in the north continue to thrive and help support Indigenous trappers in the region. With each purchase of Aurora Heat warmers, the Indigenous fur industry will only continue to grow and prosper.

“Aurora Heat does affect the trappers, in particular the Indigenous trappers in the Northwest Territories. It’s all about demand. So, the more

pelts that we [sell], I like to think that we’re making a difference. Beaver pelts (prices) have gone up and they should because it’s a lot of hard work. And being part of the fur industry in terms of making a finished product. We are responsible and grateful to the trappers who go out and harvest in the wild. This is hard work, and it needs to be valued for its sustainability. If we continue with these types of products, then we have a sustainable marketplace. It’s important and it’s something that we’re putting our efforts behind.”

Giving Back

As Aurora Heat progresses down its path of success, Brenda envisions Aurora Heat continuing to give back to her community. Helping people has been ingrained in Brenda since her days as a travelling eye specialist and it continues to drive her and her business today.

Future of the Business



Currently, a dollar from every product that is purchased is donated to children and youth, educators, and Indigenous Knowledge Holders' programs in her community. These initiatives help fund programs for Indigenous educators and Elders to participate in workshops, educate youth in the outdoors through training sessions, and help support a northern university education center for Indigenous learning and research. Aurora Heat also sponsors a local snowboarding event and has helped a local female hockey team attend various events and tournaments in the region.

"Giving back is an important part of my business, and I think it's what makes it a social enterprise. You're doing business for good; you're making conscious efforts to give back and to recognize what it is that makes a difference."

Talent Development

With the growth that Aurora Heat has experienced came the opportunity to provide work opportunities for university students. Brenda looks at these internships as an opportunity to give back, but she also feels a responsibility to help the younger generation gain valuable skills that they can take with them as they continue in their careers.

"I really enjoy having interns working with us. And Lianne was, one of our very first and just the responsibility to be so that her journey is impactful."

The first intern that Aurora Heat brought on was Lianne, a university student completing her degree in business. This was an invaluable experience that exposed Lianne to many aspects of entrepreneurship and day-to-day business operations.

"I got lucky to be able to try all these different things, from marketing to business development, and that is something that I'm going to carry with me for my future career. I am very thankful for that." - Lianne Adair



Indigenous Values

Brenda's Indigenous heritage plays a significant role in her business. Her family holds a strong connection to the land and has been involved in hunting and trapping in some capacity over her life. Using the beaver as a key material in the products that Aurora Heat produces and sells ties her business back to her Indigenous familial roots. She also aligns her business with an essential Indigenous principle: reciprocity.

"The important thing when I think about how I operate in an Indigenous way is the reciprocity. You know, giving back the relationships with everybody that I deal with is always based on respect."

Lastly, Brenda looks at her business as a difference-maker in the lives of those who work for her. It's an opportunity for them to be a part of something bigger with their work being invaluable and meaningful to the success of the company. She strongly believes that Aurora Heat is making a difference, and this is what motivates Brenda to get out of bed in the morning.

"The capitalistic view is not as important to me as having a wholesome business that makes a difference in this world."

Last Words/Advice

Last Words/Advice

For those interested in business and potentially starting their entrepreneurial journey, Brenda passes along great advice that helped lead her down the path she is on now: travel. Travelling challenges you to do different things and see unfamiliar places. These experiences can shape your ability to become more adaptable and innovative and teaches you how to pivot and change when needed.

“Travel when you’re young, do different things, figure different things out. Don’t default to doing the same comfortable thing, even if it is your friends or your family [telling you to do these things]. Do the things that challenge you that help your brain grow and as much as possible.”

Lastly, Brenda recommends remaining connected to your community — a characteristic that has helped Aurora Heat remain successful.

“I encourage people to give back to volunteer to be part of the community, to make a difference to other people. That will make you into a happier person, and perhaps even a successful businessperson when you’re focused outside of yourself.”



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Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement

Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning and the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business is on the treaty lands and traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit and homeland of Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

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The research team would like to thank Brenda Dragon of Aurora Heat who generously shared her time, experiences, and knowledge throughout the development of this case study.

Suggested Citation

Wubbenhorst, A., Henebry, J., & Szkudlarek, P. (2023). *Indsights - A Window into the Indigenous Economy: A Case Study on Aurora Heat* (pp. 1-20). Toronto, Ontario: Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. Retrieved from www.indsights.ca.





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