



Vancouver International Airport, Sea Island, British Columbia

A Place in Evolution

Intro

Vancouver International Airport (YVR) exists to serve the surrounding community and the economy that supports it. Like other airports, its core function is to provide ground services that enable inbound and outbound movement by air of people and goods regionally, nationally, and internationally. More interesting though is the way they do this, and more. **It begins with the belief that their business is completely interconnected within a larger ecosystem—human and more than human—rooted in Sea Island on the Fraser River Delta of British Columbia.** Which happens also to situate them on traditional unceded territory of the Musqueam people and inside the boundaries of Greater Vancouver.

Backstory

When the local airport authority became responsible for running the facility in 1992, the arrangement was operationalized through a 99-year lease of the land and infrastructure from the federal government. A for-profit non-share capital corporation business model was chosen, one that invests all profits back into the airport. The faraway lease-expiry date of 2072 combined with this **purpose-oriented and community-centric organizational model has enabled a culture of stewardship and holistic thinking** to emerge. In the words of Tamara Vrooman, the President and CEO, YVR’s “...focus is always on how to sustain a future,” and her organization regularly asks, “...what does our community need from us, [at this time]?”

Looking back, the early days under this arrangement were a heady time for the country. Canadians were inspired by the success of Vancouver Expo '86 as well as the opportunities stemming from Canada’s deepening integration into a rapidly liberalizing world economy. Canada was looking to the Vancouver Airport both as an economic gateway between our country, the Asia-Pacific and the broader North American economy, as well as a welcoming place for immigrants and guests from Asia-Pacific to be greeted upon their arrival in Canada.

As the saying goes, with opportunity comes responsibility. Thirty years on, YVR has indeed earned its reputation as an internationally competitive mover of people and facilitator of commerce, including for tourism. As we will see, its success has grown in no small part out of a willingness to **1) work at the scale of place, 2) embrace the complexity** inherent in this unique ecosystem (itself intertwined with larger domains around it), and **3) cultivate a field of mutually reinforcing relationships** between people and businesses whose energies are continually drawn towards the greater potential of this place.

1. Relationship with the Musqueam Nation

Essential to putting this belief into action is the **transparent and inclusive collaboration practised between leaders of YVR and the Musqueam people**, having evolved their relationship into one of trust and mutualism. In 2017, building on their history of working well together, YVR and the Musqueam people formalized a 30 year *Musqueam Indian Band - YVR Airport Sustainability & Friendship Agreement*. This long-term partnership recognizes that **YVR has a responsibility to work with the Musqueam to achieve a sustainable and mutually beneficial future for this community**. The agreement embeds principles of stewardship and representation, making explicit a host of intended benefits including funding scholarships, diverse employment opportunities, revenue sharing with the Musqueam, identification and protection of archeological resources, as well as support for ongoing airport operations and long-term development of YVR.

<https://www.yvr.ca/en/about-yvr/musqueam/overview>

Put succinctly by Vrooman, YVR “..integrates this perspective into everything we do...[in part] because transparency and inclusiveness improves the quality of decisions.” This is reflected in an organizational culture in which every new employee’s onboarding involves time spent with the Musqueam who reinforce with them the **values of respect, pride, inclusiveness, honour and shared responsibility**.

2. Relationship with the natural ecology

In terms of humanity’s broader relationship with our natural ecology, air travel generally sits at the degenerative end of the spectrum of impacts. While the YVR leadership team readily acknowledges this reality, they do not accept it as a future state. Instead, they are taking steps to **reduce the harm locally on and around Sea Island** resulting from their own operations, as well as to **cultivate an inclusive culture of innovation oriented towards rebalancing aviation’s relationship overall with the ecology** on which we all depend for our survival.

On Sea Island, YVR’s environmental management practices **combine modern biological sciences with traditional Musqueam knowledge** of the Fraser River Delta to rehabilitate shoreline biodiversity and other factors important to the health of the habitat, most notably for salmon. This began with recognizing the interdependence between the vitality of the river delta, the salmon, the Musqueam and the airport. Learning to see and *work with* the local ecology as an integrated system presented these partners with the opportunity to discover how stewardship of the airport and associated lands could be altered to recreate ecological conditions conducive to more robust salmon populations. In 2016, YVR became the first airport in North America **certified as salmon-safe**, and earlier this year they were recertified as such. <https://www.yvr.ca/en/media/news-releases/2022/recertified-salmon-safe>

More broadly, in response to civilization’s grand challenge of coming to terms with our impact on the climate, YVR has developed a **Roadmap to Net-Zero emissions by 2030** resulting from its local airport operations. When asked about the motivation for setting a comparatively ambitious timeline, Vrooman was all business. The longer they wait, the bigger the gap they’ll have to close. And she expects that being an early mover will position YVR to attract more public and private capital, more partnerships with climate innovators, more opportunities to demonstrate to other airports that it’s both possible and profitable – potentially even generating future revenue streams from the resulting

innovations as they did before by being the first to deploy airport check-in kiosks. Simply put, aligning corporate intentions with collective wellbeing is good strategy for profit sustainability. <https://www.yvr.ca/en/about-yvr/environment/carbon-reduction>

To broaden this movement, YVR is investing in Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) infrastructure through its involvement in **BioPortYVR**, an initiative designed to enable air carriers flying out of Vancouver to make the switch to low emissions renewable fuels that are compatible with existing fleets of aircraft. This infrastructure, when viewed together with the **Innovation Hub @YVR** (hosted by the airport), is an invitation for other organizations to bring their unique mix of talents so that **diverse groups can 'learn together' and partner to harmonize**, on the one hand, the benefits of physically connecting people and places with, on the other hand, the potential of zero emissions flight.

3. Relationship with employees, businesses, and diverse communities

This philosophy of respect for people and place manifests in numerous other ways. One of the most important is how the airport seeks to co-create value with (rather than extract value from) the people it employs, outside organizations operating within the regional ecosystem, the land on which they sit, and even the digital sphere.

Living Wage Employer

Several years ago, YVR made the transition to become a certified **Living Wage Employer** (their own employees and soon-to-be direct contractors, some 2,200 workers in total) and they are encouraging all other employers operating within the airport ecosystem to embrace this practice. Again, it's not just the right thing to do, it's good for business too. Looking at the employment landscape holistically, higher entry level wages foster a tighter bond between employers and employees thereby encouraging a mutual commitment to employee development and, relatedly, reducing 'churn' so as to enhance the vigour of the airport ecosystem overall. It also allows YVR and its partners in this ecosystem to better attract prospective new employees. For example, early in 2022, when YVR advertised 80 vacancies for guest experience positions, it received over 600 applications. Not only did they fill every vacancy at an important moment in the tourism sector's recovery, but the resulting new hires also netted them some 32 different language capabilities.

Iskwew Air

High quality connectivity between urban, rural, and Indigenous communities is important for the socio-cultural, economic and even the ecological health of the wider region. **Iskwew Air** is a new entrant into this space; they are **an Indigenous, woman-owned airline** flying out of Sea Island. This carrier received the blessing of the Musqueam to operate on their traditional unceded territory and then began *chartered* operations in 2019. In 2021, Iskwew Air marked its inaugural *commercial* flight from YVR, offering daily scheduled service between Vancouver and Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island. September 2022, Iskwew Air and YVR entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen their working relationship based on a shared vision for the potential of

aviation. Said Teara Fraser, Founder of Iskwew Air, “We look forward to continuing to connect people with each other and the land alongside our friends at YVR. We know, together we can transform the aviation industry into one that is based on reciprocity, relationships and sustainability. This is the future taking flight.” One opportunity is to enable more remote parts of region to tap into the potential of authentic local tourism experiences which help their communities thrive?

<https://www.iskwew.ca>

Land use planning

During COVID-19, YVR **updated its land-use plan** on Sea Island for the first time in 30 years, putting an indefinite pause on previously zoned development of a third runway. Instead, they are inviting others to join them in exploring opportunities for industrial, commercial, logistics and/or conceivably residential uses. When asked about how they intend to proceed, Vrooman’s response was, “Slowly, in synch with Musqueam agreement and principles.” She emphasised that success, “**rests on a foundation of partnership with Musqueam; [and] rests on our commitment to decarbonizing.**” For example, might these lands play a role in fostering a more robust marketing and logistics ecosystem for regenerative farmers, fishers and food producers who already have a foothold in the region?

Digital twinning of the airport

Another recent initiative with long-term potential rests on having taken time during the pandemic slowdown to digitally map the entire outside and inside of the airport. This **digital twin of YVR** and surrounding lands opens the way for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to learning and innovation than in the past, for example through real-time modeling of aircraft movements outside as well as human and air flow patterns inside. It creates potential for improving efficiency, reducing emissions, and mitigating airborne disease transmission. Potentially even new revenue streams for creators of Indigenous art installations too large to take on the road; think digital re-creations of large works of art that can be auctioned in the form of Non-Fungible Tokens!

Conclusion

Vancouver International Airport’s **pattern of development** is indicative of an organization that is **evolving towards a regenerative practice**, even though this is not the language they would use. The airport’s relationship with the local Musqueam people, with Sea Island and the Fraser River Delta is increasingly mutualistic. This is synergistic with cultivating opportunity for greater connection and mutual benefit between urban, rural and Indigenous communities of the region. And between the region and the wider world.

Some Indicators of Progress

- Approximately 100 Musqueam employed with the Airport Authority on Sea Island in diverse roles

- Ongoing habitat restoration – Salmon-Safe Certified
- Living Wage Employer
- Carbon reduction leadership -- Roadmap to net-zero emissions by 2030
- Hosting an Indigenous, woman-owned airline
- Land-use development based on Musqueam principles and commitment to zero emissions