

Benjamin Punnet

December 17, 2020

President

Rockfish Climbing Co-op

2068 Seal Cove Circle,

Prince Rupert BC

Dear Mr. Punnet,

First of all, thank you for the opportunity to write this report on how the Rockfish Co-op can grow and retain membership through new engagement strategies.

As a member of the climbing community in Prince Rupert, it has been a real pleasure to be able to speak to Rockfish Co-op members, wider Prince Rupert community members and other stakeholders about ways in which the Co-op can grow its membership through new engagement strategies.

When I first moved to Prince Rupert, one of the first things I did was to contact the co-op and find a way to get involved as a way to meet people and make friends in my new home. Since then, the co-op has been a central part of my social life. This is why I believe the co-op has lots of potential and could grow significantly ahead of the construction of a new climbing wall.

The recommendations listed above were drafted after speaking to other co-op members and stakeholders, including yourself. I hope this report provides a blueprint for the future growth for the co-op.

Sincerely,

Rodrigo Samayoa

# Recommendations on Improving community engagement at the Rockfish Climbing Co-op

For

Benjamin Punnet,

President of the Rockfish Climbing Co-op

By

Rodrigo Samayoa

English 301 student

December 17, 2020

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# Abstract

The Rockfish Climbing Co-op was formed with the goal of building a new climbing wall in Prince Rupert, BC and as a response to space and management limitations of the existing wall at the Prince Rupert Civic Centre. However, the small size of the climbing community in Prince Rupert have hampered the co-op's ability to grow a membership base large enough to attract funders for the new wall. This report looks into the barriers the co-op faces in recruiting and retaining members and makes recommendations on how the co-op can recruit and retain new members.

# Introduction and Background

The Rockfish Climbing Co-op was founded in 2018 by a tight-knit group of climbers with a specific purpose in mind: build a modern indoor climbing gym that can provide a space for climbers in Prince Rupert to both build a community and pursue their passion for the sport.

For years, the climbing community in Prince Rupert has been limited by the harsh weather of the region, which limits the opportunities for outdoor climbing, and by the limited access to indoor climbing spaces. For the past 4-5 years, the Devil's Crag wall at the civic centre has acted as a community hub for the budding local climbing community and helped stabilize and even grow the existing community (Samayoa and Punnet).

But as all local climbers know, there are limitations in both the small physical space and management of that wall. With only 7 ropes, the wall has become too small for the regular crowd of 10-15 climbers it receives on climb nights.

Beyond the physical space, the lack of community access to the wall has been an issue. While the wall is mostly maintained through volunteer work of the climbers themselves, the space is managed by the Civic Centre and shared with the basketball court. This means climbers have limited access to the space, both for climbing and maintenance.

The goal of building a new climbing wall is to both expand the physical space and gain full control over the wall so as to allow for the climbing community to expand further.

The problem the co-op is facing is that it is hard to recruit and retain co-op members who are willing to invest time, money and energy into the co-op without an existing physical space that brings people together. But at the same time, to attract funders and ensure the

sustainability of the co-op in the long term, more members and community engagement is needed to get the project started.

## **Purpose of the Report**

This report will detail actionable recommendations the co-op board and members can take to increase community engagement and recruit new members to the co-op. To compile these recommendations, I have conducted interviews with different stakeholders to gather information on the problem itself and potential solutions.

## **A Note About Covid-19**

Covid-19 has changed everything. The co-op was already on track to finding a location for the climbing wall and approaching funders, but the pandemic derailed these plans.

The pandemic has also affected the climbing community. No longer can climbers meet regularly at the Devil's Crag or come together to build a new wall.

This report is making the assumption that life will go back to a level of normalcy seen pre-pandemic, where climbers can climb in large groups again, public events can be held and people can interact outside of their bubbles.

This is an important consideration when reading through the recommendations, as life may look different in 2021 and beyond and many of these recommendations may no longer be relevant.

# Findings

## **How has the co-op grown to date?**

The co-op currently consists mostly of the tightly knit group of climbers that gather regularly to climb at the Devil's Crag wall in the Civic Centre and climb outdoors in the summer (Samayoa and Punnet). While the co-op has over 50 members on paper, most of whom have signed up through Reel Rock movie screenings, the core of the co-op consists of the 8-12 climbers that congregate around the Devil's Crag.

Aside from the initial group of climbers that formed the co-op, active members who have joined since then have mostly been people from out of town looking to build community (Samayoa and Punnet). This includes people like Emily B., Alanah M. or myself. Very little growth has come through engagement with the local Prince Rupert community.

## **Who can the co-op attract?**

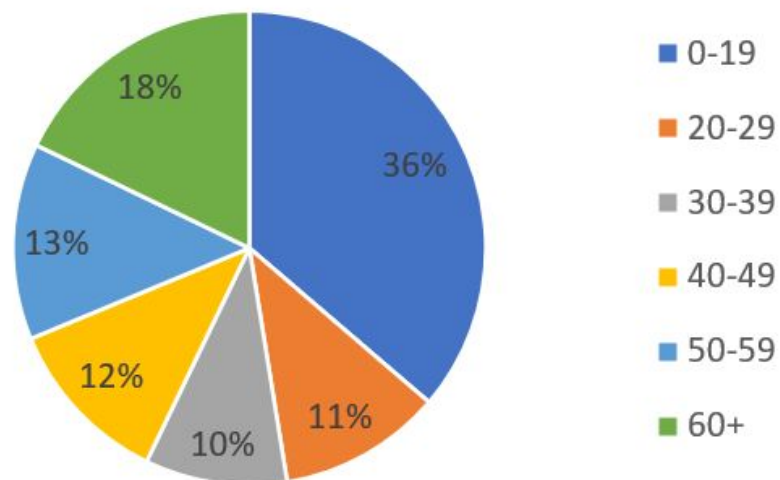
While the co-op structure helps offset labour costs and removes the need for profit, the co-op still needs to attract enough members to maintain operations.

One of the biggest challenges the co-op is facing is demographics. Climbing gyms are mostly found in urban centres because of the high overhead and maintenance cost, which requires a large customer base (Gerry). In a small town like Prince Rupert, with only close to 12,000 people, it's hard to maintain a for-profit gym (Statistics Canada).

Traditionally, the main demographic for climbing gyms are young people of around 18-30 years old (Samayoa and Robitaille ). Prince Rupert, however, has a similar issue as other small towns where young people in that age group tend to leave for school or other opportunities.

This means the co-op needs to expand the target demographic for who to engage to include older demographics as well as young children and teenagers. According to the 2016 StatCan census 89% of residents are over the age of 30 and under the age of 19, compared to only 11% between the ages of 19-30 (Statistics Canada).

Prince Rupert Population Distribution by Age



Source: Statistics Canada

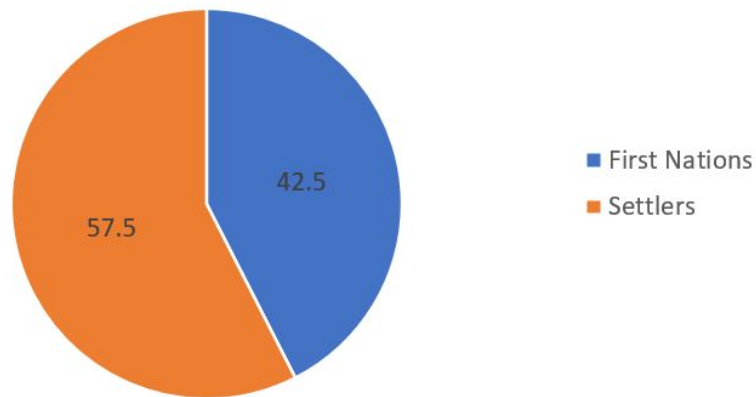
These statistics need to be taken carefully, however. Prince Rupert is currently going through a boom phase with the port expansion, which is bringing many young people back in town. While many of these are transient workers who are staying for just a few weeks to a couple of years, there are many who are staying long term. This boom presents an opportunity for the co-op as a place for newcomers to engage with the community.

Other factors to consider are the racial and economic makeup of the city. According to the latest census, The Skeena-Queen Charlotte census tract, where Prince Rupert is located, has the highest ratio of First Nations people of any region in BC and is also one of the



regions with the highest poverty rates, with a median income of just over \$31,000 (Statistics Canada).

First Nations as a Percentage of Total Population



Source: Statistics Canada

Rock climbing has traditionally been a very white and privileged sport in North America. Accessing climbing gyms, outdoor recreational areas and buying all the gear is expensive, so this has been a barrier for low income, First Nation and immigrant communities to access the sport.

Any community engagement plan has to include plans to attract First Nations residents to the project and create opportunities for low income people.

### **Stakeholder interviews**

This report relies on information gathered from interviews with different co-op stakeholders and members of the wider Prince Rupert community. Below is a brief summary of the interviews and the learnings from each interview.

**Benjamin Punnet - President, Rockfish Climbing Co-op**

The interview with Ben had the purpose of gathering information about the co-op and the challenges it has faced in trying to build a new climbing wall. Since the board members of the co-op and most regular members are aware of the history and challenges of the co-op, this report will not go into much detail about that section of the interview. However, these are some of the key learnings from the interview that are relevant to this report:

- The original co-op membership mostly consisted of Benjamin's friends and family, most of whom are regular attendees to the Devil's Crag climb nights at the Civic Centre.
- Most new members for the co-op have consisted of new arrivals in Prince Rupert looking to make friends and build a community.
- The main form of community outreach for the co-op outside of the climb nights at the Devil's Crag has been the yearly Reel Rock film screenings, the Children's Festival event at the civic centre and social media promotion.
- The co-op has a goal of selling between 10-20 yearly passes to the new climbing wall every year as well as selling 30-40 drop-in passes per week to stay solvent.
- Some of the barriers the co-op faces for further growth and community engagement include:
  - The bad experience many Prince Rupert locals have with the civic centre, which has a history of restricting the types of activities that can be held inside their facilities.
  - The perception that rock climbing is an extreme sport.
  - The lack of awareness many locals have that there is an existing climbing wall and a co-op trying to build a new one.
  - The lack of control climbers have over the Devil's Crag opening hours and space.
- The co-op does not currently have specific outreach plans to expand the climbing community.

### **Naomi Vandermeer - Member, Rockfish Climbing Co-op**

Naomi is a good example of how the co-op can attract new climbers to the community by acting as a community hub. Naomi did not grow up climbing and only got into climbing at the Devil's Crag three years ago as a social activity. She had friends attending the climb nights at the Devil's Crag and decided to join as a way of spending time with her friends, but over time came to love the sport and the community of climbers.

She is now one of the regulars at the Devil's Crag climb nights, has taken up outdoor climbing, and is an active member of the co-op. While she is not on the co-op's executive board, she has helped out at events like the Reel Rock film screenings and the Children's Festival.

For her, being part of the co-op is more a way to be part of a community and a place to learn, than a physical space to climb.

Naomi is also one of the few co-op members who was born and raised in Prince Rupert. As a local, she confirmed many of the elements Benjamin identified as barriers preventing locals from joining:

- Many of her friends and family had no idea the Devil's Crag existed until she started climbing herself.
- Since climbing is not a popular sport in Prince Rupert, many people see it as an extreme sport rather than an evening recreational activity.
- There is little awareness of the co-op and its goals in the wider Prince Rupert community.

But Naomi also provided useful feedback as to how the co-op can attract new members.

Some of her recommendations included:

- Run and attend more events as a co-op.

- Do more promotion to raise awareness of the project.
- Organize group outdoor events like trail clearing in local crags or group outdoor climbing days.
- Be more friendly and welcoming to the new people who come to the Devil's Crag and outside walls.
- Link up with other like-minded groups to form partnerships.

### **Jessie Gibson - Prince Rupert Resident**

Jessie is likely the quintessential target demographic for a traditional climbing gym. She is a young professional in her early 30s, active, lover of the outdoors and has expressed interest in climbing in the past. In fact, she has attended climb nights at the Devil's Crag climbing wall a handful of times, but does not attend regularly.

When asked about which clubs she is part of in Prince Rupert, she mentioned the Ground Search and Rescue, the Kaien Coastal Riders - an adaptive hiking program that connects people with mobility barriers to the outdoors - and the Backcountry Society. When asked what inspires her to join and engage with these groups, she listed her love for the outdoors and love for community as the top reasons.

During the interview she expressed she was interested in doing more climbing and even joining the co-op to pursue that sport. But her main motivation for doing more climbing is to be outside, which is why she has not taken indoor climbing as a regular activity and the main reason why she has not joined the co-op.

For Jessie, her main motivation is to be outside and find people with whom she can be outside. She specifically said she would be more likely to join the co-op if the co-op offered programs that connect people to the outdoors and build an outdoor climbing community. She

specifically asked for workshops that teach new climbers how to safely get outdoors and possibly even taken them to the outside crags to experience outdoor climbing.

### **Erik Brooke - Team Leader, Prince Rupert GSAR**

Erik is the team leader of the Prince Rupert Ground Search and Rescue (GSAR). Like many groups in the city, the GSAR has struggled over the years to maintain an active volunteer base. Over the past 2-3 years, however, the volunteer membership of the GSAR has grown substantially.

Erik attributes this to a few reasons:

- The GSAR executive has been working to make the team more welcoming of all abilities. Like with rock climbing, many people are intimidated by joining a GSAR group. Not only do people have an idea that GSAR volunteers need to be extreme outdoors people, but there were also some people who felt the previous iteration of the local GSAR was not a welcoming place for new members.
- The recent demographic shift from the latest economic boom has brought more young people into the city who are looking for activities where they can connect with people. As one of the main outdoors-focused groups in town, the GSAR has attracted many of these newcomers hoping to connect with the local outdoors community and give back to this community.
- The GSAR has been more active in community events like the annual Sea Fest and the Children's Festival, and has even hosted fundraising events of its own.
- Recent permanent funding allowances from the province have helped the local GSAR invest in the membership and in new equipment, which has spurred greater public and media interest in the local group.

When asked specifically about the co-op, Erik mentioned that the GSAR is very supportive of building a new climbing wall as it would give their group a space to practice rope rescue,

which the group does not currently have. Furthermore, many of the GSAR members are also outdoors enthusiasts, many of whom are also outside climbers and would be interested in using an indoor climbing facility during the winter months.

### **Kevan Robitaille - President, Powell River Climbing Co-op**

The Powell River Climbing Co-op opened their doors in 2018. In many ways, it resembles the Rockfish Climbing Co-op. It arose from a desire by a small local climbers to have an indoor space to work out and congregate. It's also located in a small community without the population base to support a traditional for-profit climbing gym.

When asked what their engagement strategy was to recruit members before their wall opened, Kevan's answer was "our strategy was: if you build it, they will come."

While they did run some events to drum up community support for the project in the early days of the co-op, they also struggled to get community members involved before the physical space started to be built.

Once the construction of the wall started, the excitement of having a new recreational facility prompted many community members to volunteer and donate for the construction of the wall. He mentioned, as examples, an electrician who volunteered his skills in exchange for a yearly pass for his child, or businesses who donated funds in exchange for ad space in the new gym.

In the years since their gym was built, they have formed partnerships with the school district, local businesses and the City of Powell River to boost attendance and community engagement.

His main advice for a young co-op was to be active in the community and run events that attract a wider audience. His group, for example, runs the annual Reel Rock film screening in Powell River, which always brings many community members out and exposes them to their co-op. This, in fact, has also been the Rockfish Co-op's most successful public event as well.

## Recommendations

These conversations with stakeholders and community members provide valuable insight on actions the co-op can take to increase community engagement both before and after the physical climbing space is built:

1. Form a community engagement committee in the co-op's board that is tasked with organizing public events and forming networks with the wider Prince Rupert community. Without a person or group of people whose specific role in the co-op is to engage the wider community, there will be no one to push these projects forward.
2. Launch an outdoor climbing program ahead of the building of the new wall as a way to attract members of the wider outdoors community to the co-op. This was identified by the interviewees as a value-add for the co-op. Not only does it engage people directly and provide new activities for residents, but it also helps grow the climbing community itself. Those who enjoy climbing outside in the summer, often try to find ways to train and stay active in the winter months or rainy days, which will attract them to the co-op's new wall.
3. Increase online presence by engaging more on social media and building a website as a way to promote the existence of the co-op among locals and newcomers. Currently, the co-op does not have much of a web presence and it is difficult for people looking for a climbing community in town to find the group. With a bigger

online presence, the co-op can attract locals looking for activities as well as newcomers looking for community.

4. Develop a dedicated First Nations engagement strategy to make the co-op more welcoming and open to First Nations communities that have traditionally been excluded from other spaces and clubs in Prince Rupert. First Nations represent a sizable share of Prince Rupert's population and any growth strategy has to include them. This can also present opportunities in the future by opening the door to work with local nations that are looking to provide physical activities to young people in their nation.
5. Establish formal ties with other outdoors-focused groups in Prince Rupert, including the Backcountry Society, the Prince Rupert GSAR, and the Kaien Trails Society. These groups already have an active base of people who may be interested in climbing. Forming partnerships with them can not only help attract members from those groups, but it can also convince funders that the co-op has community support.
6. Enhance the community elements of the co-op by hosting monthly or quarterly socials that can bring in new members and help fundraise for the new wall. For many people, climbing is as much about the community and the people as it is about the sport. Non-climbing social events can help build that sense of community and encourage others to join and stay active in the co-op

## Conclusion

The Rockfish Climbing Co-op is not the only group in Prince Rupert struggling to find and retain new members. The city's small and transient population makes it hard for many groups to thrive.

This is why the co-op needs to find new and creative ways to maximize the city's potential and demonstrate the value it adds to the city. The recommendations listed above can help attract people to the co-op and give them a reason to stay.



That said, these recommendations will not be implemented on their own. Going forward, the co-op has to establish a path forward for implementing these recommendations, whether it be through an engagement committee or some other mechanism.

A potential next step could be to perform a wider survey of the co-op members to both identify other engagement ideas not listed in this report and also to identify members who are willing to volunteer to implement some of these recommendations.

## Appendix

### **Interview Questions for Ben Punnet**

1. Can you please tell some of the history of the Rockfish Climbing Co-op?
2. Who is the target demographic for the co-op?
3. How has the co-op recruited and engaged members in the past?
4. In your opinion, what has been the level of success of the co-op when it comes to recruiting members?
5. What barriers, if any, has the co-op faced in recruiting and retaining members?
6. Have you considered implementing new engagement strategies to grow your member base? If so, which?
7. How has COVID-19 and the associated restrictions affected the co-op's efforts to recruit new members?
8. What is your membership goal?

### **Interview Questions for Naomi Vandermeet**

1. How did you become a member of the Rockfish Climbing Co-op?
2. What inspires you to take part in the co-op's events and activities?
3. What would you say is the biggest barrier for the co-op to attract new members?
4. What do you think the co-op can do to recruit and retain new members, both from within and outside the climbing community?

### **Interview Questions for Jessie Gibson**

1. What community groups are you part of in Prince Rupert?
2. In general terms, what inspires you to join these groups?
3. If a new climbing gym was built here, would you consider joining the co-op?
4. If so, would you join the co-op before the gym opens to help get it started up?
5. From your outsider perspective, is there anything the co-op can do to make the co-op more inviting for outside the small group of existing climbers?

6. What do you think the co-op can do to recruit and retain new members, both from within and outside the climbing community?

### **Interview Questions for Kevan Robitaille**

1. Can you please tell some of the history of the Powell River Climbing Co-op?
2. Who is the target demographic for the co-op?
3. Has the co-op been successful at maintaining a member base large enough to sustain the operations of the gym?
4. What have your member recruitment and retention strategies been in the past?
5. What barriers, if any, has the co-op faced in recruiting and retaining members?
6. Have you considered implementing new engagement strategies to grow your member base? If so, which?
7. Do you have any advice for new budding co-operatives looking to build a new climbing gym?
8. How has COVID-19 and the associated restrictions affected the co-op's operations and member engagement?
9. How have you overcome these challenges that have come up from COVID-19

### **Interview Questions for Erik Brooke**

1. Can you please tell some of the history of the Prince Rupert Ground Search and Rescue?
2. How does the PRGSAR recruit and retain members to the team?
3. What barriers, if any, has the PRGSAR faced in recruiting and retaining members?
4. Have you considered implementing new engagement strategies to grow your member base? If so, which?
5. Do you have any advice for other Prince Rupert community groups looking to bring in new members into their community?

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