

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Documentary looks at the impact of the marijuana industry on a small B.C. town's economy

By John Mackie, Vancouver Sun January 27, 2010



Dave uses a state-of-the-art hydroponic system for growing several lucrative marijuana crops per year in his basement. Image from Cannabiz. Photograph by: Lionel Goddard, Special to The Sun

Cannabiz

Where: CBC-TV

When: Thursday, 9 p.m.

The Downside of High

On The Nature of Things

Where: CBC-TV

When: Thursday, 8 p.m.

VANCOUVER -- Marijuana is believed to be a \$20 billion industry in Canada. But most discussion about the drug is centered around the moral issue of whether to legalize it or not.

Lionel Goddard thought it was high time somebody looked at marijuana as a business, not a social issue. The result is CannaBIZ, an hour-long documentary airing on CBC-TV's DocZone tonight at 9 p.m. Goddard is a former CBC reporter turned documentary filmmaker. He was approached by the network to do a film on "the state of the marijuana industry in Canada," which is a broad subject.

He decided he needed to focus on a single community, and chose Grand Forks, an idyllic town near Nelson. “It’s in the Kootenays, in the heartland of marijuana, where the hippies came in the ’60s and planted the first B.C. bud,” Goddard explained.

“I thought if I could focus on one town, rather than try to find a dealer in Nova Scotia and a cop in Toronto, maybe I could see the business as it’s actually working, and maybe see its connection to the local economy.”

Grand Forks leaped to mind because it achieved national notoriety in the late 1990s for having the “marijuana mayor,” Brian Taylor.

Taylor not only admitted smoking marijuana, he wanted Grand Forks to become the centre of a new marijuana/hemp industry. He wound up being defeated in 1999, but was undeterred, becoming the head of the B.C. Marijuana Party for the 2001 provincial election and campaigning around B.C. in a “cannibus.”

Taylor lost, but kept running for Grand Forks mayor. As luck would have it, he was running again while Goddard was filming in 2008, which provided a natural storyline.

Grand Forks turned out to be the perfect place to shoot. Goddard found a young guy who let him film him planting his crop outdoors, and an older grower who let him film his much more sophisticated indoor grow-op.

The RCMP let Goddard film them searching for marijuana fields from helicopters, and chopping them down when they discovered them. One of his key subjects was the victim of a “grow-rip,” and welled up when discussing it, perhaps the most poignant moment of the film. The growers don’t come across as hardened criminals, they’re more like an old hippie neighbour who likes to garden. “It’s weird,” said Goddard.

“There’s almost an innocence in the heartland of marijuana, and there’s a sense that something is being lost. There almost is a sense of pride there, of tradition, that people are mourning.

“I’m not sure if people understood that it existed in the first place, because [growing pot] was illegal. But it’s a counter-culture, it’s a way of life, in that area of the province. And it supports the towns there.

“We like to drive there as yuppies, to have these little towns to drive through and pick up our ice cream and fresh vegetables and have a bed and breakfast to stay in. But people should realize that town probably wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for the marijuana industry, or at least be in the shape that it’s in.”

The loss of innocence is partly due to the fact that marijuana has become such a big business, gangs and organized crime have moved in. Cocaine is being exchanged for pot, partly because it’s easier to transport and cash is harder to launder; some growers are even carrying guns to protect their investment.

“I think [gangs] represent a dangerous trend, but I don’t believe they’re at the point where they’re taking over the market,” said Goddard.

“They represent a small percentage of the marijuana industry, but they represent a larger percentage of the collateral damage that is being done as a result of it. People are dying now in the marijuana industry, whereas that never occurred before.”

Goddard thinks his 14-month investigation just scratched the surface of the marijuana industry.

“I got to see a privileged splinter of this huge world that I think most people don’t have any idea about,” he said.

“There is a huge world, an underground economy, worth billions, in this province. Almost every person must know someone, or live near someone who’s involved.”

CannaBIZ is half of a marijuana double-bill Thursday night on CBC. It will be preceded at 8 p.m. by The Downside of High, an hour-long documentary on The Nature of Things about new research that finds teenagers under 16 that start smoking pot are “four times more likely to become schizophrenic” than those that don’t. It focuses on three young British Columbians who experienced mental problems after smoking pot at an early age.

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