

# WEBINAR

DESTINATION DIALOGUES 2024

# REPORT

## ReThinking Experience Development in Canada's Destinations

November 2024  
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📍 Baddeck, Nova Scotia



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Learn about the key concepts and learnings presented in Destination Dialogues 2024, a webinar and online workshop organized by Destination Canada in September, to inspire, inform and empower rural destination development professionals. This report on the webinar, *ReThinking Experience Development in Canada's Destinations*, is written by Celes Davar, host and facilitator of Destination Dialogues, and reflects his personal views and contribution to the conversation. The report recaps and expands on ideas and insights shared during the webinar. Destination Canada is publishing this independent report with Davar's permission.



## About Celes Davar

*Celes Davar* is president and owner of experiential tourism company *Earth Rhythms*, founded in 1995, located in the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq in western Nova Scotia's Gaspereau Valley. Celes is a storytelling guide, community workshop facilitator, champion of regenerative tourism, community catalyst and experiential tourism coach.

# The Context

We are operating within a global and national economy that is still recovering from the pandemic. **But business as usual has changed.** We are not sure what the new normals are. In tourism, we are all struggling to shape our businesses and destinations in relevant ways, as things continue to change. Experience development that champions regenerative practices is in its early stages.

**We are in a climate crisis**, which has been accelerated by 170 years of burning carbon-based fuels—namely coal, oil and gas. Tourism has one of the largest carbon footprints of any sector—which presents us with an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Now is the time to craft experiences that are close to zero waste, offer time in nature and actively reduce carbon emissions.

**The collapse of global biodiversity** and the choices we face to create a more livable planet are in front of us. We need to bend the curve back upwards—and tourism has a very strong part to play in that, because people travel to our natural areas, parks and coastal regions, where these rapid changes are evident. Rural and northern regions offer large and inspiring landscapes in Canada, where Indigenous and settler experiences can illustrate the relationships between ecosystem health, biodiversity and human stewardship.

**Rising and troubling social divisions have emerged at the community, regional and national levels in many countries, including Canada.** The gap continues to grow between the privileged and wealthy, and those who are marginalized, without wealth, and feeling abandoned. How can tourism be more inclusive, both as community suppliers and hosts, but also in welcoming all guests, regardless of gender, background, status or race?

**There have been degenerative impacts on oceans, lands and communities from a variety of sources.** Globally, we have realized that mass tourism and associated marketing campaigns have had many negative impacts. Tourism impacts affect small and large communities, local farms, coastal and wetland areas, local towns and villages, and municipal infrastructure. We seem to have only thought about tourism in terms of increasing revenues and visitor numbers, and have not addressed other important and relevant metrics or integrated them into more holistic tourism strategies. What needs to change?

These current realities reflect a time of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity—and different questions have begun to emerge. Is it possible that tourism—and its associated mechanics, infrastructure and activities—needs to change? How do we adapt and reDesign a more resilient travel ecosystem that results in thriving communities, prosperous businesses and restored ecosystems?



📍 Jasper National Park, Alberta



📍 Tatshenshini River, Yukon

# The Need for ReThinking of Visitor Experiences

**Our current realities mean that conversations are taking different pathways, and businesses and destinations are investing differently, to reinvent systems and reThink tourism, both in urban and in rural and remote areas.** This requires governments, businesses and those who facilitate economic development and tourism to assess and recalibrate. A reset is needed.

While many aspects of tourism infrastructure, transportation and delivery will still be needed for serving large numbers of people with accommodation, entertainment and various activities, there is acknowledgement of the need for new tourism offerings that illustrate sustainability in practice, use renewable energy, reconnect visitors to nature, and include more community residents and their stories than traditional tourism activities, businesses or operational practices.

In Destination Canada's recent report on [A Regenerative Approach to Tourism in Canada](#), tourism was identified as a catalytic force for transformation, to reconnect people to each other and to nature, and to reawaken us to our interdependence within a larger living system. Tourism has the potential to add value without extraction and elevate the role of communities of all sizes, so they can discover their inherent potential, weaving purpose, place, people and profit together again.

Because many traditional Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) have had mandates primarily for marketing, budgets did not prioritize time or funding for the design and long-term development of new visitor experiences adapting to changing traveller sentiments, climate change, a global pandemic and economic uncertainties. This approach to tourism marketing

led to a lack of development of visitor experiences that offered the essence of a destination's stories, access to local storytellers, slower forms of travel, more intimate contact with community hosts, regenerative practices, and immersion into a curated set of activities with a local host, using the senses to be more hands-on and interactive with place, tools, materials and foods unique to the local ecosystem.

Market research like Explorer Quotient (EQ) and other psychographic research has provided new insights into traveller motivations, and social and travel values, which have been helpful in shaping the evolution of new visitor experiences all across Canada.

One might suggest that the very definition of tourism is changing. What would change in how we design visitor experiences, marketing and tourism development within Canada, if the definition of tourism was the following?

A regenerative approach to tourism involves three elements<sup>1</sup>:

- Connecting people and their place in a deep, purposeful, and meaningful relationship
- Putting that shared purpose into action by developing hosting experiences and infrastructure that are enlivened by local story, learning and care
- Working in a manner that grows capacity for flourishing and resilience among people, businesses, communities and ecologies.

1. Destination Canada, [A Regenerative Approach to Tourism in Canada](#) (2024) p.6



Ste-Geneviève, Manitoba



Tourism is not just an economic activity or industry that generates wealth. It is much more. **Tourism can be a force for good!** It is a **relationship** in which host communities and businesses in a destination **welcome and host** travellers who visit, take part in local activities, and give back. In this relationship, we invite residents and travellers to experience people and place, honouring the land and cultural traditions over time, and sharing stories, often through unique immersive **experiences that are hands-on**. Travellers are invited to be **responsible** in their visit, reduce their carbon emissions and waste footprint, and **help communities and landscapes** to be protected or regenerated, as part of the tourism visit. We would like them to transformed by this experience, returning home to advocate for the people and the destination in an informed manner.”

-Celes Davar, September, 2024



📍 Elsipogtog Mi'kmaq Cultural Center, New Brunswick

Visitor sentiments about travel are changing. In May 2024, the Expedia Group released their [2023 Global Impact Report](#). In the report's opening message, CEO Peter Kern states, "Travel transcends movement from one place to another. It's a catalyst for opening minds, uniting people and cultures, and challenging perspectives. Expedia Group's Open World™ Impact strategy serves as our roadmap, guiding our journey to become a more inclusive, sustainable, and responsible company and industry."

### The Expedia Group's 2023 Global Impact Report identified three key priorities<sup>2</sup>:



#### Economic Advancement

Strengthen economic opportunity by enabling the growth and success of local and small businesses within the travel ecosystem to ensure more people benefit from the industry's growth.



#### Inclusive Pathways

Advance travel equity for all by identifying equity gaps and barriers to travel, reimagining travel in a way that welcomes all.



#### Prosperous Planet

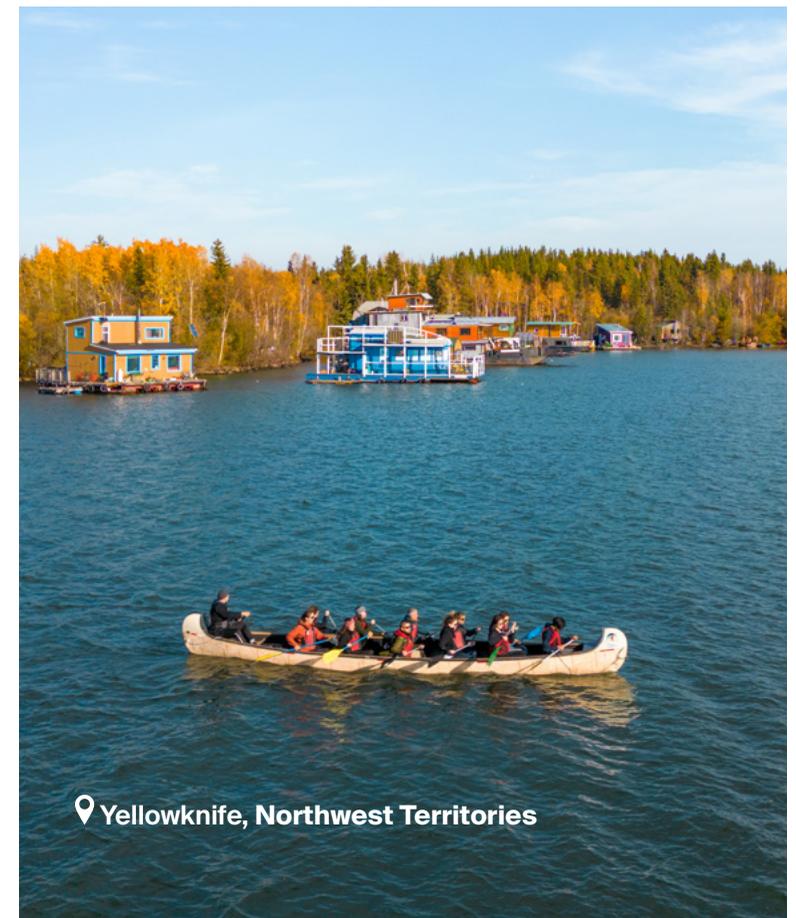
Promote more sustainable travel by aligning our business with a Net Zero future, enabling travellers to act more responsibly, and encouraging partners to offer more sustainable travel options.

2. Expedia Group, [Global Impact Report - 2023](#) (2024), p.7

Perhaps it is time for a different narrative in tourism. Tourism is not just about "the visitors". It is also about us, the people who live in hosting communities. What do we want our communities to be like as livable spaces, as shining examples of sustainability, doing the right things to thrive, well into the future? When we start implementing actions, sustainability becomes simply how we do things in business, at our facilities and attractions, and within our communities. It's not just valid market research about travellers that can shape new opportunities. It's also about creating positive impacts from tourism that improve our communities. Both must happen at the same time. This is the promise of "tourism as a force for good." This is also the promise of reThinking the design of visitor experiences.



📍 Métis Crossing, Alberta



📍 Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

# The Opportunities

**New visitor experience development initiatives are taking place in many destinations across Canada.** They are being championed by different stakeholders (DMOs, municipalities, museums, conservation authorities and public institutions) in different ways. For decades, there has been significant investment into infrastructure (trails, attractions), promotion of traditional visitor services associated with travel (restaurants, entertainment, accommodations, transportation, self-guided activities, tours), and the offering of packaged itineraries (various combinations of the above) through unique marketing campaigns.

A major task for the tourism sector is the opportunity to reThink and reDesign excellent visitor experiences. *What does excellence in visitor experience design involve?* Recent experience development work shows that it includes access to great community storytellers, room for moments of transformation, built-in sustainable practices as a foundation, time and space to feel the regional “sense of place” and nature, hands-on activities, and an awareness that these can be designed for specific audiences.

Designing legendary visitor experiences is about crafting legacy moments for guests (whether residents of the community or visitors from away), changing the tourism narrative to reinforce a much stronger sense of place.

These new experiences elevate regional stories—facilitated by local, non-traditional community hosts coached to develop regenerative experiences—changing destination tourism narratives to focus on experiencing all things local, to delight, educate, transform and give back to community.

This report offers examples of new visitor experiences that have been in-market—many within rural settings—and suggestions (with examples) for an investment strategy to build capacity to coach and create visitor experiences that add new value to businesses, communities and destinations.

The development of these new experiences aligns with other recent Destination Canada reports, including [A Regenerative Approach to Tourism in Canada](#), and [Rising Tides, a Regenerative Tourism Strategy for the Atlantic Canada UNESCO Tourism Corridor](#).

A few important opportunities now present themselves.



**First, there is a need to develop practice approaches** (training, coaching, mentoring) that support non-traditional community hosts to be part of the tourism ecosystem.



**Second, there needs to be a significant restructuring** of the funding models within tourism government departments and DMOs, to increase investments in experience development, rather than solely focusing on marketing research, marketing and market development.



**Experience development** based on local stories, nature and local traditions will also change marketing and promotional strategies and content.



St. Catherines, Prince Edward Island



Iqaluit, Nunavut

© Marfin Olynyk



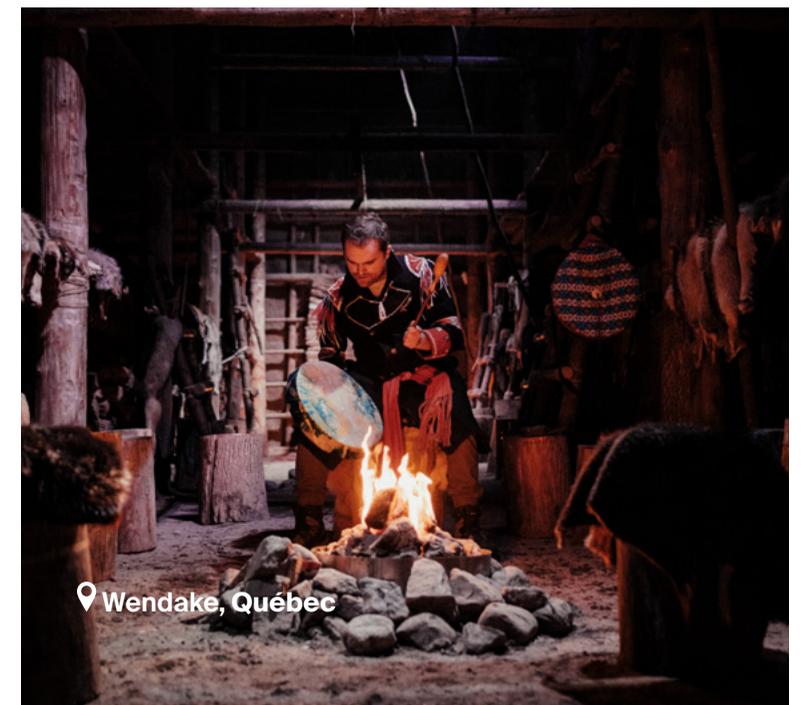
📍 Ottercreek Woodworks, Ontario

To enable communities to thrive, with more efficient operational budgets and greater resilience to our current realities, there is a growing need for more in-destination collaboration and strengthening the visitor offers. Synergies need to be fostered, and supported with education and training, to align local stories with visitor services like hyperlocal foods, nature connections, and restorative actions—and enable business-to-business (B2B) actions in the region that bring about a bigger win-win-win for businesses, the local ecosystem and visitors.

There are many opportunities to use existing, underused infrastructure, in new and creative ways, to make these buildings, community centres, parks, trails and other services shining examples of zero waste, renewable energy and low carbon.

Creating new visitor experiences that use this infrastructure should be a key tactic in all regional tourism strategies. There are so many opportunities to rent community halls (as places for experiences or food services, in four seasons), invite visitors onto farms, or enable visitors to attend unique local artisan studios and workshops (rather than just buying retail art and craft).

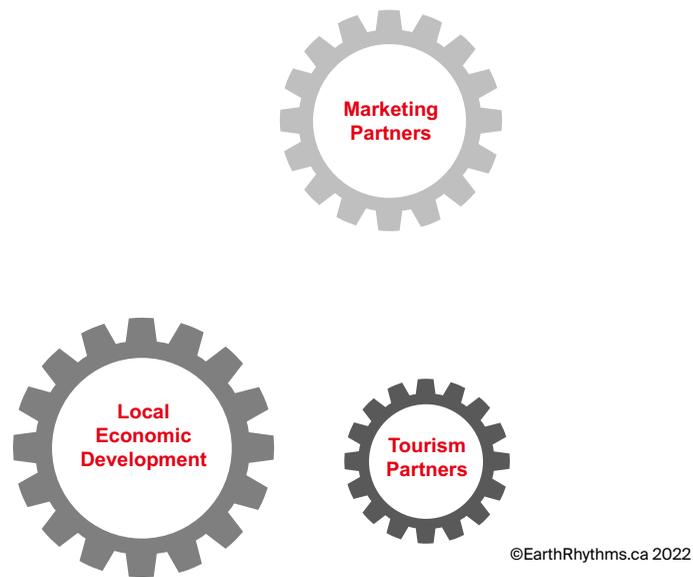
Mass tourism already offers numerous ways for large numbers of people to get to iconic locations primarily in peak seasons. What is needed are other options for visitor engagement that responds to travellers seeking a slower, more intimate experience with the people and places in their destination of choice. Diversification of experiences is needed, whereby some experiences (for example, cultural, artistic, performing arts, culinary and wellness experiences) are offered in one variation for summer travellers and another variation (scaled back, lower price point) for local residents in other seasons of the year. When community residents begin to see these shifts, they naturally become more supportive of appropriately scaled tourism.



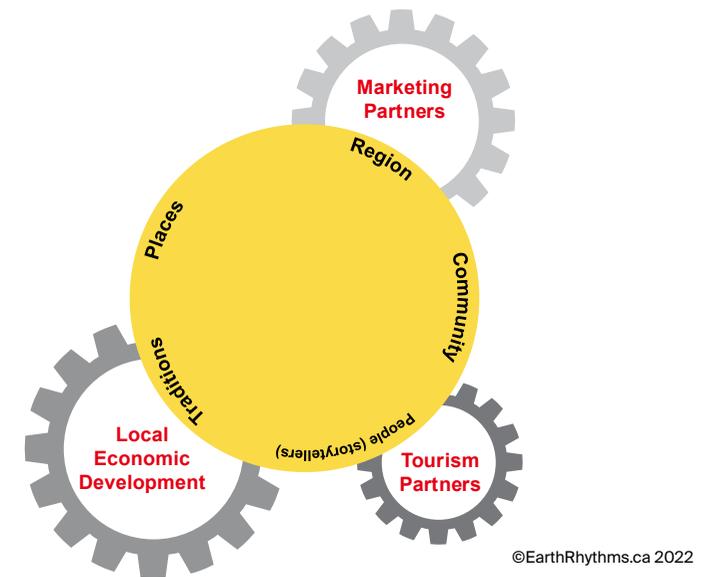
📍 Wendake, Québec

# Crafting Regenerative Visitor Experiences

**The tourism experience development process at a destination level involves multiple partners, investors and businesses.** The following framework illustrates how the creation of legendary visitor experiences can emerge within the dynamics of the tourism ecosystem, layering in new opportunities.

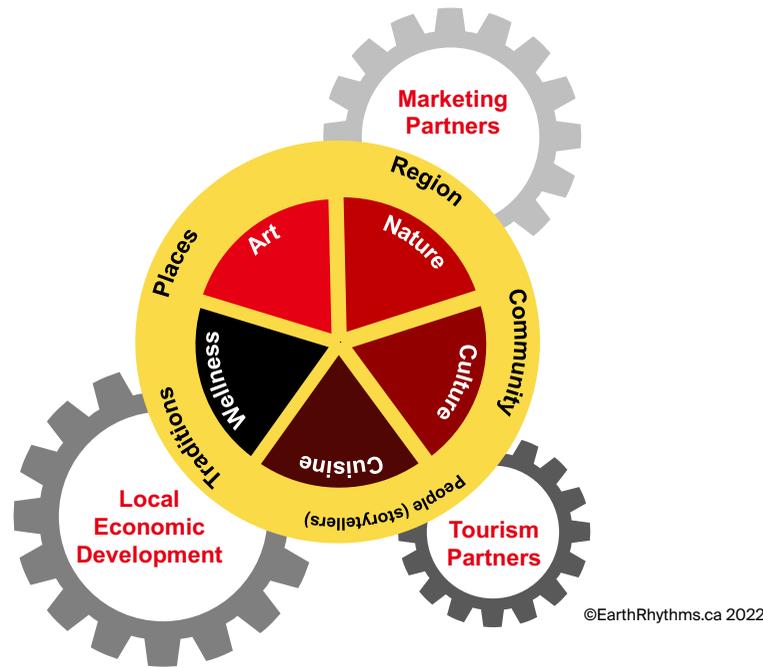


**There are unique local traditions, people (storytellers, hosts), and places where guests are welcomed by the community, that define a regional sense of place.** This identity has been shaped by Indigenous land use and traditions, recent settlement patterns and a hyperlocal interaction with the land, its ecosystem and waterways, climate and geography.

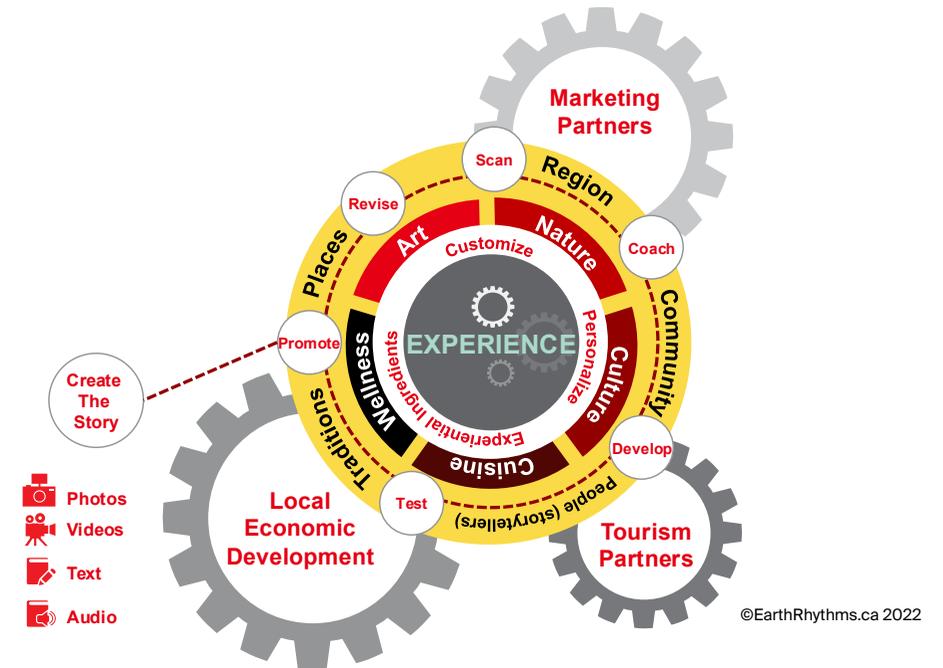


In any destination, there is a range of community marketing partners, tourism businesses, community organizations, non-profits, museums, parks, historic sites, attractions and municipal economic development organizations. Intersecting like the gears in an engine, they help drive innovation, collaboration and investment for a wide array of tourism infrastructure, activities and experiences. In the past, the primary metrics have focused on growing visitor numbers and revenues. While this continues to be important, significant work is now emerging around an expanded set of metrics that includes impact of tourism activities on communities, local ecosystems, community wellbeing, waste streams and carbon emissions.

# Crafting Regenerative Visitor Experiences (continued)



When considering a destination, there are primarily five realms that reflect the local context—the world of art and performing arts, regional ecology and associated natural systems, culture and traditions, food production and cuisine, and wellness or wellbeing practices.



Regenerative visitor experiences can be crafted within these five realms to offer different ways to learn from local hosts. Often, two or more of these realms can be combined, enhancing and enriching the visit. Using several ingredients, the process of crafting experiences involves a systematic and intentional scanning for community gems, coaching these local hosts or storytellers and developing new experiences. These are tested for market readiness, high quality digital collateral is developed, and the experience can then be promoted and marketed from websites and using booking platforms that are increasingly easy for both hosts and guests to use. This development process often leads to a different approach to marketing, which is story-based and specific, reflecting the unique experiences. These new experiences can then be layered into individual businesses at different times of the year, as well as existing destination websites and marketing initiatives.



The heart of a legendary experience is a storyteller, a community gem.”

- Celes Davar



📍 St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

**If we accept this as a realistic outcome from the experience development process, then we understand that experiences cannot be self-guided.** The host or storyteller is critical, as the authentic facilitator of the stories, interactions, conversations, guidance and learning.

When a local storyteller invites guests into their world, they share knowledge and engage visitors in making something unique with them to take away—this is an experience. It is different from a typical tour for larger groups, primarily featuring a leader and a presentation of information. Examples of such tours might include a workshop that is primarily instructional providing participants with new skills, a demonstration that usually separates the expert from the audience watching how something is made, or an event that is mainly a one-way presentation of information or passive entertainment.

Stories are the unique perspectives shared by the actual people who live in a destination. They are personal and owned by the storyteller, reflecting their business, expertise and knowledge.

Stories are reflective of place, history and traditions over time. Stories are about what is local and how that has evolved—they are the starting point for experience development.

Many of these storytellers are not part of the traditional tourism ecosystem as we know it—they are people who live in our community. They are examples of what we might call **Non-Traditional Community Hosts**. Some other examples include artists, farmers, artisans, soil technicians,

flower growers, songwriters and musicians, woodworkers, foragers, wildlife and wellness practitioners, ecologists, and teambuilding facilitators. This is not a complete list, but it helps us to look more deeply into our community to expand and amplify how we communicate our place to guests.

Why might we want to include these community hosts in visitor experiences within our destinations? To be more inclusive and have a broader representation of unique local stories. This is what many visitors are seeking—to be able to meet locals and learn from them. It also increases the inventory of local experiences for tourism operators to include in visitor itineraries and packages to the area. Often, these community partners don't want to run a tourism business or be a tourism operator or a professional guide. But they are people who will share their story, are interested in adding new revenues to their business, and would be happy to collaborate with other tourism professionals who could get their experiences to market.

The following case studies offer some examples of these new regenerative visitor experiences available in Canada. They were selected because they have been in-market selling successfully for several years, one in rural eastern Manitoba and one in rural southern Ontario.

# Case Studies



📍 Ottercreek Woodworks, Ontario

## Case Study #1

[Dave Schonberger – The Story of Tree to Table](#)

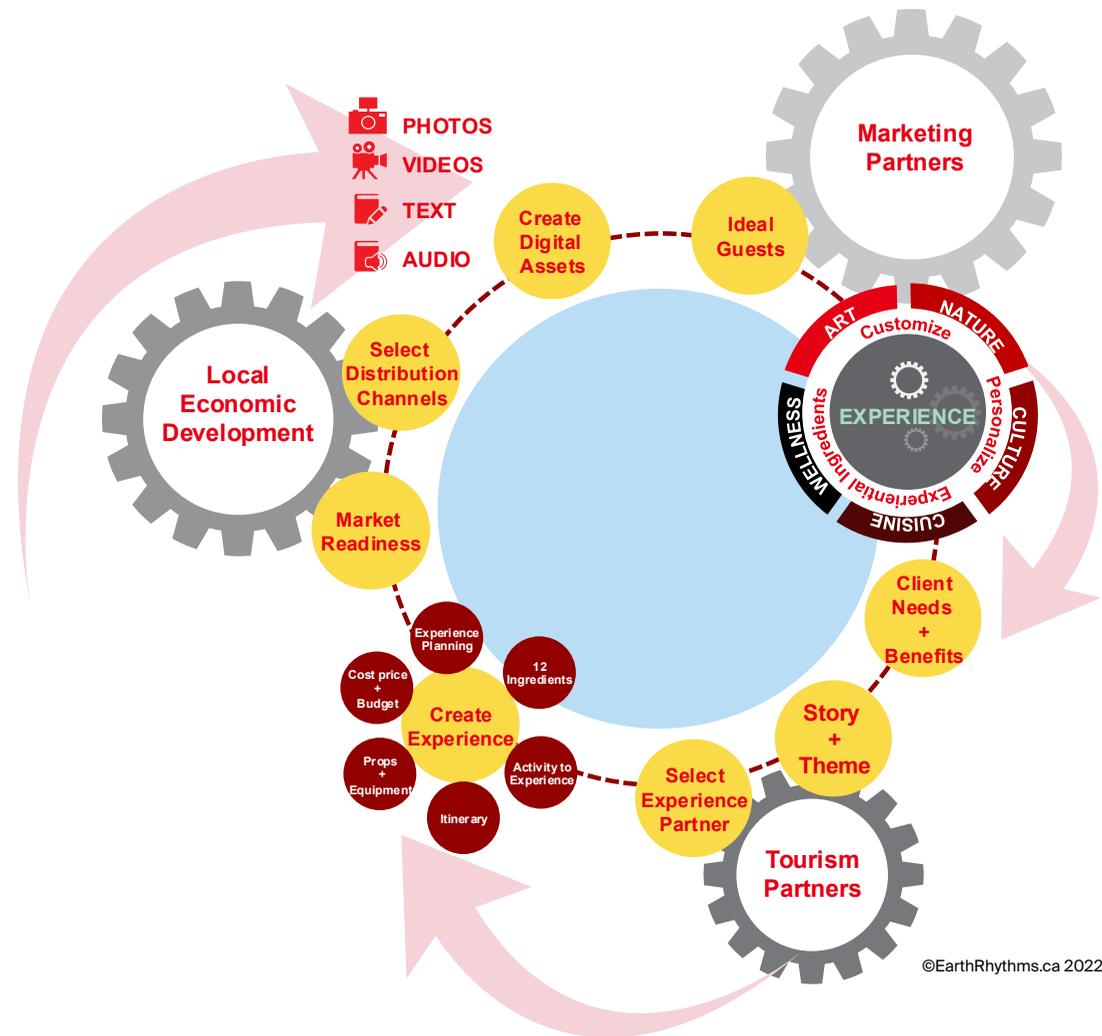


📍 Masagana Flower Farm, Manitoba

## Case Study #2

[Lourdes Still – Tinta, A Dye Your Own Wearable Art Experience](#)

# Summary



It is evident there are specific elements of legendary visitor experiences that we can learn from in these case studies.

One is that **a storyteller as host, guide and facilitator is essential**. [Dave Schonberger](#), founder of Ottercreek Woodworks Inc. and [Lourdes Still](#), founder of Masagana Flower Farm and Studio are both storytellers or experience guides, who are present in person and guide the experience.

Another is to **create specific hands-on activities that visitors do, learn and engage with to make something to take away**. For example, making a dye your own scarf or a charcuterie board are two memorable takeaways.

A significant distinction of a legendary experience is that **the storytellers act as guides on the side**, setting up activities for successful participation. Experience guides act more as facilitators, rather than presenters. Storytelling is simply one method that a guide uses to convey information. But telling a story is not the same as sharing an experience, which involves movement, various stages (indoors and outdoors), making something with the experience host—and being transformed by being taken on a journey into the real world of the host.

Legendary visitor experiences have an important outcome, which is to create **opportunities for personal transformation, aha moments, or insights**. Being with Lourdes and Dave offers insights into their values and journeys. Time is provided to reflect and talk about the meaning of these values and their work, in relation to the geography and climate that surrounds them.

**Designing visitor experiences to be regenerative and local** is how sustainability is built in as a foundation. Local foods are served, a walk outdoors is offered, natural materials are involved in the creation of the takeaway. Experience hosts and guests realize that they do not have to talk about sustainability as part of their experience—the way the experience is offered demonstrates best practices in sustainable tourism.

Read the Destination Dialogues 2024 Workshop Report by Celes Davar [here](#).