

New northern mayors facing many challenges

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McLauchlan says he's working closely with the local Chamber of Commerce to try and enhance the town's tourism profile.

The new mayor spent 26 years in the RCMP before retiring so any political involvement then was out of the question. Now he wants to channel his energy into making good changes happen.

The Pas is one of the oldest settlements in northern Manitoba. It offers raw natural beauty that attracts visitors from around the world. A traditional meeting place between Indian trappers and the French and English fur traders, it wants to bill itself as the Gateway to the North.

The Pas offers unique recreational activities and a variety of cultural attractions such as the Trapper's Festival, Agricultural Fair and Opasquia Indian Days. It also boasts it is a town where the Northern Lights shine year-round.

"We have beautiful clear lakes, clean air, great hunting and fabulous fishing," McLauchlan adds. "This is really an untapped resource and we want to develop it."

Flin Flon, population 5,600, has also had its share of economic bad news with the closure of the local smelter after five decades. The tall chimney has now been capped and its closure, on environmental and economic grounds, eliminated 200 jobs, though many have retrained and some have retired.

The new mayor of the town, which straddles the Manitoba and Saskatchewan border, is George Fontaine and he looks on the bright side.

Past accusations that the smelter had polluted the town are now silenced and he notes that remediation work by the province means that two of the town's three parks have had a total rejuvenation and makeover.

Fontaine wants to focus on this greener image and work with other levels of government to increase camping and tourism generally. He's also focused on providing positive things for the younger generation.

"We are into the fourth generation of people who have lived here and we want to keep families together and make sure there's continuity," Fontaine says.

"We're in a push now to create a skateboarding facility and next year we want to develop an Olympic style BMX track. It's important to have recreational facilities and programs to engage all members of the community."

Polar bear excursions an 'amazing experience'

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Two big males were play-fighting, rearing up on hind legs, mouths wide open, pushing and battering each other with their powerful paws.

It was a formidable display of strength, agility and endurance as they wrestled each other to the ground, rested for a spell on the muskeg and then went back for another round.

"They are solitary creatures but they do this to socialize," explained Pilkington, who said the two bears were each about 10 years old.

"They play because there wasn't a need to fight (over mating with a female or a food source), and they're intelligent. When they come to play like this, they come to know each other through smell.

"It's a complex thing. These alliances between bears are made in the fall, but only last until the ice forms on Hudson Bay. Then, it's every bear for himself as they hunt seals."

During another Tundra Buggy expedition after a heavy snowfall several days later, we also saw scattered clutches of willow ptarmigan sheltering amongst dwarf willow, a snow bunting, a couple of red foxes (but not any of



The Tundra Buggy takes visitors out for a day of polar bear viewing near Churchill. (Photo courtesy Robert Taylor- Postmedia)

the smaller white arctic foxes), and even a seal poking its head briefly out of the rough Hudson Bay waters as our Tundra Buggy trundled past the shoreline.

Back at the centre, our group heard presentations by Pilkington and other experts, including

University of Manitoba zoologist Professor Jane Waterman, who is studying individual polar bear identification and play behaviour.

One evening, Dene elder and long-time Churchill resident Caroline Bjorklund gave a poignant, informal account of her life and

the Sayisis Dene people.

Bjorklund was one of the Sayisis Dene who were forcibly relocated by the government from their northern Manitoba homes to Churchill in the 1950s, causing unanticipated social and cultural difficulties.

Our vacation also included a 45-minute helicopter ride, exhilarating sled-dog rides (on sleds with wheels) at Blue Sky Expeditions and a visit to the Town of Churchill.

There, we toured the Parks Canada Visitors Centre and the famed Eskimo Museum, stood on the rocky shore of a raging Hudson Bay, went gift shopping and had lunch at the lively and affordable Gypsy's Bakery, Restaurant and Coffee Shop owned by the Da Silva family.

"This was an amazing experience," said Leonora Rodriguez, a soft-spoken biologist, web designer and world traveller from Costa Rica, during lunch on the Tundra Buggy one day.

"I haven't gotten this close to nature anywhere else in Canada as here in Churchill. This is pure nature."

Writer Martin Zeilig's trip was sponsored by Tourism Manitoba and the CNSC

Northern Manitoba harvesters say wild rice 'finest in the world'

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Moreover, he recently spoke to a trade delegation to Manitoba from Germany, Iceland and Denmark that showed a lot of interest in purchasing Wild Man's products.

Smaller packages of rice and soup are sold in specialty stores such as De Luca's and health food stores in Winnipeg, as well as grocery outlets in the province. "Arts and Crafts Shows and Farmers' Markets are excellent venues from which to sell one pound packages of our rice and soups," Richard says.

The company is about to go online with a store (www.wildmanricing.ca) in a few weeks.

In the meantime, products can be ordered from Tony at 204-794-7068.

Another northern wild rice producer is Richard Russell of Far North Wild Rice of Flin Flon.

Russell has been growing wild rice in northern Manitoba for about 25 years.

He says the best quality rice is found in remote lakes and streams

north of the 55th parallel in Manitoba.

Also OPAM certified, Russell says the "north's long, warm summer days and clean, pure waters produce a long grain, flavourful rice known to be the finest in the world."

Weather critical factor

Growing such a delicacy depends upon the weather as high or low water levels, heavy winds, hail or an early frost can destroy the crop or prevent it from ripening into its attractive dark brown colour and delicious kernels, he says.

Russell's online store (www.wildrice.mb.ca) offers a selection of bagged rice with Canadian prices starting at \$6.50 for a one pound poly bag and \$8 for a one pound gift bag.

A five pound Ziploc bag is available for \$31.50 and a 50 pound bulk bag for \$300.

For shipping costs within Canada and to destinations outside the country, contact Russell at rrussell@mts.net or call 204-687-3631.



Wild Man Ricing harvests this year's crop on a lake near The Pas.

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Highway 10 North Opaskwayak, MB
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 p. 204-627-7230
 f. 204-623-2770
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