

## The Perfect Island Project

by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS --

"Been a good year for the island," I said, raising my glass in a holiday toast.

"Next year's gonna be better," grinned Alvin Martell, raising his.

Astonishing. In 1994, Isle Madame was confronting the collapse of the fishery, and a report by GTA Consultants warned of impending economic and social catastrophe. By late 1998, the island had created perhaps 250 new jobs; information-economy businesses were running help-wanted ads and facing modest labour shortages, while a local realtor had a waiting list for new houses.

The 1994 GTA report discerned the island's only hope in something called Acommunity economic development.≡ Nobody knew what that meant, or how to do it. But last fall, at Nova Scotia's first Community Economic Development Awards ceremonies, Development Isle Madame Association (DIMA) and its offshoots were finalists in five of the six categories, and won the award for greatest contribution to economic growth -- having already received Nova Scotia's first Community Aquaculture Award. At one recent economic development conference, a delegate told Alvin Martell that if he heard Isle Madame praised one more time, he=d throw up. Well, said Alvin with a shrug, "we're not gonna apologize for our success."

Alvin works with DIMA, which has been involved in most of the new ventures. The biggest single employer is aquaculture, with more than 100 new jobs at the largest fin-fish farm in the Maritimes and perhaps 30 more in various shellfish operations. The aquaculture businesses have spawned two new companies which manufacture aquaculture equipment. The shellfish farms are financed in part by a Community Investment Co-operative which raised more than \$150,000 from local investors. Another CIC raised a similar amount to regenerate a local building-supply business, and a third will support a community-owned shrimp fishery. The CICs are administered by St. Joseph's Credit Union, which also puts aside 10% of its net earnings for investment in community enterprises and is currently nominated for a national CED award.

Tourism has been a relatively minor factor, but the island has new bed-and-breakfasts and a small fleet of charter sailboats allows visiting sailors to explore the stunning archipelago around the main island. This Christmas, the work of island artisans was sold through a co-operative gift store called Boutique Isle Madame. There's a spanking new Co-op supermarket. A community TV station called Telile, now on cable, will soon seek a broadcast license. (I confess a special interest here: I'm Telile's board chairman.) Three kilns produce wood products for export. An Isle Madame oil company (with service stations and home-heating distribution throughout the Maritimes) has spun off a business manufacturing oil tanks.

Perhaps the most surprising new business is Tradewinds Call Centre, owned by DIMA in partnership with an Ontario company. But call centres are ideally suited to a bilingual rural location: all you need are trainable people, good phone lines and marketing smarts. Tradewinds employed up to 16 people last year; this year it expects to employ at least 35, maybe more.

What accounts for this sterling performance? I turn a useful penny speaking to conferences about this, and I always highlight relentless internal communication, perceptive leadership, the adept use of government programs, tough-minded realism, a welcoming attitude to incoming entrepreneurs -- and an early decision that youth would drive the process and age would sustain and counsel it. Alvin Martell is a doddering old fossil of 43, but the manager of Telile, Gloria Hill, is 32, while DIMA's financial whiz, Joel Bowen, and its chairman, Jason Boudrot, a lawyer, are 27. The manager of Tradewinds, Claudine LeBlanc and the local MLA, Michel Samson (now Minister of Environment), are 26.

Most important, perhaps, is the island's pragmatic, intimate Acadian culture. The Acadians have endured, against all odds, since the time of Shakespeare. They survived ethnic cleansing in 1755; a mere economic crisis is not a major item in their history. Open-minded but close-knit, they know in their bones that those who do not hang together in adversity are doomed to hang separately. "You don't do this work for money," says Alvin. "You do it for the community."

All over the Maritimes -- Cheticamp, Tignish, Pubnico, Moncton -- this once-disdained minority is demonstrating the power of co-operation and community in a world of carnivorous international capitalism. No doubt they will even confront prosperity with their characteristic blend of humour and aplomb.

“Lord American Jesus,” said one islander recently, grinning as he watched the traffic in Isle Madame’s market town, “the way t’ings are goin’, we’re soon gonna need traffic lights in Arichat.”

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