

Small in Numbers, Large in Presence: How the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho is Thriving

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Summary: One key issue facing the Native American community on the reservation is the fact that casinos are controversial; there are pros and cons when it comes to gambling. While casinos and gaming are not the ideal generator of income in many respects, the ultimate question is whether it serves a good cultural representation of the tribe, is economically stabilizing the reservation, and is politically sound as it aligns with the definition of a sovereign nation.

Background

The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho in 1974 declared war on the United States of America with 67 remaining Kootenai members.ⁱ War, diseases, and displacement were attempts to make this community weak, despite being small in numbers, this war brought national attention regarding tribal conditions and resulted in positive changes to the tribe's way of living, including their cultural, economic, and sovereign preservation. The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho today continues to experiment with various methods including the establishment of a casino, the Best Western Kootenai River Inn Casino and Spa as a means to express their culture to the larger community. However, as a non-tribally managed casino ran by a big corporation like Best Western, the emphasis on culture is questionable and furthermore, the political sovereignty of the nation is compromised.

The Best Western Kootenai River Inn Casino and Spa is a non-tribally managed casino by Best Western, it is still fully owned though by the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho. Using a content analysis of tribal and casino websites and social media, this study focuses on **cultural** similarities and contrasts between tribe culture and tribe culture that the casino portrays to those outside reservation life of the Kootenai Tribe. Furthermore, this study will describe how as a **sovereign** nation, tribes manage their own tribal government, education services, police forces, economic development projects, and cultural and social functions. Using another content analysis of secondary reports of casino impacts on the community, this will also focus on the **economic** revitalization and contributions of the casino to the state of Idaho. Lastly, within the shield of the Kootenai Tribe is a ribbon that is wrapped around a state map of Idaho to show the ongoing relationship between the tribe and the state. However, the establishment of a casino for the purpose of gambling has strict guidelines including state and federal rules, which even a

sovereign nation, must abide, because of this, the relationship between casino, tribe, state, and federal laws is complex and varied when determining culture, politics, and economics.

Ultimately, these three categories while treated separately interweave one another and I will share these findings.

Findings:

Cultural Aspects

While many tribes own and manage their own casino, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho is small in numbers and thus relies on corporate assistance to maintain their casino. Despite corporate management, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho infuses their culture within this enterprise. Most notably, is the recognition that the Best Western Kootenai River Inn Casino and Spa is owned by the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho. In all the logos for the casino, both on the casino website and tribe's website, Best Western is not mentioned at all in the images. In the newsletters that are sent out to members, Best Western is also not mentioned, thus while a mainstream corporation manages the casino, it appears that the Kootenai Tribe makes sure to let audiences know that the tribe is the one that drives the casino. Furthermore, the tribe's shield stands as the casino's logo, not Best Western's, which makes an even more powerful statement of who is in charge behind the operation [Figure 1].



Figure 1: Logo of Best Western Kootenai River Inn Casino and Spa



Figure 2: Logo of the casino in a newsletter sent out.

Similarly, when looking at social media such as Facebook and Twitter, only the casino had social media presence. Despite the tribe not having a social media presence and only the casino, of the two Facebook pages created, the Kootenai Casino was more active and had more likes than the Best Western plus Kootenai River Inn Casino & Spa. Thus, while management does not belong to the Kootenai Tribe, ensuring tribal ownership and the tribe's shield as a logo for the casino makes it apparent that some form of culture is preserved [Figure 3 & 4].



Figure 3: Kootenai Casino Facebook Page



Figure 4: Kootenai Casino Facebook Page with Best Western logo & name.

Despite the powerful claim, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho expresses about ownership of the casino, few traditional practices or cultural performances are mentioned on the casino's website. According to the 2011 Annual Report of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes, a Kootenai Culture Committee serves to preserve language, culture, and repatriation matters, their motto is "Preserve, Protect, Perpetuate and Enhance the Language and Culture of the Kootenai People".ⁱⁱ This committee thus serves to maintain Kootenai culture within members of their tribe, which is why there is a huge emphasis on oral history, cultural camps, and tribal education day within the tribe itself. However, the casino has few of these important traditions of the Kootenai Tribe mentioned and only when you investigate about the tribe itself is it known. Thus, it can be assumed then that sacred traditions and culture are extremely valued and therefore is preserved within the tribal group.

Yet, when looking closely, there are traces of Kootenai artifacts scattered throughout the casino, though not as obvious, designs and decorations showcases Kootenai culture throughout

the casino in a passive manner. For instance, in all the rooms there are Native American paintings, whether it is Kootenai Tribe paintings though is questionable. There is also a family suite called the Three Moon Suite, named after a chief of the Kootenai leader.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, passive forms of cultural representation are apparent, but not described to visitors in details.

Nevertheless, a center exists that displays the traditional cultures of the Kootenai Tribe, “The People’s Center”.^{iv} This is located in Montana though because it is part of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation. Here, the center provides education on aspects of traditional life through museum tours, cultural exchanges, elder appreciation lunches, and even arts and crafts like the “beading circle”.^v

Overall, tribal gaming while having significant economic impacts is also a symbol of pride for the tribe as seen in the marketing of the casino. The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho preserves their culture within their tribe to maintain sacred traditions. The tribe ensures that they are the owners of the casino and makes their presence known within the tribe and on social media. However, their culture within the casino and on social media lacks, with few traces to indicate that there is cultural pride. To those outside the tribe, those interested might inquire more about the cultural artifacts at the casino, but instead of decorating the entire casino and displaying Native American artifacts everywhere without meaning attached to it, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho maintains a sense of pride and integrity instead of using token gestures of a “cultured casino.”

Economics of the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho

Economically, many stereotypes of American Indians exist. There is the idea that all Indians are rich, that they are rich because casinos generate large revenues and that Indians

receive a large portion of this. In fact, the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes receive only \$1,200 and minors get \$600 per capita per year, this is barely enough to survive and is a fraction of living costs.^{vi} Native Americans also historically and even today are among the poorest people with 60 percent or lower in poverty. Furthermore, while there is evidence that shows casinos have generated employment by 26 percent and tribal population in turn has increased by another 12 percent or that health disparities have declined, it comes with a cost. Four years after a casino opens violence, auto thefts, and bankruptcy rates increases by 10 percent in every area with a casino.^{vii}

Tribal use of revenues:

Due to the fact that the Kootenai Casino is owned by a tribe, it is obligated to improve life for tribal members, a fraction of the profits goes back into the community. One major contribution that casinos allocate their profits to is for local education.^{viii} Because of Proposition 1 passed in Idaho, the casino must dedicate 5% of net Indian gaming revenues to local education programs and school districts on or near reservations. This accounts to an average of \$2 million per year, which is equivalent to the 27% of the annual funding by the Idaho State Lottery.^{ix} Casinos have also helped financially drive the tribal government to maintain stability and to continue to do work that serves the community. Thus, through continued tribal government funding this extends to cultural preservation, the development of wellness centers, job training, higher education scholarships, schools, and many others.

Of most importance though, is that casinos provide job stability. In turn, job stability parallels with decreased poverty. The Best Western Kootenai River Inn and Casino ranks first in total employment in their county and ranks third in direct employment as defined by the actual number of Native Americans at the facility. Of the 550 jobs that Native Americans have in

Idaho, 300 are obtained in the gaming industry with only 250 in non-gaming fields. Historically, unemployment rates have reached 70% and due to gaming operations have significantly been reduced, in turn, this reduces the dependence on tax-supported welfare and public assistance programs. Eventually, this becomes a catalyst to improving the overall quality of life of tribe members.^x

Furthermore, revenues can indirectly affect tribal members through the revitalization of natural habitats surrounding the tribe. By gaining more profit, the distribution of money can further be spread to other causes such as building sustainable communities. The tribes in Idaho have lead a revitalization campaign in low-income, rural regions of the state where they are the most needed. This initiative began with Governor Kempthorne's statewide campaign to revitalize rural Idaho.^{xi} Some things that have gone into effect includes the Kootenai River Habitat Restoration Program, due to the fact that the Kootenai Indians believe it is their purpose as guardians of the land to maintain it alongside the local community surrounding it.^{xii}

To generate even more profit, many casinos have begun to diversify their assets. With the Best Western Kootenai Casino, it is not merely just a casino, but it is now also an inn, a restaurant, and is continuing to expand still.^{xiii} Other Idaho casinos are motels, retail trade establishments, have golf courses, and many other activities that transform the Indian gaming facilities into a tourist resort.

Non-tribal factors

While a large portion of the revenues generated from the Best Western Kootenai River Inn Casino and Spa goes toward the tribe, its impacts goes well beyond that. In Idaho itself, five

Indian gaming facilities provide 4,455 jobs, reducing unemployment and welfare payments, this in turn has large effects in reducing poverty and government dependency.

Furthermore, casino gaming revenues have led to the development of community infrastructure such as building industrial parks.

Nevertheless, there are negative impacts as to what a casino can do. While profits at the surface level appear to benefit the community, influence on players and their disposable incomes can have detrimental effects. Gambling addiction, alcoholism, violent crimes in general and bankruptcy is within greater reach when casinos are nearby. While the argument can be that this is an individual problem, from a public health standpoint casinos create greater access to these negative outcomes and thus have an obligation to prevent adverse consequences to occur. However, casinos do very little to provide services to remedy these situations. What they do is minimal to follow state mandates, oftentimes capping the amount of withdrawals one can withdraw from an ATM or provide signage and brochures of gambling addiction, these passive methods while mandated are not effective, but are instead, simply placed there to follow the laws. Therefore, we now turn to understand the politics behind these laws and how a sovereign nation works in the context of gaming with state compact regulations.

Politics of Gaming

As a small tribe trying to preserve their culture, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho faces the issue of preservation or assimilation. Business and culture however intersects when we talk about casinos and gambling, ultimately though business drives profits that gets invested in cultural preservation. It is because of this, that the tribe faces challenges between the values they believe in and what they need to do to survive.

For the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, “Self-government is not an Indian idea. It originates in the minds of non-Indians who have reduced the traditional ways to dust, or believe they have, and now wish to give, as a gift, a limited measure of local control and responsibility...It is important that we trace the genesis and development of this idea and discover how it manifests itself in our lives today” [p 15 Deloria, Lyte].^{xiv} Thus, when the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians won their Supreme Court case, it upheld that Tribes stay autonomous.^{xv} However, with the regulation of Indian gaming, sovereignty was forced to be compromised again at the expense of profit through state compacts. Therefore, while sovereignty should be an automatic right to Indian nations, the American government still infringes upon it.

For the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, cultural preservation is of utmost importance. Because of their sovereign status, the tribe has chosen to limit the profits [per capita] they make from the casino to those who are one-quarter Kootenai with the essential paperwork to prove so.^{xvi} Not only that, but sovereign nations decide their own forms of government, they decide who can be a Kootenai member, and those decisions are comprised of nine council members who are enrolled tribal members.^{xvii} These rules though are on a case-by-case basis dependent on the tribe and its relationship with the state.

When we then talk about state intervention and federal intervention these two are different in regards to the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho. It becomes more complicated because the Kootenai Tribe does not solely own their own casino, but works through a third party provider, the Best Western who takes a large share of their profits. For the tribe, the Kootenai Tribe is similar to that of the State of Michigan, where changes in sovereign immunity and state authority for gaming activity are under the IGRA. For federal intervention, less is at stake for the Kootenai Tribe because it is settled at the state level, but previous federal intervention has

occurred in the 1970s when the tribe needed recognition to get itself off from impoverished conditions.

Sovereignty itself is another issue when we talk about the politics that tribes face. Sovereignty does not simply mean forming a government and selecting membership, but also how to administer and enforce laws, to tax, and to regulate domestic relations of its members. In these definitions, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho manages to do it through their council, this council is comprised of different regions. Regarding sovereignty, the revenue generated from the casino however, has a lot of strict rules, autonomy of a nation does not grant them full autonomy of a casino, especially when the Kootenai owns one in which mainstream society also is able to enjoy. Under tribal gaming laws, net revenues from tribal gaming must be used to fund tribal government programs or operations, promote tribal economic development, provide general welfare of the tribe and its members, and donate to charitable organizations, as well as helping to fund operations of local government agencies. There are also mandates in place that requires each state to send a public service message regarding responsible gaming and addiction.

In terms of licensing, each state has different licensing policies. For instance, the Washington state gambling Act gives the public an opportunity to engage in limited charitable and social gambling without fear of organized crime infiltration or the potential for fraud by professional gamblers, Idaho has a similar law.

Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude that casinos have played a major role in the economic revitalization of Indian tribes. Not only that, but casinos have paved the way for tribes to invest in their culture, their government, and even to contribute to non-tribal communities. However,

the topic that needs further research and transparency is what the corporation, Best Western get out of collaborating with the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, not knowing these answers then we do not fully know where profits lies. There is a lot to consider when it comes to casinos and tribe relationships. The nature of state and federal regulations are all things we must consider before moving forward with gambling. Despite the overall positive outcomes, the highlight for the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho is how they preserve their culture within their tribe to maintain the sacred traditions. The tribe ensures that they are the owners of the casino and makes their presence known within the tribe and on social media, that while Best Western manages it, they for sure do not own the casino, but the Kootenai people do.

References

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