

# Destination Dialogues

Summary Report – November 29, 2023



Event programming, logistics,  
and summary provided by



# Background



Destination Canada contributes to destination development across Canada through thought leadership, planning, and strategic support. While this broader work is important, destination development in rural Canadian contexts often has specific challenges that require innovative approaches. On November 29, 2023, the Destination Development Team hosted a free, online event for rural destination development professionals to inspire, inform, and strengthen their work through learning and discussions tailored to their unique needs.

Destination Dialogues featured two components:

- A **public webinar** that brought attendees from coast to coast to coast together to inspire rural destination development professionals to think creatively and learn from industry peers doing excellent work through a lively keynote address, a panel discussion, and two case studies; and
- A **workshop** that brought a smaller group of rural tourism professionals together to connect, share learnings, and problem solve together through conversation and networking.

The objectives of this pilot initiative were to:

- **Inspire:** Present attendees with a motivating keynote speech, a dynamic moderated panel, and destination case studies, designed to inspire and embolden innovative and creative tourism solutions in their rural destinations.
- **Foster Innovation:** Engage in insightful discussions and explore case studies around innovative destination development and regenerative approaches across rural Canada from a variety of perspectives.
- **Create Relationships:** Connect industry peers and like-minded individuals through candid conversations and idea-sharing.
- **Share Knowledge:** Exchange insights, learnings, and best practices, for the benefit of all participants and other destination leaders post-event.
- **Provide Feedback:** Gather valuable insights to support Destination Canada in offering continued learning and engagement opportunities that add value to communities, the planet, and the economic landscape of rural communities.

This summary report is informed by the webinar and workshop participants that attended Destination Dialogues.

# Session 1: Webinar



## From Coast to Coast to Coast

45 British Columbia	26 Ontario	3 Prince Edward Island	5 Yukon
13 Alberta	3 Quebec	6 Newfoundland and Labrador	50 Unknown
6 Manitoba	8 New Brunswick	1 Northwest Territories	
6 Saskatchewan	4 Nova Scotia	3 Nunavut	

## Representing

- 3 Academic Institutions
- 10 Destination Marketing/Management Organizations representing areas with <5,000 residents
- 11 Destination Marketing/Management Organizations representing areas with <50,000 residents
- 20 Destination Marketing/Management Organizations of areas with 50,000+ residents
- 43 Municipal Organization/Government (Tourism/Economic Development)
- 21 Non-Profit Organizations
- 15 Private Tourism Business (Consultant/Operator)
- 2 Others
- 54 Unknown

# Key Takeaways

risk taking  
activation pilot projects  
collaboration  
adaptability culture  
connection  
community engagement  
education

## We learned that

- **Embracing risk and adaptability** are foundational elements for rural destination development. The ability to navigate uncertainties and adapt to changing circumstances is crucial for building resilience for the destination and those that live within it.
- **Community is the key** to harnessing passion, vision, and perseverance, and a community-centric approach. Building a narrative that resonates with the local community, creating authentic experiences, and keeping people at the core are vital for rural destination development.
- **Innovation** can help challenge the status quo in rural contexts. Creative solutions can address unique challenges to bring about positive change and economic prosperity across the visitor economy.
- **Collaboration** is a driving force for success in rural destination development. Working with other businesses, forming partnerships within the community, and embracing a collaborative mindset over competition are key strategies for long-term success and meaningful impact.
- **Sustainability** is particularly important in rural destination environments. Intentionality in how people connect with the local environment and community should be at the heart of business decisions.

# Graham Sherman

## Keynote Speaker

Rural destination development professionals can face similar challenges to small-town Canadian business owners: limited resources, reliance on collaboration, and the need for persistence. As an entrepreneur in rural Alberta, Graham shares his journey to building Tool Shed Brewing Co. into a successful business and outlines how his story can be a blueprint for rural destination development professionals to innovate for and engage with local communities.



### Key Takeaways

- **Fear is natural and starting a business is scary.** Don't be afraid to take risks and try new things.
- **You've got to start somewhere.** Passion, vision and perseverance are key to success.
- **The "rules" don't always make sense.** Leveraging innovation to challenge the status quo can lead to meaningful change for entire industries.
- **Your company is only as good as its story:** how can you create experiences and build community through everything you do?
- **Collaboration beats competition every time.** Whether a global pandemic or a hard business quarter, working with other businesses allows you to be adaptable and creative to everyone's mutual benefit.



# Entrepreneurship Driving Responsible Rural Tourism

## Panel Discussion moderated by Jennifer Horsnell

The entrepreneurial landscape is an important part of rural destination development. This panel brought together three extraordinary enterprises that enrich their respective communities in distinct ways. Through a stronger understanding of the entrepreneurial journey, including challenges incurred and support received, rural destination development professionals can better entice and enable tourism businesses like these to grow responsible rural development in their own communities, for the benefit of all.



### Alex Berlyand

COO and Co-founder of [Parkbus](#), a transportation service connecting city dwellers to outdoor destinations like parks. He is also BC Programs Coordinator for the Tourism Innovation Lab.



### Chris Tait

Manager at [Klahoose Wilderness Resort](#), an award-winning off-grid Indigenous eco-resort in coastal British Columbia that is 100% owned by the Klahoose First Nation.



### Isaac Murphy

Owner and Operator of [Mysa Nordic Spa](#), an 18-acre Nordic Spa in Prince Edward Island that offers spa and relaxation services, an onsite restaurant, and accommodations.



## Key Takeaways

- Connection to the land and local communities is at the heart of responsible entrepreneurship.
- Be intentional with your approach to sustainability and impact. This will build an authentic and resilient product.
- Keep people at the heart of your business: those who work for you, those you work with, and those who engage with your product.
- Don't try to do it all – understand what makes your business unique to that place, build that narrative, and focus on perfecting it.
- Collaboration will facilitate success, particularly in a rural context. Consider how you can partner and align with other businesses in the community to prosper. This could also be leveraging academic institutions and other thought leaders in your area to advance sustainability work.

# Case Study: Rugged Apprentice

Presented by Alex Bouchard,  
Tourism Development Advisor at the Government of  
Yukon's Department of Tourism Development

**Rugged Apprentice**, a community-led voluntourism program, provides an opportunity to explore Yukon while giving back to communities and local businesses.

- Creates unique and transformative visitor experiences
- Develops and improves visitor and community infrastructure/assets
- Fosters tourism during the shoulder season
- Encourages a positive perception of tourism for locals

## The program has delivered impactful results:

- 350+ applications
- 90% of participants stayed in the destination beyond the program
- 80% of participants expressed an interest in moving to the Yukon following their experience
- 100% of participating communities said they would participate again

The success of the Rugged Apprentice program highlights the power of creativity in rural destination development. There was a desire to bring more visitors to different parts of the territory, but only if there was mutual benefit for the communities. This required creative thinking, but ultimately having this at the heart of program development ensured support from local residents - a critical element to Rugged Apprentice's success.

## Key lessons from this program include:

- Always be ready to adapt
- Find and empower your community champions
- Let go of your expectations: things will always go differently than you plan



# Case Study: Centre Wellington Downtown Shuttle Program

Presented by Joao Carrolo,  
Destination Development Coordinator at Elora & Fergus  
Tourism

Centre Wellington developed a sustainable solution to address congestion in downtown Elora and encourage dispersion to neighboring Fergus.

- This free solution operates on a loop with multiple stops between Elora and Fergus with multiple stops
- It operates every weekend in Centre Wellington's high season

The DMO leveraged old school (signage and sandwich boards) and new school (digital, social media) tools to showcase the program.

**Two unique elements of success:**

- Tourism Ambassadors: local residents on board share local knowledge, events, and wayfinding with riders
- Talent on Board program: hire local performers to provide entertainment. This drew local attention and led to community buy-in for the program. It also unlocked additional arts and culture funding

The success of the Shuttle Bus built the case for adopting this year-round as an ongoing solution for residents and visitors alike.



# Session 2: Workshop



**17** participants

from rural destinations attended by invitation

## Networking and exchange opportunities

Quality roundtable of introductions

Two breakout discussions to stimulate sharing and collaboration

## Facilitated by

**Michelle Holliday** Founder, Thrivable World

## Including presentations by

**Zac Gribble** of Destination Stratford on regenerative tourism

**Micha Fardy** of Friends of Fundy on community-led solutions

**Jessica Brooks** of Eternal Landscapes Mongolia on rural product innovation

# Key Takeaways

funding  
connection  
patience  
qualityoflife  
community enrichment  
trust shared resources  
partnerships entrepreneurship collaboration

## We learned that

- **Building trust** is time-consuming but crucial in rural destination development. Ensuring communities are prepared and welcoming towards visitors is a critical aspect of success.
- **Bigger may not be better.** Focus on smaller, localized solutions in rural areas for impactful change. Large-scale projects may not be as effective in creating positive results felt more acutely in rural communities.
- **Funding and resource challenges** are significant in rural destination development. Matching and spending requirements associated with grants are hurdles that destinations often face.
- **Connections are key.** Strengthen project feasibility through partnerships and regional collaboration. Optimize efficiency by defining roles, fostering internal collaboration, and emphasizing expertise for comprehensive coverage.
- **Communication.** Storytelling emphasizing connectivity and community's role improves access to funding. Empower communities to host and participate in tourism discussions, ensuring critical voices are part of the development process.

# Flash Innovations

## 7-minute introductions to three rural destination development solutions



**Zac Gribble**

*Executive Director of Destination Stratford, and Festival Director of Lights On Stratford*

DMOs can capitalize on crises by adapting their models to better serve the community. Shifting from a pure focus on members to include a community focus allows you to adapt to challenges through creative solutions. This led to three projects for Stratford:

- Addressed community need for a year-round accessible washroom by transforming underused tourism kiosk.
- Encourage the year-round use of public spaces through Stratford Al Fresco, which partners with local restaurants and suppliers for outdoor dining experiences.
- Lights on Stratford Festival, a new winter experience, addresses seasonality and draws visitors from across the region.



**Micha Fardy**

*Executive Director of the non-profit Friends of Fundy and co-lead of the Upper Bay of Fundy Rural Regional Destination Project*

Moving towards community-oriented approaches in destination management broadens the scope beyond traditional tourism stakeholders. Leveraging projects and initiatives that cater to both visitors and locals, fostering inclusivity and addressing various needs will lead to greater impact and legacy. This includes:

- Work includes several approaches such as research and evaluation, community building and facilitation, learning events, and prototyping.
- Collaborating with network of community organizations.
- Aligning to the UN SDGs.



**Jessica Brooks**

*Founder, Eternal Landscapes Mongolia and Chadmana Erdene*

Innovative and inclusive approaches in rural tourism product development builds internal and external capacity, empowering employees and partners to navigate challenging scenarios and contribute to a more resilient and vibrant industry. Eternal Landscapes Mongolia is doing this in several ways:

- Building long-term, trusting partnerships with community members is crucial success factor of rural destination development.
- EL recently launched Chadmana Erdene, a pioneering training initiative and support hub for women in Mongolia's tourism sector.

# Breakout Groups

## First Breakout

**What's an opportunity or challenge that's most on your mind?**

**Responses revolved around the following themes:**

- Trust building, which can be a time-consuming process. Ensuring that communities are prepared for and welcoming towards visitors is a critical aspect of successful rural destination development.
- Despite a tendency to focus on large-scale projects, impactful change often comes through smaller, localized solutions – particularly in rural communities where positive results can be felt more acutely.
- Funding and resources pose significant challenges in rural destination development. Matching and spending requirements often associated with grants represent real hurdles for smaller destinations.
- Working together through partnerships or regional collaboration can build capacity and strengthen project feasibility.

## Second Breakout

**What's a possibility or solution you'd like to act on in your destination?**

**Responses revolved around the following themes:**

- Optimize efficiency by defining roles, fostering internal collaboration, and encouraging open discussions. By focusing on your area of expertise, you can cover more ground.
- Storytelling that emphasizes connectivity, interdependencies, and the role of community in tourism projects can lead to better access to funding. This includes integrating efforts and addressing duplications.
- Empower communities to host and participate in tourism discussions. This community-focused approach ensures that the voices that are critical to effective destination development are part of the development process.
- Capacity building is critical to success. Educating local businesses on the importance and wide-ranging impacts of tourism will lead to a more inclusive industry, support community buy-in and reduce silos.
- Encourage a shift from competition to collaboration in rural destination development. This involves trust building, partnerships, and storytelling.

# Final Thoughts

**According to Destination Canada's Fall 2023 *Tourism Outlook*, our country's potential growth trajectory should take us to \$160 billion in revenues by 2030, but capacity constraints are limiting the tourism sector from achieving its full potential.**

An increase in the tourism workforce, building capacity, attracting high-value guests, and collaboration will help close the gap. Through this summary report we highlighted important challenges, insights and resources for rural tourism professionals and supporting organizations to problem solve together and think creatively to help unlock Canada's full potential.

Our hope is that rural tourism professionals will continue the path towards intentional destination development and connect with industry peers and like-minded individuals through candid conversations, idea-sharing and the exchange of best-practices to create positive results for rural communities.

# Appendix

CANADA 

# CAN

Canada 

 DESTINATION  
CANADA

CONNECT  
SEVEN  
GROUP

# Poll Responses

## Session 1: Webinar

1

**Does your economic development agency in your community or region intentionally attract tourism investment?**

**71** Yes

**14** No

**21** Not Sure

**73** Non-Respondents

2

**Is tourism identified in your official community plan?**

**90** Yes

**7** No

**19** Not Sure

**63** Non-Respondents