

NORTHEASTERN BC 10-YEAR DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

HIGHLIGHTS



DESTINATION
BRITISH COLUMBIA™

THANK YOU

The Northeastern BC Destination Development Strategy is the outcome of a twenty-six month, iterative process of gathering, synthesizing, and validating information with tourism partners about the status and future direction of tourism in the Northeastern BC planning area.

We thank the First Nations on whose traditional territories we gathered for our community meetings, including:

Kwadacha Nation, Daylu Dena Council, Blueberry First Nations, Doig River First Nations, Fort Nelson First Nation, Halfway River

First Nation, Prophet River First Nation, Sauteau First Nations, West Moberly First Nations, McLeod Lake Indian Band, Lheidli T'enneh First Nation and Tsay Keh Dene Nation.

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 Committee as well as the facilitator of the destination development process.

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1 INTRODUCTION

WHY A STRATEGY?

The Northeastern BC Destination Development Strategy was developed to enhance the competitiveness of the Northeastern BC planning area 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 Northeastern BC strategy.

WHO IS IT FOR?

The Northeastern BC 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, environmental, social, and cultural benefits for the entire Northeastern BC planning area.

WHERE IS IT FOR?

The Northeastern BC planning area extends from the northern tip of the BC portion of the Alaska Highway (Highway 97) to the Yukon-BC border south to Prince George and from the western edge of the Muskwa-Kechika Management area east to the Alberta border.

WHERE DOES IT FIT?

Northeastern BC is one of 20 planning areas across BC 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 Northeastern BC Destination Development Strategy is one of three Destination Development Strategies being prepared for the Northern BC Tourism region. The two other planning areas include Northwestern BC and Haida Gwaii. In time, informed by the outcomes of all relevant planning area destination development strategies, regional tourism strategies will be developed. These will, in turn, inform the creation of a provincial strategy thereby ensuring a truly integrated and cohesive combination of bottom-up and top-down destination planning.

A KEY IMPERATIVE

The recommendations contained within the Northeastern BC 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 with a shared agenda that the full potential of the Northeastern BC planning area will be realized.

AT A GLANCE

In what follows, the distinctiveness of the destination is summarized and its vision for tourism 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 associated actions then follow. 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.

2 REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

A DISTINCTIVE DESTINATION

Northeastern BC is characterized by a vast geography of rugged mountains, majestic rivers, pristine lakes, rolling prairies, and rich agricultural lands. It features extensive touring routes, abundant parks, wildlife, and a rich reserve of paleontological resources. With its welcoming communities and Indigenous cultures, the sheer scale of the destination lends itself to a diverse natural environment which supports a wide range of tourism experiences. With the exception of Prince George, communities in the area are relatively small.

Overall, Northeastern BC has outstanding cultural and natural assets that support (or could support) a range of adventure, ecotourism, cultural, and First Nations tourism experiences. The area has a wealth of BC Parks. The destination includes several iconic features and unique attributes that can potentially appeal to, and cater to, different markets. The north and south are distinctive areas with the north characterized by the central plains and the northern Rocky Mountain range, while the south is situated at the northernmost part of the upper Fraser River watershed on the east side of the mountains. The focus of tourism in the northern section of the planning area is touring, primarily by car, recreational vehicle (RV), and motorcycle.

Sport tourism is established and growing. The focus of tourism in the southern section is sport tourism, event tourism, adventure tourism, and ecotourism. While some winter experiences are available, the most visitation occurs in the summer, spring, and fall.

Through the planning process, participants identified the following key iconic features that currently serve, or potentially could serve, as demand generators and focal points around which to galvanize a common identity for Northeastern BC:

- Alaska Highway Corridor
- Liard River Hot Springs
- Tumbler Ridge UNESCO Global Geopark
- Ancient Forest
- Muskwa-Kechika Management Area

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:

NORTHEASTERN BC OFFERS
UNIQUE AND DIVERSE ADVENTURES
OF A LIFETIME IN WORLD-CLASS
SETTINGS WITH RICH HERITAGE
AND CULTURE, SPECTACULAR
WILDLIFE, VAST WILDERNESS, AND
WELCOMING COMMUNITIES.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

The planning area faces a number of challenges, including: transportation barriers to, from, and within the region; a low level of awareness about the area; a lack of sufficient roadside services and facilities; a lack of market-ready experiences; the high cost of operations in remote areas and the challenge of staff attraction and retention. However, key opportunities include:

- The development of thematic and circle routes
- Building experiences around iconic attractions and areas
- Clarifying the identity of Northeastern BC
- Developing visitor, market and export-ready experiences
- Developing ecotourism
- Developing tours that extend from the Alaska Highway

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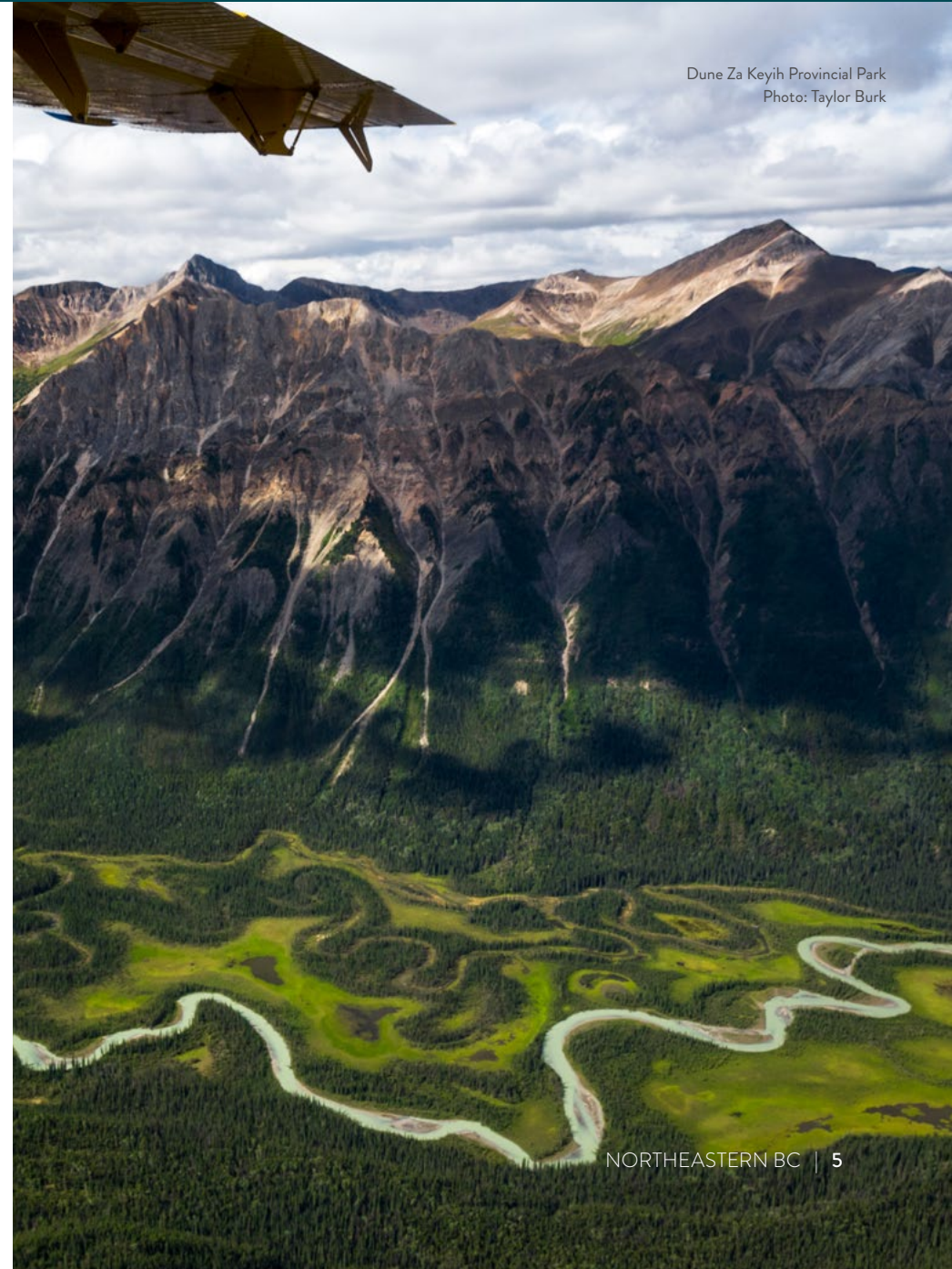
REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

EXPERIENCE POTENTIAL

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

- **OUTSTANDING THEMATIC TOURING AND/OR CIRCLE ROUTES** — routes that are enriched by diverse and natural landscapes, natural features and wildlife, heritage and culture experiences, and ecotourism experiences. While this unique selling proposition is anchored by the iconic Alaska Highway, there are many additional routes with considerable thematic potential that can help further develop Northeastern BC into a top touring destination in North America.
- **PALAEONTOLOGICAL EXPLORATION AND ADVENTURES** — experiences that are built on the rich palaeontological resources throughout much of the destination, the emerging presence of the Tumbler Ridge UNESCO Global Geopark, and the vast trail networks featured in and around communities and in provincial, regional, and municipal parks. It should be noted that the discovery of palaeontological resources in Northeastern BC is still in its infancy.
- **SUPERB OUTDOOR ADVENTURE AND ECOTOURISM BASED ON THE WILDERNESS AND DIVERSE OUTDOOR SETTINGS OF NORTHEASTERN BC** — while some parts of Northeastern BC are impacted by the resource sector, the destination does feature vast areas of nature and wilderness that are wild and untouched. Wild and untouched areas are becoming increasingly rare worldwide, which reinforces what is special about Northeastern BC.

Dune Za Keyih Provincial Park
Photo: Taylor Burk



3 AT A GLANCE

VISION STATEMENT Northeastern BC offers unique and diverse adventures of a lifetime in world-class settings with rich heritage and culture, spectacular wildlife, vast wilderness, and welcoming communities.

THEME 1	SIMPLY THE BEST: CORE ICONIC FEATURES			
	MUST DO Within the context of evolving a Northeastern BC Iconic Features initiative; develop, profile, and link experiences based on the area’s acknowledged outstanding features. Include the development of niche tours, thematic signage, and an interpretive program which consistently and coherently communicates the area’s iconic assets, while working with partners to address improvements to essential amenities for the traveller.		LEVERAGE WIDER APPEAL Building on the draw of the area’s iconic features, ensure that other aspects of the product/ experience are cohesively developed to take advantage of these features. Focus on the development of associated circle tours, thematic travel routes, and niche package development. Develop links with key attractions and events in nearby communities.	
THEME 2	A SHARED AGENDA: COLLABORATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND RESOURCES			
	COMMUNICATE & COORDINATE Secure a resource dedicated to monitoring progress on the implementation of the 10-year strategy. Focus on developing communication tools (webinars, email, video conferencing) to ensure that progress is effectively communicated to all those involved in realizing the implementation of the strategy.	INSPIRE & MOTIVATE Host events/forums featuring relevant and inspirational guest speakers, professional development, and other initiatives that will help to drive the implementation of the strategy. Where feasible, host a dedicated event to celebrate successes and plan next steps. Ensure those in furthestmost locations can participate remotely in such events.	ENGAGE & RESPECT Develop a work plan aimed at engaging First Nations who are interested in progressing destination development initiatives. Work with relevant partners and organizations to ensure that Indigenous constitutional rights are recognized and established protocols are respected in delivering on the tourism agenda.	RESOURCE & EQUIP In identifying priority destination development initiatives, ensure that adequate resources are available and coordinated across relevant provincial ministries to secure required funding. Explore a range of potential funding sources including federal, provincial, multi-sectoral, and public-private partnerships.
THEME 3	SUPPORT SYSTEM: POSITIVE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT			
	VALUE & SUPPORT Applying a cost-effective model to estimate the value of tourism, communicate the results to residents, First Nations governments, local governments, and regional governments. Ensure tourism values (economic, cultural, and social) are understood and tourism’s role in enhancing the quality of life for all is supported.	RECOGNIZE & REFLECT Work with local governments, regional governments, and First Nations governments to ensure that input from tourism industry representatives is sought when developing community plans. Ensure that tourism interests are reflected within economic development strategies, transportation plans, and parks and recreation master plans.	SAFEGUARD & PROTECT Work with strategic partners to monitor and address complex issues that are having an impact on wildlife. Promote integrated land use management and work with others to restore natural habitats and re-balance wildlife populations.	ENABLE & RESPOND Work with relevant ministries and agencies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the process for obtaining tenure, permits, and development approvals. Encourage First Nations to seek advice on securing access from provincial highways to reserve land to facilitate the development of facilities and services.

ON TRACK: INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION

REFRESHED & RESTORED

Work with partners to identify priority needs in relation to new pull-outs (including washrooms, picnic amenities, signage), and develop and implement a plan to provide essential amenities, facilities, and services. Identify associated budgets for capital investment and ongoing maintenance.

ALERT & PREPARED

Assess the current situation regarding the provision of emergency services and the state of emergency preparedness at key locations within Northeastern BC. Work with the federal government and relevant partners to provide reliable wi-fi and cell service.

WELL-SIGNED

Develop a strategically phased signage program for thematic corridors and circle routes. Identify associated development and annual maintenance costs. In conjunction with relevant agencies, include consideration of signage for core attractions and iconic features.

RELIABLE AIR ACCESS

Initiate a dialogue between key stakeholders regarding ways to improve the frequency and reliability of air passenger service to northern airports, and specifically to Fort Nelson Airport.

PARKS FOR ALL

Work with BC Parks, private sector operators, and regional districts to respond to current and future visitor needs in relation to the configuration of camping site/RV parking, extending the seasons and integrating parks within the overall visitor experience.

GREAT TRAILS

Identify priorities for investment in the development of trails and trail networks. Include consideration of the stories behind the many historic trails that are an essential component of the area's heritage tourism experience. Explore funding opportunities to support trail development and enhancement.

AUTHENTIC VOICE

Work with First Nations governments to identify and work with the appropriate authorities to improve signage related to First Nations communities, tourism features, and welcome signs. Support efforts to include the referencing of traditional territories in key locations, such as airports.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Ensure that the Spinal Cord Injury BC's "Access BC" initiative receives strong support from municipalities, regional districts, provincial government agencies, tourism operators, and other relevant community stakeholders and associations in Northeastern BC. Work to ensure that employment, facilities, infrastructure, programs, and services are accessible and inclusive to all.

A COMPELLING OFFER: EXPERIENCE DEVELOPMENT

INDIGENOUS TOURISM

Provide supports (economic, capacity-building, education, research) and guidance to First Nations communities and entrepreneurs who are interested in enhancing an existing tourism business or starting a new one. Drawing on existing and new research, promote the clustering of accessible, market-ready Indigenous tourism experiences across the destination.

EXCELLENT EXPERIENCES

Invest in robust research to better understand market needs and inform product development. Work with partners to develop high-quality, special interest niche tours, packages, and experiences that showcase the natural and cultural features of the area, including its iconic features.

CULTURAL HERITAGE MATTERS

Marshal the area's strengths in heritage, arts, culture, festivals, and events in support of developing thematic corridors and cultural tours. Source and apply best practices in improving the financial sustainability of community museums to ensure that they continue to provide enriching experiences for visitors.

THEMATIC ROUTES

Develop thematic corridors and circle routes as a core product for Northeastern BC. Establish a common identity for their signing; provide a consistent storytelling experience; and ensure unique features, such as the area's palaeontological resources, are profiled. Further develop the Alaska Highway as a key attractor and work to ensure that routes and corridors tie into neighbouring destinations.

PLACES TO STAY

Prepare an accommodation feasibility and investment strategy to assess key locations where unique resort, cabin, and RV accommodations could be developed to support circle routes, thematic corridors, and the iconic features of Northeastern BC.

URBAN APPEAL

Encourage relevant partners to collaborate in the promotion of the urban tourism offer, including the development of conference and meeting facilities in key locations; the curation of key festivals and events; the implementation of downtown enhancement schemes, and the promotion of local and regional cuisine.

SPORTS TOURISM

Develop a sports tourism strategy that identifies core facilities, the types of events and markets that these facilities could attract, key sporting events to target, and a coordinated approach to attracting and servicing events over the next 10 years.

WINTER ADVENTURES

Prepare an inventory and assessment of current winter tourism assets, products, services, and festivals. Establish the gaps in provision and identify location specific opportunities for a range of winter activities that will extend the season.

THEME 5 CONTINUED	<p>BIKE IT</p> <p>Within the context of the Northern BC Mountain Bike Strategy, identify the gaps that need to be filled and associated investments required to advance the development of this experience. Further develop mountain biking in areas of Northeastern BC that have what it takes to provide a competitive offer.</p>	<p>OPEN FOR BUSINESS</p> <p>Raise awareness amongst local businesses about the importance of having consistent business hours and quality service. Introduce experience development and ambassador programs that can help businesses meet and exceed visitor expectations in terms of facilities, services, and experiences.</p>	<p>FINGER ON THE PULSE</p> <p>Informed by robust research, ensure that future product and/or experience development and services meet the needs of international visitors from both existing and emerging markets</p>
THEME 6	MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER: TOURISM WORKFORCE		
	<p>RECRUIT, RETAIN & RECOGNIZE</p> <p>Develop a Northeastern BC tourism labour market strategy to address recruitment and retention issues and skill gaps. Work with relevant partners to enhance the experience of volunteering, through initiatives such as recognition and training programs that build volunteer capacity.</p>	<p>FUTURE-PROOF</p> <p>Work with other regions and the government of BC on initiatives to help mitigate issues regarding succession planning and business continuity for tourism businesses. Identify and promote programs that provide entrepreneurial training and guidance, including those provided by Community Futures, Small Business BC, Aboriginal Business Development, and colleges.</p>	

4 GEARING UP

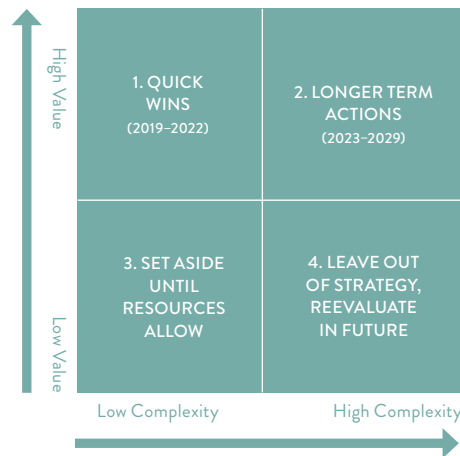
SUCCESS NETWORKS

This strategy is intended to inform actions for the future, which over time may be embedded in the local, regional, and provincial decision making. 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 Northeastern BC 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 are identified as well and will inform the regional and provincial destination development strategies.



LIARD RIVER HOT SPRINGS PROVINCIAL PARK
Photo: Andrew Strain



CATALYST PROJECTS

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

Simply the Best: Core Iconic Features

- Identify current and future remarkable experiences that exist or that can be developed around the Top Iconic Features. Prepare a plan and schedule for developing, profiling, and linking these experiences as a Northeastern BC Iconic Features initiative over the next 10 years. This should include sub-plans for each of the five iconic feature areas.
- Coordinate key attractions and events in nearby communities with the iconic features, to develop and link the top iconic features and related experiences with nearby communities, including their key events and attractions.

A Shared Agenda: Collaboration, Engagement, and Resources

- Under the auspices of the Northern BC Tourism Association, establish a committee, with a dedicated position, to develop communications tools to ensure that progress regarding destination development and the implementation of the 10-year strategy is communicated regularly.
- Host events/forums featuring relevant and inspirational guest speakers, professional development, and initiatives that will help coordinate implementation of the 10-Year Destination Development Strategy. Piggyback on existing events, where feasible.
- Working with the Indigenous Tourism Association of British Columbia, Treaty 8 members, and other relevant organizations, and observing protocols of First

Nations, develop a work plan aimed at engaging interested First Nations in destination development strategies and initiatives.

- Provide resources to establish a mechanism (dedicated person, committee and/or group) to coordinate and monitor the implementation of destination development priorities.
- Establish a position which identifies source funding for priority destination development initiatives and coordinates priorities for relevant provincial ministries to assist with their funding decisions.

Support System: Positive Operating Environment

- Conduct initiatives to increase awareness about the value of tourism, with targeted audiences including local and regional governments, First Nations governments, and residents (who are taxpayers and can influence government). This will include first estimating the value of tourism for regional districts and then for Northeastern BC.
- Using the value of tourism results, work with local and regional governments to secure more consistent support for tourism. Look to examples where this has been done effectively, such as on Vancouver Island through the Tourism Association of Vancouver Island (TAVI). Focus on infrastructure, amenities, and civic attractiveness that benefit residents as well as tourists.

On Track: Infrastructure and Transportation

- Work with Recreation Sites and Trails BC to determine priorities regarding investments in, and coordination of, priority trail networks.
- Continue working with local and regional governments, the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNR), BC Parks, Parks Canada, and the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board to encourage investment in, and coordination of, priority trail networks, including the identification of the stories behind many historic trails.
- Build on the ongoing work of Spinal Cord Injury BC (SCIBC) to ensure that the Access North initiative receives strong support from municipalities, regional districts, provincial government agencies, tourism operators, and other relevant associations in Northeastern BC. Where appropriate, coordinate research efforts (e.g., audits of roadside amenities) to ensure that universal design amenities and other amenities are provided to support the touring market. Coordinate this work with efforts to develop thematic corridors.

4 GEARING UP

A Compelling Offer: Experience Development

- Proactively connect with First Nations to determine levels of interest in developing authentic tourism experiences. This should be done in a manner that respects the protocols of First Nations.
- Provide economic supports, capacity-building and/or education, research, and guidance to Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs who are interested in enhancing an existing business or starting a new tourism business.
- Invest in updated research to guide product and experience development to help ensure that experiences meet current and future market demand.
- Hold an annual product and/or experience development forum that can be attended in-person or as a webinar.
- Conduct and, if relevant, apply research on best practices related to offering an enriching experience to visitors and residents through museums. This should tie into the product and/or experience development forum.
- Prepare an accommodation feasibility and investment strategy, which assesses key locations where unique resort, cabin, and RV accommodations could be developed to support circle routes, thematic corridors, and the iconic features and wonders of Northeastern BC.
- Develop a sports tourism strategy that identifies core facilities, the types of events and markets that these facilities can attract, key sporting events to target, and a coordinated approach to attracting and servicing events over the next 10 years.
- Develop a clear understanding of existing winter tourism experiences, which can help extend tourism into winter. To do this, prepare an inventory and assessment of current winter tourism assets, products, services, and festivals.
- Given the long-term outlook of the Destination Development Strategy, there is a need to monitor research related to international markets, including both existing and emerging markets, to ensure that Northeastern BC can enhance existing products and/or experiences and develop new products and services that will meet and exceed visitor expectations.

MUSKWA-KECHIKA ADVENTURES

Photo: Taylor Burk



LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Read the Northeastern BC Destination Development Strategy
or reach us at:

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FRONT COVER PHOTO: FORT NELSON, Ryan Dickie

MUNCHO LAKE PROVINCIAL PARK
Photo: Andrew Strain