TOURISM 101

Tourism and Community Development

Prince George

Introduction: Tourism's Value Proposition

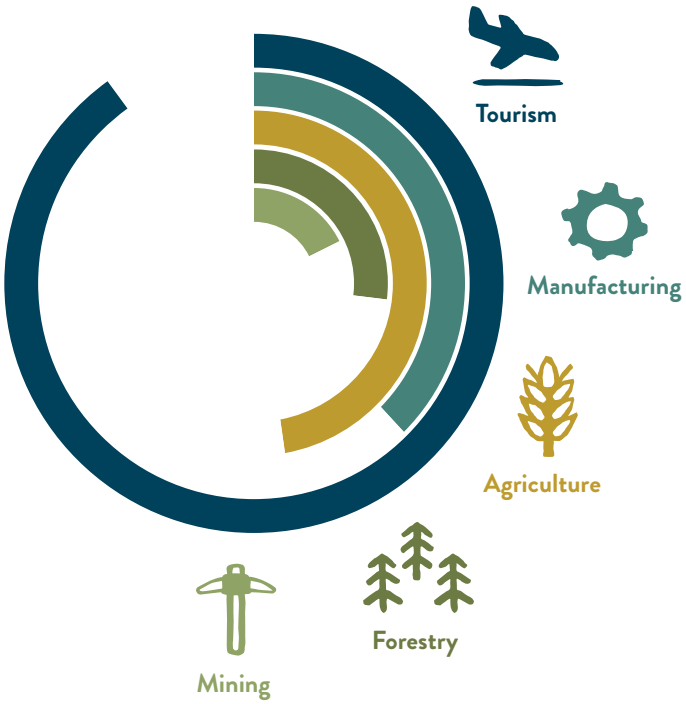
From remote and rugged archipelagos to cities on the edge of nature, there is an abundance of unique communities in British Columbia. Vancouver to Vanderhoof, Daajing Giids to Golden, Tsawwassen to Trail. No matter what community you think of, tourism has the potential to increase the quality of life for all residents and enhance their visitor economy.

Tourism in British Columbia helps drive the economy while contributing to community development and cultural enrichment. Tourism also acts as a catalyst for social, civic, cultural, and political growth, allowing its benefits to spread far beyond the visitor economy. The province's approach to tourism is characterized by its adaptability across different community sizes and aspirations, ensuring that each area can leverage tourism to its full potential.

This resource explores the varied impacts of tourism in BC, demonstrating how the industry contributes to the social fabric and economic vitality of the province and the communities within. From boosting local economies and creating job opportunities, to preserving ecological values and cultural heritage, tourism in BC supports the amenities and services that help communities thrive.

Not every community can have a mill, mine, or manufacturing plant, but they can have a visitor economy based on their own distinct destination attributes. Each community can create a local visitor economy on their own terms, scale, and pace, rather than according to an industry-wide template of development. When compared to other economic base sectors, tourism offers host communities considerable local control over the scale and scope of development.

Degree of local and community influence on sector investment and development



Source: Lions Gate Consulting, estimates based on multiple industry studies.

The Benefits of Tourism

Tourism benefits can be economic, socio-cultural, and ecological. This might look like:

- Economic diversification through the injection of tourism dollars into local economies;
- Providing platforms for cultural exchange, such as events, local festivals, and public gatherings;
- Infrastructure development that caters to both visitors and residents, such as improvements in transportation, public spaces, recreational facilities, and services like healthcare and education;
- An increase in employment opportunities through job creation in a wide range of sectors;
- Environmental stewardship through the promotion and carrying out of environmental awareness and conservation activities; or,
- Greater political capital and civic engagement leading to stronger advocacy for local interests.

Tourism also brings the benefit of choice: it's accessible to any community and offers them a greater degree of influence on sector investment and development, allowing them to shape their own future.

Let's take a closer look at some of these benefits. To help with some of the concepts, we'll use the example of a fictitious community that we'll call Your Town.

The Economic Benefits of Tourism

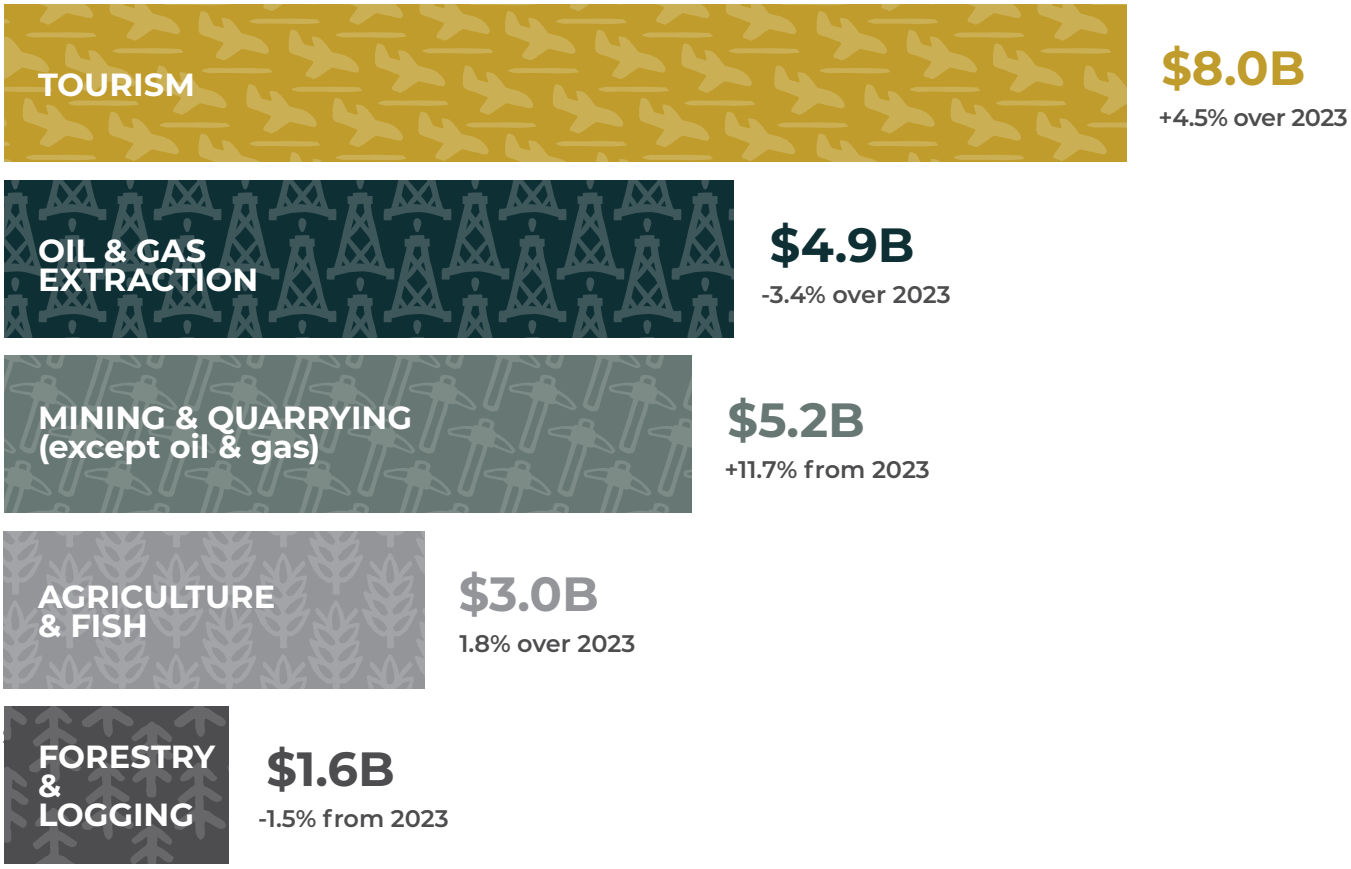
In our previous resource on the visitor economy, we explored how tourism creates direct, indirect, and induced economic benefits for communities. Tourism in BC plays a significant role in the province's economic landscape, generating substantial revenues that contribute to its financial health and vitality. This enables further investment in public services and infrastructure. The local impacts of tourism span direct visitor spending in accommodations, dining, and retail, to broader economic enhancements through the tourism-supported supply chain, such as local agriculture and construction.

Tourism is emerging as an important cultural and economic force for Indigenous people. Indigenous people are involved in owning and operating a wide array of tourism businesses that contribute to the wide range of tourism offerings in BC, and also provide a source of income for Indigenous communities, supporting economic development and sharing of cultural experiences. Assessing Indigenous tourism's impact goes beyond fiscal transactions, recognizing the value of cultural exchange and knowledge preservation.

Additionally, tourism acts as a lever for community development, supporting the enhancement of local amenities and infrastructure, thereby improving the quality of life for both residents and visitors. Altogether, the ripple effects of tourism contribute to economic growth, cultural vitality, and continuous community advancement.

Masset

GDP BY PRIMARY RESOURCE INDUSTRY



Source: BC Stats, 2024
To find the latest statistics, see the *Value of Tourism Report* in the Destination BC Research & Insights Hub in the Industry Performance section.

Let's take our example. Maya travelled to Your Town for a mountain biking weekend with her friends. She loved the hotel, found a great restaurant for dinner and enjoyed a chance encounter with a local farmer. Between her and her three friends, they spent over $1,000 in the community that weekend. When she went to work on Monday, Maya decided to hold her staff meeting at the same hotel a month later at a cost of over $15,000. Those funds supported residents through staff wages, supported the farmer through food procurement, supported the local bus company by renting it as a shuttle for an evening event, and supported the local museum where the event was held.

For up-to-date information on tourism gross domestic product (GDP) see the "Value of Tourism Report" in the Destination BC Research & Insights Hub in the Industry Performance section.

> Most tourism businesses are locally-owned, small and medium enterprises that directly contribute to local economies.

Smithers

Terrace

TOURISM BUSINESSES

16,925

tourism-related businesses were in operation in BC in 2024, a 0.4% increase over 2023.

Number of tourism-related businesses in operation at a single point in time in 2023 (December 2023).

TOURISM EMPLOYMENT

113,760

people were employed in tourism-related businesses in 2024, a +1.5% increase over 2023.

Number of jobs that tourism spending supports.

Which of these economic considerations can you take action on within your community?

- Offer competitive wages
- Encourage year-round visitation
- Incorporate tourism as part of a larger economic strategy
- Manage growth to ensure cost of living remains stable for residents

For up-to-date information on tourism businesses and employment, see the "Value of Tourism Report" in the Destination BC Research & Insights Hub in the Industry Performance section.

The Sustainable Economics of Tourism

The tourism industry can provide competitive wages, ensuring the local workforce can thrive in the places they work and create sustainable economies in visitor-centric communities. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) throughout BC work to promote year-round visitation to help stabilize employment and revenue. The Government of BC also conscientiously manages tourism growth to maintain affordability for residents, including measures to regulate housing markets and match infrastructure development with the needs of a growing visitor base. This mindful approach to integrating tourism into the wider economy is part of BC's commitment to ensuring a strong economy, a healthy society, and environmental care go hand in hand.

Vancouver

The Socio-Cultural Benefits of Tourism

Tourism creates a complex system of benefits that go beyond the dollar. Many of these are socio-cultural benefits, such as:

- Protection and preservation of ecological values;
- Encouragement of learning, and preservation and interpretation of heritage assets;
- Adoption of new technologies;
- Truth and reconciliation through tourism; and,
- Diversity through tourism.

The Protection and Preservation of Ecological Values

Ecological preservation in BC means ensuring the continued vitality of the natural environment, including rainforests, coastlines, deserts, oceans, lakes, rivers, grasslands and mountains. While these are incredible assets for a tourism destination, they cannot be taken for granted. By championing ecological stewardship as a feature of the visitor experience, BC's tourism industry can ensure this natural beauty will captivate and inspire for generations to come.

Fort Nelson

In this way, tourism can be a vehicle for education and empowerment. Interpretive trails and eco-tours turn visitors into active, environmentally-conscious participants. With the support of tourism revenues, community-led conservation efforts showcase the role of local custodianship in maintaining biodiversity and ecosystems, while cultural events adopting sustainable practices reinforce ecological stewardship.

Encouraging Learning and Heritage Asset Preservation

Each visit to BC can be an immersive lesson in history, where heritage sites share living stories, museums, and cultural centres act as the torchbearers of tradition, and guided historical tours offer a path through time. The engagement of visitors with these historical assets encourages their preservation while providing necessary funding. In much the same way, active participation in cultural festivities and patronage of local arts translates into tangible support for ongoing conservation efforts. This continuous cultural exchange deepens visitors' understanding and strengthens their experiences, as well as promoting the diverse heritage in BC on the world stage.

West Kelowna

Adoption of New Technologies

Tourism in British Columbia readily embraces the adoption of new technologies, enhancing the visitor experience while spreading benefits to local residents. For example, innovative technologies like augmented reality (AR) can bring historical sites to life, allowing visitors to see the past unfold before their eyes, while interactive apps provide self-guided tours and in-depth knowledge in many languages. These technologies not only make learning more inclusive and engaging for visitors but also aid in the interpretation and management of heritage assets, offering alternative ways to experience culture that reduce the physical impact on sensitive sites.

Truth and Reconciliation Through Tourism

Tourism plays an important societal role in bringing people together and sharing the true stories of British Columbia. Authentic Indigenous cultural experiences invite the feeling of connection with all things and create greater cultural understanding. They are transformative experiences that create lasting memories and are the highlight of a traveller's journey. Tourism is a path to lasting, meaningful reconciliation and building stronger connections with Indigenous Peoples, communities, and cultures.

> The tourism industry welcomes people of all nationalities, abilities, religions, genders, ages, and income levels. It is also a major employer of young people, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, and segments of society under-represented in other industries.

FROM WORDS TO ACTION

Destination BC's DEIA Strategy is a framework for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to shape meaningful change within our organization and across the tourism industry through our work. Our strategy embraces three core themes:

Comox Valley

Diversity in Tourism

Tourism in BC has proven itself as a promoter of diversity. This is a reflection of the province's inclusive ethos, and BC's welcoming nature extends to the industry's workforce. Employment within tourism is characterized by opportunities for a wide range of demographics, including young professionals seeking entry-level positions, individuals from various ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds, and people of all abilities. This also reinforces the province's reputation as a destination that values and celebrates diversity.

> Did you know? Destination BC has a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Strategy. You can read it here.

Let's go back to Your Town. Charlie recently found out his grandmother and great-grandmother grew up in Your Town. During his summer holidays, Charlie drove from Coquitlam to Your Town to learn more about where his ancestors were from. As part of his road trip, he listened to a podcast about the First Nation and the territory he was travelling to. He learned about the residential school that was there and what the local community has been doing to act on truth and reconciliation by transforming the old school building into a gallery to showcase talented local artists. When Charlie arrived in Your Town, he visited the gallery and bought some art as his own act of reconciliation. Then he visited the cultural centre to learn about the cultural heritage that was being protected—masks, totem poles, and regalia. While there, he met an elder that remembered his grandmother and shared many stories of when the two of them were friends. The visit to Your Town opened him up to a new way of travelling, deepening his understanding of the people and place.

Which of these socio-cultural considerations can you take action on within your community?

- Encourage dispersion across your community
- Prioritize community access to resources
- Protect local culture and customs
- Educate visitors on local culture and customs
- Encourage visitors to interact with locals

Squamish

Invest in Iconics: A Strategic Approach to Sustainable Tourism in British Columbia

For decades, the tourism industry has worked hard to attract visitors during non-peak seasons, and to entice visitors to travel throughout the entire province. Despite best efforts, the results have been limited: while the industry as a whole has grown, the challenge of growing visitation to more parts of the province, and through more seasons where capacity exists, has not been overcome. This perpetuates challenges for businesses in attracting and retaining year-round staff, and generating enough revenues to put aside emergency funds to manage the unpredictable nature of entrepreneurship.

British Columbia's "Invest in Iconics" strategy, initiated by Destination BC, represents a groundbreaking approach to redefining tourism in the province. Together with the support of Indigenous Tourism BC, Regional DMOs, the tourism industry, and communities throughout the province, Destination BC is branding, marketing, and supporting the development of globally compelling routes and places that span the entire province of British Columbia.

This strategy provides the opportunity to re-imagine British Columbia—creating iconic, inspirational routes and places that will strengthen travel appeal in all regions of BC, in all seasons. Long-term, this strategy balances the capacity needs and market-readiness of communities—focusing on shoulder-season growth in cities and mature destinations, while fostering all-season growth in high-potential communities and rural destinations where capacity exists.

To learn more about the Invest in Iconics strategy, please click here.

Ecological Benefits of Tourism

Dispersion and Business Locations

The ecological benefits of tourism in British Columbia are significantly enhanced by the strategic dispersion of tourism businesses beyond bustling Vancouver-Lower Mainland, a practice that alleviates environmental pressures on urban centers and brings benefits to more remote and rural areas. Many tourism businesses throughout all six tourism regions benefit from this strategy.

These regions each have their own unique ecological and cultural attributes. They host a variety of tourism enterprises ranging from eco-lodges and adventure tourism companies to vineyards and cultural heritage sites. By encouraging visitors to explore less frequented areas, we can collectively mitigate the environmental impact on any single location and promote more balanced economic development across the province.

> More than half of tourism businesses (60%) are located in the Vancouver, Coast and Mountains region. Vancouver Island (16%) and the Thompson-Okanagan (12%) have the largest number of businesses outside the Vancouver, Coast and Mountains region.

Number of tourism-related businesses in operation at a single point in time in 2024 (December 2024).

Hope

Responsible Ecological Introduction of Tourism

With an ecological environment as incredible as the one in BC, the tourism industry must coexist harmoniously with nature. This includes diligent water and land use management, where resources are utilized sustainably to support tourism activities without depleting or damaging local ecosystems. The preservation of ecosystems is paramount, with concerted efforts to protect wildlife habitats, forests, and waterways, ensuring that the natural beauty and biodiversity that attract visitors remain unspoiled.

Infrastructure development in visitor areas is carefully planned. Investment in initiatives such as carbon offset programs and the promotion of eco-friendly tourism practices also aligns with the growing demand for sustainable travel options. Additionally, the concept of community carrying capacity is deeply ingrained in BC's tourism strategy; this involves understanding and managing the number of visitors that an area can accommodate without compromising the quality of life for residents or the visitor experience.

By considering the social, environmental, and infrastructural limits of tourism, BC ensures that tourism growth is sustainable and beneficial to both the environment and communities. Together, these measures create a responsible ecological framework for tourism in BC, demonstrating a commitment to preserving the natural heritage in the province for future generations.

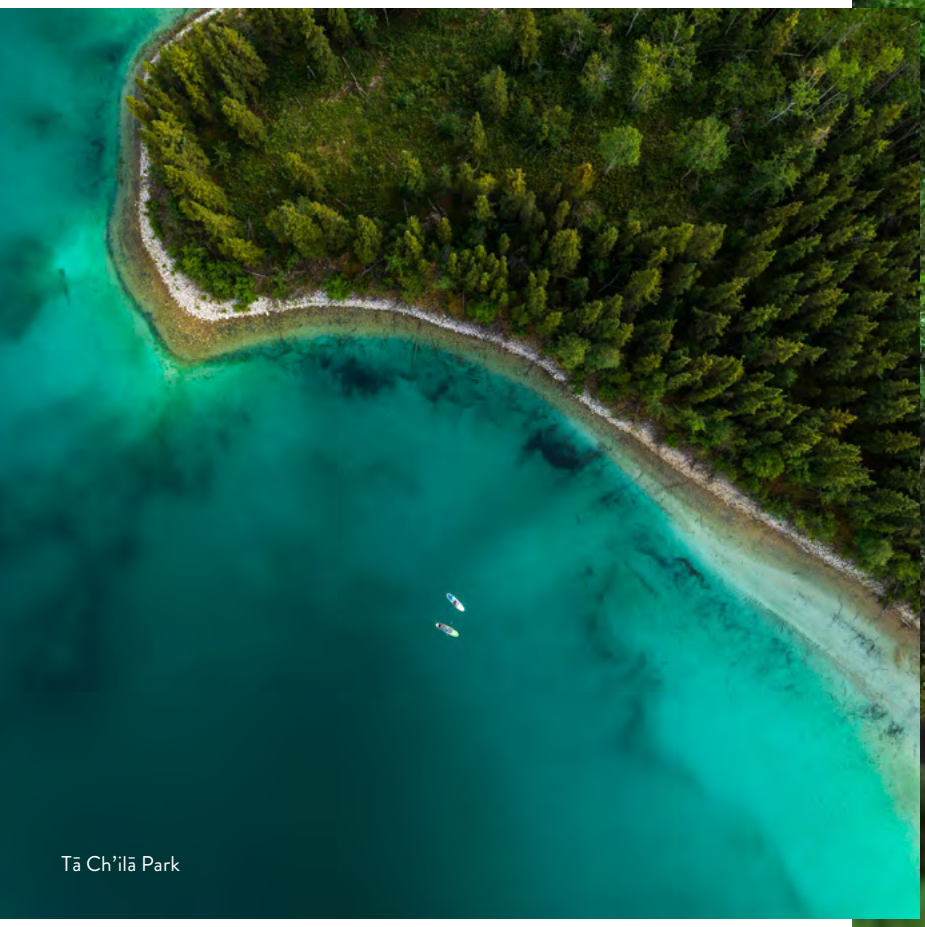
Here's another example. Amal had never travelled to Your Town before and didn't really know what to expect. She didn't plan to do too much as she wanted to just relax and spend the weekend in the cabin she rented. While shopping at the local grocery store, Amal noticed a poster on the community bulletin board inviting visitors to a beach cleanup. The next morning, Amal walked to the beach, leaving her electric vehicle in the driveway. After two hours of filling three bags of garbage removed from the shoreline with new friends, she was ready for a hot bath. Just as she was turning on the tap, she read a sign requesting visitors

Wilderness Lake

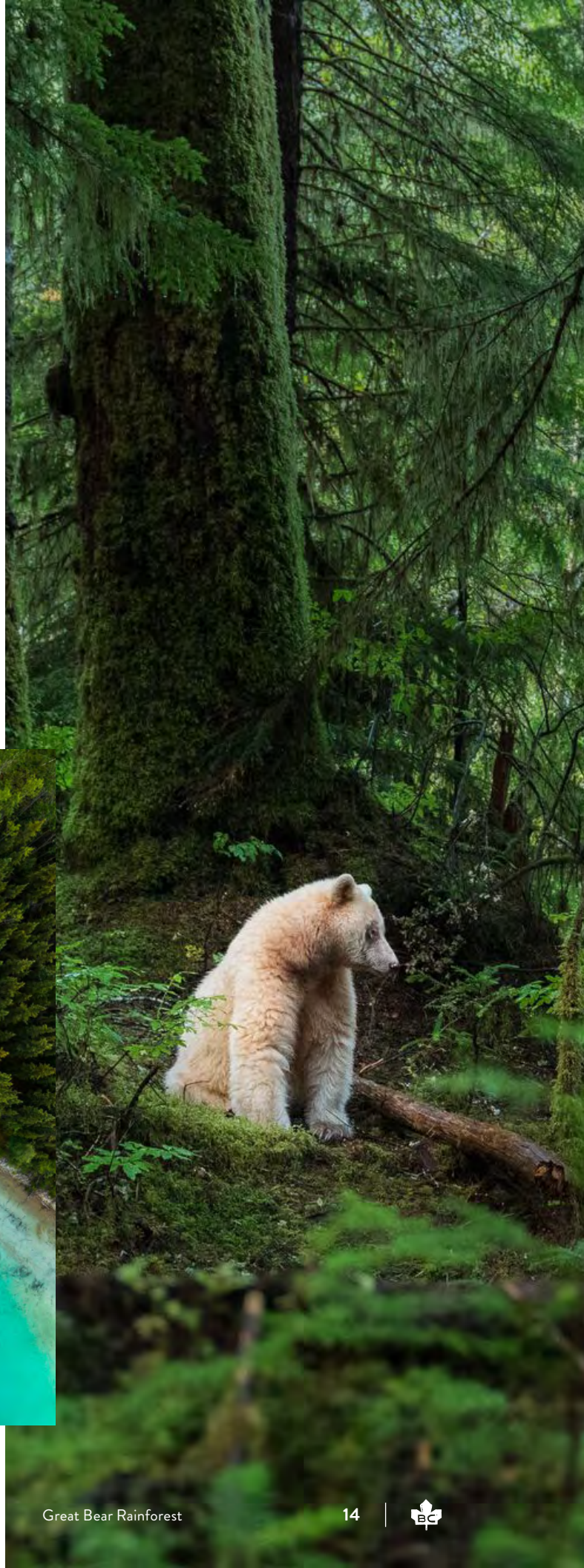
to reduce water consumption due to a water shortage. Amal happily opted for a quick shower instead, and then went online to donate to the local organization who organized the cleanup.

Which of these ecological considerations can you take action on within your community?

- Manage water and land use
- Manage ecosystems to ensure their preservation
- Reinforce infrastructure to manage pollution (public transport, EV chargers), litter (increased garbage and recycling facilities), and noise
- Invest in climate change mitigation strategies



Tā Ch'ilā Park



CASE STUDY

TRANSITIONING TO TOURISM

HOW TOFINO IS BALANCING TOURISM GROWTH AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Sitting in the picturesque setting of Pacific Rim National Park and Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Region, Tofino is a global tourism success story. Made up of Hesquiaht, Ahousaht and Tla-o-qui-aht traditional territories and with a permanent population of about 2,500, this community on Vancouver Island is famous around the world for its surfing, storm watching, and supernatural beauty. But this success hasn't come easy–facing affordability, infrastructure, and housing challenges as well as growing crowds, it's the smart planning of Tofino's rights holders, businesses, and other community members that are ensuring the sustainability of its tourism industry.

In the 1980s and '90s, Tofino witnessed a transformation. The town, traditionally reliant on resource extraction like logging, embarked on a journey towards a more sustainable future through tourism. This shift aligned with the global movement towards environmental conservation and offered a new path for economic development.

Tourism in Tofino surged. The newly designated Pacific Rim National Park Reserve drew visitors looking to reconnect with nature, and significant resort developments like the Wickaninnish Inn gave them a place to stay. By 2018, visitor numbers soared to 600,000 annually, bringing $295 million into the local economy and supporting thousands of jobs. Tofino had successfully reinvented itself as a premier tourist destination.

This incredible success also brought challenges. The influx of visitors pushed the limits of Tofino's rural infrastructure. Housing affordability became a critical issue, exacerbated by the rise of short-term vacation rentals. The town's small land base and limited services struggled to keep pace with the demands of a booming visitor economy.

In response to these challenges, the community, First Nations, and municipal government in Tofino took proactive steps. The Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation introduced a 1% ecosystem service fee on all transactions to support a guardian program and ensure that the Nation benefits from economic activities on tribal park land.

Initiatives like the "Every Drop of Water Counts" campaign and strict bylaws on vacation rentals demonstrated a commitment to sustainable tourism. The community rallied around initiatives such as the Get Wild! program, which encouraged Tofino restaurateurs to source only wild salmon, as well as Surfrider's "Straws Suck" campaign and Flash Clean Friday beach clean ups. These underscored a grassroots commitment to environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

The conversation on sustainable tourism has also remained strategic. In 2019, the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust and the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District joined forces to host the Vital Conversation on Sustainable Tourism. It brought people together from businesses, First Nations, not-for-profit organizations, and government to discuss tourism. Three years later, Tourism Tofino's Strategic Business Plan (2022–2027) reflects a deepened commitment to sustainable tourism. By focusing on off-peak season growth and integrating quality of life measures for residents, Tofino aims to balance economic development with environmental integrity and community health.

Tofino's journey from a resource-based economy to a thriving tourism hub is a story of adaptation and resilience. The community's balanced approach, mixing policy and action, aims to ensure tourism development is sustainable, responsible, and in harmony with the needs of both residents and the environment.

Pacific Rim National Park

CASE STUDY

BUILDING TRAILHEADS

HOW BURNS LAKE DIVERSIFIED ITS RURAL ECONOMY THROUGH MOUNTAIN BIKING

With a unique Indigenous heritage and a regional population of about 6,500, Burns Lake is at a crossroads of transformation. The village, nestled east of Prince George on Highway 16, was once a forest-dependent community. Now, Burns Lake is reshaping its identity and economic base amidst the challenges of industry consolidation and natural calamities, such as the mountain pine beetle epidemic and the tragic 2012 Babine Forest Products mill explosion.

Once the community's economic backbone, the shifting forestry sector has spurred the need for economic diversification. Tourism previously played a minor role in the village, primarily attracting visitors for fishing, hunting, and camping; now, it was poised for expansion. Municipal government, economic development agencies, and community organizations began exploring new avenues, among them an outdoor activity that was gaining popularity across North America: mountain biking.

In 2006, Burns Lake's mountain biking scene was obscure even to those in Northwest BC. However, a group of dedicated enthusiasts recognized its potential. That year, the formation of the Burns Lake Mountain Bike Association (BLMBA) marked the trailhead of the village's transition to tourism. This not-for-profit organization aimed to manage the land, advocate for trail users, and promote biking education and opportunities.

Under the guidance of BLMBA, Burns Lake witnessed the development of an extensive trail network at nearby Boer Mountain. Facilities included a skills park, cross-country and downhill trails, a 4-cross track, and a jump park, largely established by volunteers. These multi-access trails, complemented by camping and lake activities at Kager Lake, became a hub for not just bikers but also hikers, runners, and nature enthusiasts. The annual Big Pig Mountain Bike Festival further cemented Burns Lake's position as a mountain biking community.

BLMBA's vision of making Burns Lake a vibrant mountain biking community and world class destination is largely realized. The village is increasingly known for its family-friendly riding and received international media exposure through BIKE Magazine, the RIDE GUIDE on TV, the PINKBIKE website, and Reader's Digest. The Fall 2013 issue of Explore Magazine included the Burns Lake trails as one of the 25 essential 'All-Canadian Bucket List' activities.

The impact of mountain biking in Burns Lake went beyond leisure. Local businesses like restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, and gas stations saw increased patronage from trail visitors. Capital investments and operating expenditures to build and maintain the trails were felt throughout the community. The trail system also created community volunteerism, contributing to local socio-economic benefits. With its rising popularity as a mountain biking destination, Burns Lake now faces the challenge of maintaining and expanding its trail infrastructure to match the growing influx of visitors. The community acknowledges the need for further investments to support the trail system, which has become a vital part of the local tourism economy.

Burns Lake's journey in rebranding itself through the development of multi-use trails on Boer Mountain is a story of community resilience and innovation. Mountain biking, complementing the traditional hunting and fishing tourism offer, has become a significant contributor to economic diversification in Burns Lake. The success of this initiative is not just measured in economic terms but also in the enhanced physical and mental well-being of residents, social cohesion, and a renewed sense of pride and ownership within the community.

Burns Lake

Summary

Tourism in BC has a multifaceted value proposition. It contributes significantly to community development and the enrichment of social, civic, cultural, and political capital–and this is in addition to its force as an economic driver. It also encompasses more complex concepts such as social cohesion, economic diversification, infrastructural enhancements, and employment opportunities. On a community level, the impacts of tourism are profound, and BC's strategic approach to responsible tourism growth focuses on balancing community well-being and cultural integrity by encompassing strategies like visitor dispersion.

Socio-cultural benefits such as the preservation of ecological values, the preservation of heritage assets, and the adoption of new technologies can quietly reverberate throughout whole societies. Tourism also plays a critical role in truth and reconciliation through Indigenous storytelling and Indigenous-led participation. Social and cultural diversity in tourism reflects the sector's inclusive nature. The benefits of tourism make it an attractive industry for many people, places, and cultures. When combined, tourism's economic benefits, inclusivity, cultural exchange, and environmental stewardship can lead to strong economies and healthy societies.

Next: Globally Competitive Destinations

To learn more about the Globally Competitive Destinations, please click here.

Summerland

For additional information and comments, please contact the Destination and Industry Development team at Destination BC by email at destinationandindustrydevelopment@destinationbc.ca

Mount Assiniboine Park

DESTINATION
BRITISH COLUMBIA®

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