## NORTH ISLAND

DESTINATION
DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

## HIGHLIGHTS

## THANK YOU

The North Island Destination
Development Strategy is the outcome of a nine-month iterative process of gathering, synthesizing, and validating information with tourism partners about the current state and future direction of tourism in the North Island planning area.

We thank the Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Coast Salish people on whose traditional territories we gathered for meetings in Port Hardy, Port McNeill, Sayward, Campbell River, and Courtenay.

Thank you to our tourism partners who participated in the process by attending community meetings, participating in surveys and interviews, engaging in follow-up conversations, and forwarding relevant documents and insights. Special thanks to the members of the Working Group as well as the facilitators of the destination development process.

## WHY A STRATEGY?

The North Island Destination Development Strategy was developed to enhance the competitiveness of the North Island tourism destination over the next 10 years and beyond. The strategy was developed as part of Destination BC's Destination Development Program to support and guide the long-term growth of tourism in British Columbia. This document presents some of the key highlights of the North Island strategy.

## WHO IS IT FOR?

The North Island Destination Development Strategy is a guide for tourism partners as they work collaboratively to grow the visitor economy. The strategy will be reviewed and updated to reflect changing tourism objectives, priorities, and market conditions. Results will be tracked and learning outcomes will inform future implementation activities, thereby optimizing their effectiveness in increasing economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits for the entire North Island planning area.

## WHERE IS IT FOR?

The planning area has two distinct sub-regions. While they both share the overarching landscape of mountains, forests, and a captivating coastal environment, the Comox-Strathcona region is the more urban of the
two, with major communities and service centres in Campbell River and the Comox Valley. The northern sub-region of Mount Waddington has small, rural communities linked by the Island Highway and coastal waterways with access to a remote but accessible natural environment of equal parts water and land. The area is accessible by highway from south central Vancouver Island, ferry, airplane, floatplane, and by motor-coach

## WHERE DOES IT FIT?

The North Island is one of 20 planning areas across $B C$ for which destination development strategies are being developed. Each planning area represents a logical destination for visitors in and around the province As planning areas span across multiple jurisdictions, the importance of adopting an integrated approach with a shared vision and coordinated investment is critical. The North Island Destination Development Strategy is one of three strategies that will be prepared for the Vancouver Island region. The two others are the South Central Island and Greater Victoria. In time, informed by the outcomes of all relevant planning area destination development strategies, regional strategies will be developed. These will, in turn, inform the creation of a provincial strategy thereby ensuring a truly integrated and cohesive combination of bottomup and top-down destination planning.

## A KEY IMPERATIVE

The recommendations contained within the North Island Destination Development Strategy form the foundation for additional, focused and aligned discussions regarding implementation. It will be important to ensure that the strategy becomes embedded in local, regional, provincial, and federal decision making processes. It is only by working collaboratively in an integrated way and with a shared agenda that the full potential of the North Island planning area will be realized.

## AT A GLANCE

In what follows, the distinctiveness of the destination is summarized, and its vision for tourism is introduced. While acknowledging the challenges the sector faces, its potential for growth is set out in terms of key opportunities and experience development potential. A consideration of each development priority and its associated actions then follows. While further detail on each of these elements is available in the full strategy, they are brought together "At A Glance" to demonstrate the scope of the integrated nature of the approach being taken.

## A DISTINCTIVE DESTINATION

The North Island is a planning area of natural and cultural wealth marked by an intimate connection to the marine environment. Miles of untouched coastline and unspoiled waters host countless marine species, while vast rainforests support large predators such as cougars, wolves, and bears.

Land-based and marine-based ecotourism and adventure tourism experiences owe their existence to an incredible range of outstanding provinciallyprotected beaches, and an array of diverse landscapes and ecosystems containing over 260 recreation sites and providing wide-ranging opportunities for iconic wildlife viewing and nature observation. The area boasts the largest concentration of caves in North America, globally recognized scuba-diving opportunities, and outstanding kayak and canoeing settings. There are internationally recognized sport fishing experiences to be had, as well as marine cruising, mountain biking and road cycling, alpine and Nordic skiing, championship golf courses, and well-recognized garden collections.

While the planning area is predominantly built around nature-based or outdoor adventure tourism, it has strong elements of Indigenous culture, history, the arts, and community lifestyles. Indigenous occupation and culture can be traced back millennia. The planning area includes the traditional home of the
Kwakwaka'wakw (East Coast of Vancouver Island and mainland) and the Nuu-chah-nulth (West Coast of Vancouver Island). European settlement, dating to the

1800 s, is the foundation of many settled communities, former fishing villages, and farmland.

Over 100 annual events and festivals are hosted within the planning area, with various cultural, nature, harvest, and arts themes all contributing to the arts heritage of the North Island. The BC Seafood Festival in Comox has become the largest seafood festival in Western Canada. With festivals of this nature, a growing number of farmers' markets and new emerging food experiences have developed. The focus on local foods is growing, and the significance of this as part of the visitor experience is increasing.

## A SHARED VISION

The vision for tourism development in the next 10 years reflects the distinctiveness of the destination and the ambition of its communities:


THE NORTH ISLAND WILL BE RECOGNIZED GLOBALLY FOR ITS UNIQUE TERRAIN, COASTLINE, WILDLIFE, AND ECOSYSTEMS; ITS MARINE AND LAND-BASED ADVENTURE, ITS YEAR-ROUND OPPORTUNITIES TO BE IMMERSED


#### Abstract

IN THE ATMOSPHERIC SOLITUDE OF THE WILDS; THE INDIGENOUS CULTURE; AND THE WELCOMING RANGE OF DISTINCTIVE COMMUNITIES THAT PORTRAY AN ENGAGING ARRAY OF COASTAL LIFESTYLES AND TRADITIONS. THE TOURISM INDUSTRY WILL WORK IN RESPONSIBLE COLLABORATION WITH ALL PARTNERS, RIGHTS HOLDERS, AND LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE THAT THE PLANNING AREA'S INHERENT ENVIRONMENTALAND CULTURAL VALUES ARE RESPECTED, AND THAT THE VISITOR IS TRULY INSPIRED BY ITS WARMTH OF HOSPITALITY AND ITS EMPHASIS ON DELIVERING REMARKABLE EXPERIENCES.


## KEY OPPORTUNITIES

The planning area faces a number of challenges relating to transportation and transit services; marine and ferry infrastructure; labour market and housing issues; seasonality; land management and carrying capacity. However, key opportuniities include:

- Community buy-in and a commitment to tourism
- A history of cooperative planning
- A growing hospitality culture
- A belief in sustainability principles
- Experiences that show the DNA of the destination
- Indigenous experiences
- Higher-end, higher-yield products
- A capacity to authentically interpret the significance of the area
- Marine services
- Wildlife interpretation
- Opportunities to showcase small communities
- Labour market partnerships


## EXPERIENCE POTENTIAL

The current and future experience themes that will motivate travel and differentiate the destination with a compelling, sustainable visitor experience include:

## MARINE / LAND ECOCULTURE

- The confluence of land and sea, the diverse coastline of beaches, inlets, and islands, the backdrop of forested mountain peaks, the abundance of terrestrial and marine-based wildlife and the dynamics of the inter-relationship between the land and the marine environment all provide the basis for the identity of the North Island.
- The opportunity to explore the diversity, the grandeur, the raw beauty, the challenges, and the elemental forces that are present in this area of land and ocean.


## INDIGENOUS CULTURE

- The Indigenous culture on the North Island dates back millennia and First Nations people have shared this wild coastal region with eagles, black bears, orca, and salmon for over 8,000 years.
After a long period of cultural repression, the Indigenous communities are once again celebrating their culture through art, dance, music, language, and a sustainable day-to-day relationship with the natural world. As First Nation

SEYMOUR NARROWS, CAMPBELL RIVER Photo: Boomer Jerritt


## 2 REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

Councils within the planning area see the opportunity to engage in tourism as an economic sector, existing experiences have been strengthened, and new experiences and guided activities have been developed - such as those offered by k'awat'si Tours.
New resort and accommodation products and partnerships that open up trail-based activities. This niche sector has become a critical element of the destination offering.

## WILD ENCOUNTERS

- The North Island is renowned for its marine and land-based adventure, and for opportunities to view wildlife year-round.
- Opportunities include hiking iconic trails, exploring some of the longest and deepest karst caves in Canada, and diving in waters described as a marine wonderland. From the Kusam Klimb challenge, to a range of winter skiing adventures, the North Island has a remarkable spectrum of wild encounters.

Biking routes vary from forest roads and downhill trails to back roads and byways. There are opportunities to camp and enjoy the beaches or participate in sport fishing in some of the richest fishing grounds around the island.

## ISLAND LIVELIHOODS AND

 GLOBAL CONNECTIONS:- Early exploration led to waves of settlement, with the arrival of settlers from Scandinavia and early attempts to farm the coastal areas; the establishment of a utopian society by the Finnish settlers on Malcolm Island, the arrival of Chinese labourers to build early dock infrastructure on the west coast, followed later by Japanese settlers who sought to make a living from logging, fishing, farming, and whaling industries.
Moving forward, the emphasis will be on developing new experiences that will bring these older, more historic and partially hidden stories to life so they add value to a visit on the North Island.


## BOUNTY OF LAND AND SEA

- The interplay between land and sea has created an environment that impacts everything from local culinary experiences and festivals of the sea, to a temperate maritime climate that has allowed for the cultivation of distinctive gardens, local produce, and the growth of farmers' markets.
Equally, the bounty of land and sea is reflected in the growing music, arts and craft sector, the overall desirability and appeal of the area for residents and amenity migrants, and the sense of healthy living that has come to be associated with the North Island.

VISION STATEMENT The North Island will be recognized globally for its unique terrain，coastline，wildlife and ecosystems；its marine and land－based adventure，its year－round opportunity to be immersed in the atmospheric solitude of the wilds；the Indigenous culture；and the welcoming range of distinctive communities that portray an engaging array of coastal lifestyles and traditions．The tourism industry will work in responsible collaboration with all partners，rights holders，and levels of government to ensure that the planning area＇s inherent environmental and cultural values are respected， and that the visitor is truly inspired by its warmth of hospitality and its emphasis on delivering remarkable experiences．

## KEEP MOVING：INFRASTRUCTURE

## ON THE ROAD

Work with strategic partners to develop a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan．Focus on improving multi－modal connections between communities and getting visitors， including those without access to a car， moving around the destination．Explore the tourism potential of logging roads to enhance the visitor experience．

WELL－SIGNED
Develop a coherent，cohesive，and consistent signage strategy that responds to visitors＇needs．Ensure that the expectations and needs of First Nations are identified and integrated into the emerging strategy．

GO FURTHER：TRAILS AND CROWN LAND ACCESS

## ALL－TERRAIN

Engage with Tahsis，Gold River，Zeballos， and Campbell River to see how a marketable All－Terrain Vehicle（ATV）visitor experience could be developed．Include the prospect of developing a 400 km circle tour as well as the possibility of activating the network of decommissioned logging roads to provide ATV trails．
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## HIKE \＆BIKE

Within the context of the Hiking Tourism Masterplan，develop exceptional，multi－use， GIS enabled trails on the North Coast．Ensure that prioritized interventions deliver the best economic return as well as an exceptional experience．Scope the potential of a Nimpkish Valley rail trail and work to realize the development of the North Island section of
the Vancouver Island Spine Trail. the Vancouver Island Spine Trail．

## KAYAK \＆CANOE

Work with marine tourism partners as they develop the Vancouver Island North Circle Route marine trail．Assess sites along the Inside Passage and the west coast to identify potential service hubs and，through targeted assistance，create stronger staging areas for marine tourism．Encourage the integration of Indigenous tourism themes，products，and partners in trail activities and promotions．

## ON TWO WHEELS

In advocating the development of a more cycle－friendly destination，promote new corridor routes，pullouts，and rest stops on major highways．Encourage operators，including agri－food and agri－tourism businesses，to cater to the needs of visiting cyclists．

Within the context of developing an evaluation model for marine infrastructure， list the amenities，identify gaps，and prioritize interventions for visiting boaters． Progress a regional＂pocket cruise＂product between Vancouver and／or Seattle and the

North Island．Keep the channels of communication open with BC Ferries on matters that affect tourism．

AFFORDABLY ACCOMMODATED Investigate the possibility of developing a tourism housing strategy to address worker and visitor housing and accommodation options．Informed by best practice，work with strategic partners to address the barriers －such as transportation，lack of affordable accommodation，and the high cost of living －to recruiting and retaining employees．

## OVER WATER

## IN THE AIR

Work to maintain passenger volumes，air services，and regional status at the Comox Airport．Explore the potential to attract a direct service to／from Seattle．Ensure that ground transportation services provide cohesive，reliable，and affordable connections from airports to the places visitors want to go within the destination．

WELL－CONNECTED
Working in conjunction with the＇Connected Coast＇initiative，conduct an inventory of cell coverage in the main service areas．Prioritize coverage increases in those areas most affected in terms of the impact on the visitor experience and identify programmed options for closing the gaps．

## RECOGNIZE \＆ELEVATE

Ensure that the needs of tourism reflected in the Vancouver Island Land Use Plan are updated and acted upon．Work with strategic partners to include tourism within the scope of the inter－ministry West Coast Sector Agency and connect policy analysts within the Ministry of Tourism，Arts and Culture with regional resource－based ministry decision makers．

## REACT \＆RESPOND

Within the context of a consistent trail sustainability program， work with BC Parks to address surges in the volume of visitors over public holiday periods by directing them to alternative trails．Promote a consistent and cohesive backcountry stewardship policy and update current management plans to encourage more tourism use．

## ENGAGE \＆CURATE

Work with First Nations to develop a trails and stories database that includes history，and traditional and contemporary uses．Agree on protocols for using these tral linked stories as part of the visitor experience．Work in a similar capacity with Tourism Vancouver Island（TVI）relative to European explorers and settlers．

## WORK TOGETHER：COLLABORATION

KEEP TRACK
Create a mechanism to implement，monitor， and follow up on the Destination
Development Strategy．Invite First Nations to become part of this process and，in conjunction with Mount Waddington Regional District＇s Tourism Advisory Committee，raise awareness of the significance of the strategy for the development of the visitor economy．

## INTEGRATE \＆FACILITATE

In promoting integrated destination planning， encourage local authorities to explicitly address tourism through their available planning tools and measures．Integrate tourism into planning processes concerned with agriculture，heritage conservation， signage，transportation，parks，recreation， and trails，and site master planning．

## COMMUNICATE THE VALUE

Quantify tourism＇s role not only in generating economic growth but also in contributing to sustainable communities； enhancing the appeal of places for residents and visitors；promoting recreation and realizing lifestyle benefits．Work with key players to promote the value of tourism and the importance of supporting tourism careers and pathways to tourism employment for young people．

## ASK A LOCAL

Create a tourism ambassador program to provide more memorable experiences for visitors to the North Island．Learning from the experience of such programs elsewhere， encourage participation in the new SuperHost destination ambassador program． Identify，draw up terms of reference for，and recruit resident ambassadors．

## STATE THE CASE

Encourage those agencies with the capacity to influence the development of tourism to recognize its economic potential in relation to other resource－based sectors．Assemble a short guide，with case studies drawn from the North Island that demonstrates how resource－based decisions－e．g，logging road closures－can compromise the capacity of tourism to generate economic and community benefits．

## PURSUE EXCELLENCE

In strengthening the emphasis on sustainability within the tourism sector，explore the opportunity to pursue Biosphere Destination Certification with the Responsible Tourism Institute．Encourage businesses to pursue certification through Green Canada Tourism and develop a＇Vital Signs＇report for tourism within the planning area．

## SAFEGUARD THE RESOURCE

In light of the North Vancouver Island Marine Plan，work to protect the integrity of marine and near－shore cultural and heritage assets whilst promoting their significance within the visitor experience story．Support the Nanwakolas member First Nations in the planning， management，and coordination of commercial recreation and tourism activities in the planning area．

## KEEP UP：TECHNOLOGY

## MAPS \＆APPS

Expand the geographic scope of the Vancouver Island North trails map and app to include all of the North Island． Integrate access and transit information to trail heads and staging areas，and create a more responsive，downloadable， smartphone enabled map．Encourage providers to buy into this opportunity to showcase their offerings．

## INNOVATE \＆SHOWCASE

Identify local examples of the innovative use of technology in tourism that can be showcased to industry and communities．Consider creating a tourism technology forum to facilitate technology transfer and adoption．Assess Smart Tourism Destination concepts for their relevance to the planning area．

## METRICS THAT MATTER

Develop a performance measurement framework that can be used to evaluate the efficacy of the Destination Development Strategy．Work collaboratively with DMOs and economic development offices to consider current methods of measurement and develop a simple model that can be used to organize the sources of information，
the metrics，and indicators．

GET READY: INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT

## FACILITATE \& FOLLOW-UP

Building on existing models, create a tourism business visitation program - a Business Retention and Expansion program - aimed at retraining and expanding the number of market-ready experiences. Develop an aftercare service for operators who have participated in the Remarkable Experiences Program.

TRAIN \& UPSKILL
Work collaboratively to identify industry training needs. Consider establishing a tourism education and training advisory committee to provide recommendations on addressing training issues and needs.

## ADVOCATE \& SUPPORT

Work with Vancouver Island University to reinstitute and fill the Endowed Chair in Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development. Ensure that there is continued support for tourism research, advocacy, and innovation on the island. Advocate for increased student funding for North Island College.

## MENTOR \& MIND

In light of the influx of skilled workers and retirees who have moved to Vancouver Island, investigate the feasibility of their forming the basis for a tourism mentorship program on the North Island. Explore their capacity to act as ambassadors, volunteers, storytellers, knowledge keepers, and advisors.

## INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS

Support additional funding for the continuation of the Aboriginal Eco-tourism program at Vancouver Island University. Work with First Nations to build more tourism training programs into impact benefit agreements negotiated with major industry. Identify tourism career pathways for Indigenous young people.

## RECOGNIZE \& REWARD

Work with post-secondary institutions on industry standards and the identification of education opportunities for individuals, as well as operators. Encourage industry participation in certification programs, offering more co-op and apprenticeship opportunities.

## BE DIFFERENT: PRODUCT AND EXPERIENCE DEVELOPMENT

## LOOK, LISTEN, LEARN

Organize a study tour of best practice tourism destinations for local government, DMOs, and industry leaders. Identify and focus on areas which have demonstrated best practice in outdoor recreation, wildlife viewing, carrying capacity, environmental management, and First Nations partnerships.

## DAY TRIPPING

Identify day tours for nature observation, sight-seeing, and experiencing downtowns, highlighting local history, and culture that will appeal to highway travellers, bus tour visitors, and cruise ship visitors.

## ACTIVATE THE ISLANDS

Increase the touring appeal of rural and island communities. Establish a rural tourism advisory committee to address both supply and demand side initiatives. Develop more interpretation around geo-tourism and heritage tourism, with a focus on the culture and history of Nootka Sound. Develop a suite of niche, yet environmentally sustainable, experiences on the islands.

## WITHIN REACH

Ensure visitor services are able to facilitate connections to North Island experiences and communities. Explore how local government GIS capabilities could be leveraged to enhance such services. Continue to develop Visitor Centre capacity to expand outreach through social media and explore the prospect of providing mobile visitor services in more remote locations.

## WHALE WATCHING

In light of the prospect of securing accreditation for the world's first Whale Heritage Site (WHS) on the North Island, work with relevant partners on a WHS tourism strategy. Focus on blending indigenous experiences, edu-tourism, wildlife viewing, and interpretation.

## ADVENTURE OUTDOORS

Promote the development of backcountry outdoor recreation opportunities and encourage greater operator uptake of Crown tenures as provided in the provincial Adventure Tourism Policy. Identify infrastructure and service priorities that will support nature-based activities such as hut-to-hut development and wildlife viewing sites.

## WONDERFUL IN WINTER

In developing new winter experiences to increase visitation in the off and shoulder seasons, encourage operators to offer more winter activities, including new day tours. Work with First Nations, local communities, and existing operators to develop and package winter experiences.

## INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES

Establish an Indigenous Tourism Committee to focus on policy development and programming for product and service development. Appoint an Indigenous tourism specialist to work from the TVI office. Engage First Nations in tourism planning across all levels.

## SHOWCASE \& CELEBRATE

Build stronger linkages between the community museums in the planning area and develop interpretive materials that amplify the various elements of the North Island story. Develop cultural walking tours in each community and encourage place-making enhancements to key gathering places. Identify the infrastructure and services required to support major events.

## 4 GEARING UP

## SUCCESS NETWORKS

This strategy is intended to inform actions for the future, which over time, may be embedded in local, regional, and provincial decision-making processes. The result will be an integrated system of priorities to achieve better development decisions, drive greater tourism revenues, and realize benefits for businesses and communities in the North Island planning area. All of this will contribute to a thriving, vibrant, and growing economy.

Joint strategy ownership among all planning area tourism partners is a critical component of this program's success. The strategy identifies a suggested success network of tourism partners to champion and move actions within each objective forward.

## FRAMEWORK

The strategy presents the destination development objectives using a consistent framework to determine the prioritization of each objective and the relative timing for implementation. Objectives with a provincial or regional scope have been identified and will inform the regional and provincial destination development strategies.


## CATALYST PROJECTS

The following nine actions were identified as catalyst projects for immediately moving the strategy into implementation.

## Keep Moving: Infrastructure

- Develop a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan, with a section on addressing the distinct challenges of moving visitors around the North Island.
- Develop an evaluation model through which boat launches, docks, marinas, and other marine infrastructure and amenities can be listed and prioritized.
- Advocate for more user-friendly and accessible cycling destinations on the North Island.


## Go Further: Trails and Crown Land Access

- Identify exceptional trails on the north coast to complement and enhance TVI's Hiking Master Plan.
- Encourage BC Parks to undertake new management plans for select parks in the planning area that incorporate a much higher profile tourism mandate and management direction.


## Keep Up: Technology

Develop a tourism technology strategy for Vancouver Island that would prioritize development efforts.

## Get Ready: Industry Development

- Investigate the feasibility of a tourism mentorship program on the North Island.


## Be Different: Product and Experience Development

Develop new winter experiences to increase visitation in the off and shoulder seasons.
Develop more experiences linked to the pending accreditation of the world's first Whale Heritage Site on the North Island.

# LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION? 

 BC DESTINATION


Read the detailed North Island Destination Development Strategy or reach us at

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