



Case Study: Supporting the Response

HIGHWAY 4 WILDFIRE CLOSURE (SUMMER 2023) **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS ROLE: SUPPORT**

In the summer of 2023, Destination BC and tourism partners across Vancouver Island demonstrated the “support” role in action during a major transportation disruption caused by wildfire.

This case study highlights how industry partners worked together using BC’s Tourism Emergency Management framework to coordinate communications, share accurate information, and support both visitors and communities.



Highway 4 | Tourism Vancouver Island/Tourism Ucluelet/Tyler Cave



Stamp River, Alberni Valley | Tourism Vancouver Island/Alberni Valley Tourism Association/Peter O'Hara

SITUATION OVERVIEW

On June 6, 2023, a wildfire in the Cameron Lake Bluff area forced the closure of Highway 4 — the only paved route connecting Tofino, Ucluelet, and Port Alberni to Nanaimo and Victoria.

This closure occurred at the start of peak summer season, creating immediate concerns for:

- Local residents relying on the highway for essential supplies
- Visitors already in-destination
- Travellers with upcoming plans
- Tourism partners and businesses dependent on summer visitation, particularly those operating seasonally

It quickly became clear that the closure would be lengthy, requiring sustained coordination and communications support.

RESPONSE APPROACH: PARTNER-LED COORDINATION

While the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MOTI) worked to establish detour access for essential travel, tourism partners activated a coordinated response team.

Because the incident affected multiple communities within one region, the regional destination management organization (4VI) took the lead role.

LEAD ORGANIZATION

4VI provided regional leadership by:

- Providing regular updates from official information sources on the latest developments to the impacted communities.
- Coordinating efforts between partners and convening partner response calls as needed
- Amplifying messaging
- Keeping partners in the region informed

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

A wide network of organizations played important support functions, ensuring two-way communication between communities and provincial partners.

COMMUNITY DMOS AND INDIGENOUS TOURISM BC (ITBC)

Local destination management organizations and Indigenous Tourism BC supported on-the-ground response by:

- Gathering feedback from tourism operators on impacts and visitor concerns
- Communicating local needs back to the larger response group
- Sharing visitor-facing updates through consumer channels

- Preparing recovery marketing efforts for reopening

DESTINATION BC SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

Several Destination BC teams contributed to coordinated response efforts:

- Communications
 - Supported messaging alignment, response coordination, cross-organizational updates, and collaboration with the TEMC
- Social and Content
 - Adjusted planned content to avoid promoting travel to impacted areas
 - Updated the consumer-facing Know Before You Go page with accurate information and shared through social channels
- Marketing
 - Began planning recovery campaigns to activate as soon as leisure travel resumed
- Visitor Services
 - Shared updates across the Visitor Centre Network
 - Assisted travellers with rebooking and route planning
 - Responded to visitor inquiries by email

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY PARTNERS

Additional partners played key roles in ensuring tourism needs were integrated into the broader response:

- Ministry of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
 - Collected impact information to inform recovery supports
 - Worked with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MOTI) to include tourism messaging in official updates
- The Tourism Industry Association of BC (TIABC)
 - Stayed apprised to support members and conduct advocacy as needed

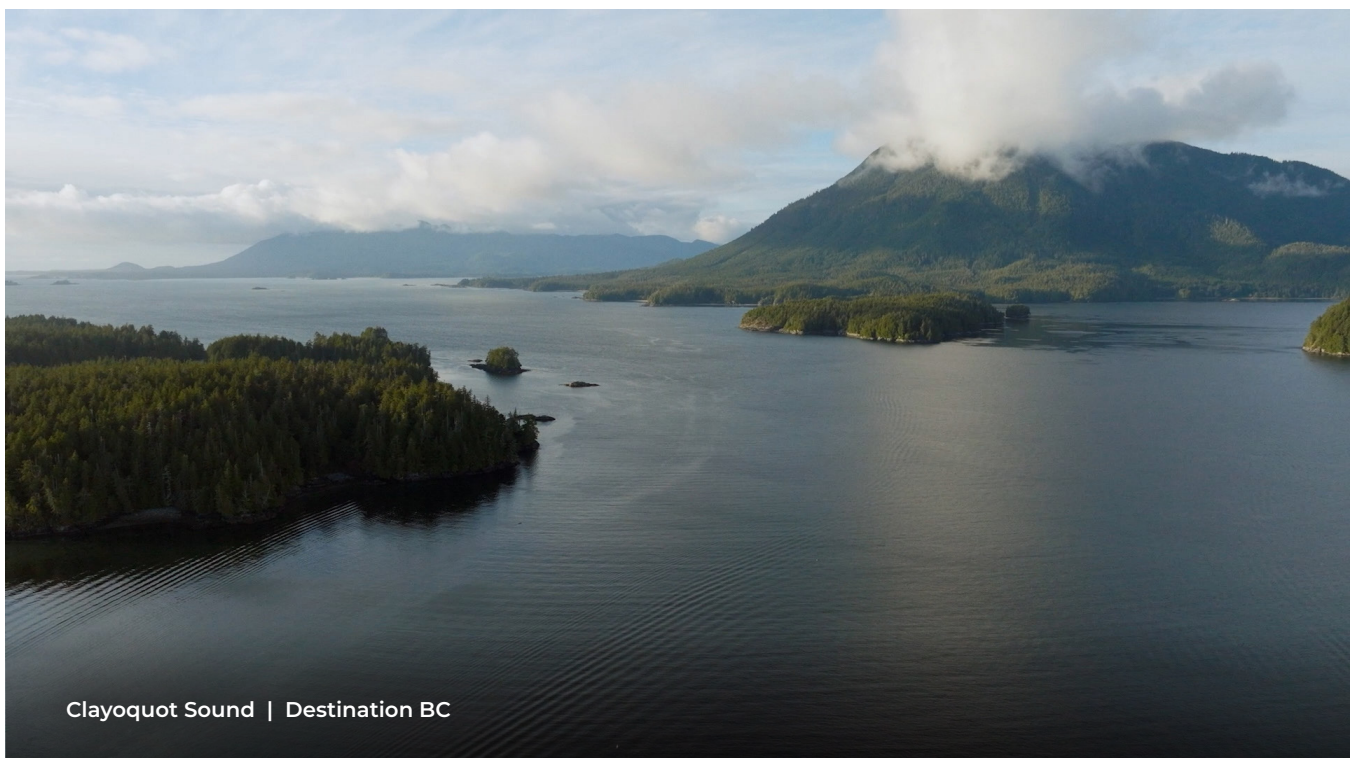
TRANSITION TO RECOVERY MESSAGING

In late July, Highway 4 reopened to single-lane alternating traffic, with scheduled closures continuing for safety work.

This marked an important shift: while access returned, visitor expectations and travel planning became critical.

COORDINATED VISITOR COMMUNICATIONS

- Destination BC and partners aligned messaging across audiences:
 - Destination BC led with Know Before You Go messaging
 - Encouraging travellers to check official sources and plan ahead
- Community DMOs promoted in-destination experiences
 - Reinforcing that communities were open
 - Setting expectations around delays
 - Using messaging such as “worth the wait”
- Amplification
 - Destination BC and 4VI amplified regional partner campaigns to support businesses



Clayoquot Sound | Destination BC

CREATIVE COMMUNICATION SOLUTIONS: REACHING VISITORS OFFLINE

Partners recognized that not all travellers would receive digital updates in real time — especially international visitors without constant mobile access.

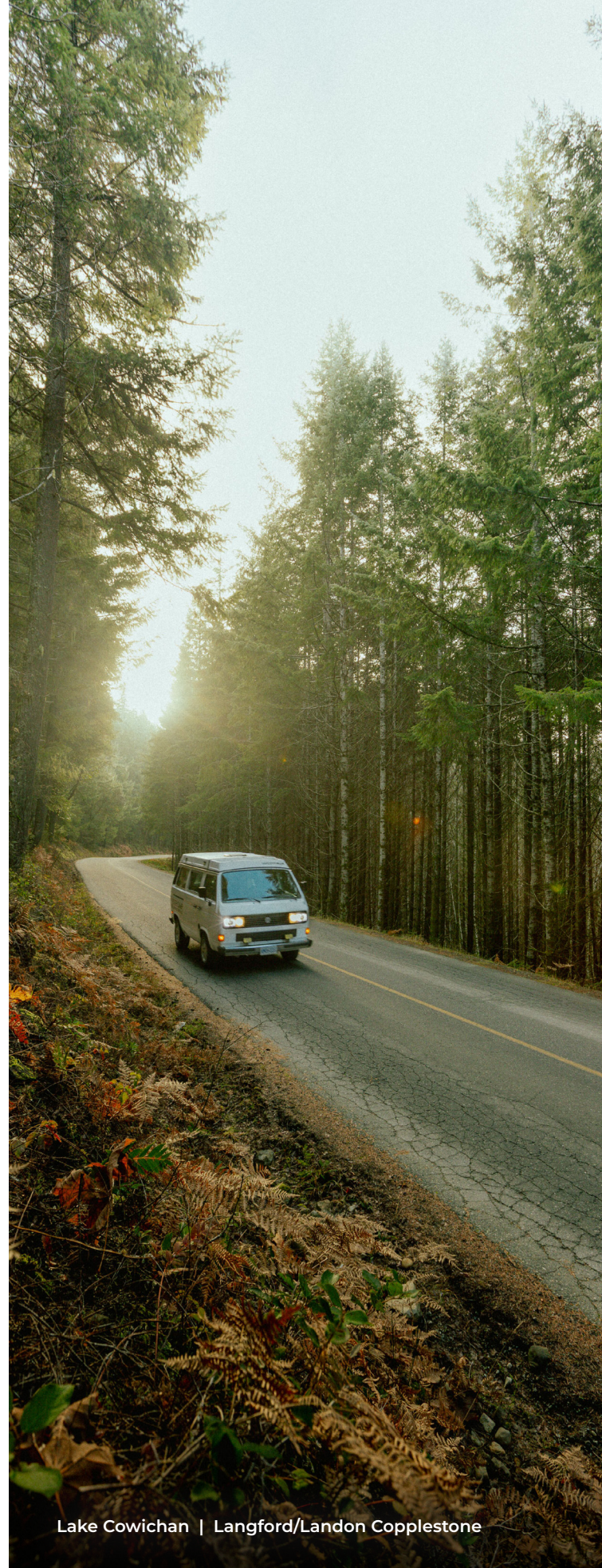
To improve awareness:

- Simple posters were created with QR codes linking directly to the DriveBC Highway 4 page
- Posters were distributed through:
 - Visitor Centres
 - Gas stations
 - Accommodations
 - Storefronts and tourism businesses

This ensured visitors could access official information while travelling.

ADDRESSING ONGOING CHALLENGES

Even with strong communications in place, some travellers navigating the partially reopened highway remained unclear about their options. A new solution was needed.



Lake Cowichan | Langford/Landon Copplestone

PARTNER COLLABORATION WITH MOTI

Since it was not safe nor feasible for tourism staff to be stationed along the highway, tourism partners worked through government counterparts to engage traffic control personnel.

Destination BC and 4VI developed a visitor messaging and resources sheet for highway flaggers to carry and reference.

This enabled flaggers to respond consistently to visitor questions, including:

- Scheduled closure information
- Where travellers could stop
- What experiences were available nearby
- Information for local Visitor Centres
- How to access official updates

This small but effective tool helped smooth the visitor journey during ongoing disruptions.

OUTCOME

On August 31, Highway 4 fully reopened to two-way traffic.

While the closure itself could not be prevented, coordinated action through the TEMC framework and partners helped reduce long-term impacts by:

- Supporting communities and tourism operators
- Providing consistent, accurate visitor messaging
- Strengthening partner collaboration across the system
- Enabling a faster transition to recovery marketing