



Cape Breton Island Northern Highlands

ADVENTURE TOURISM OPPORTUNITY STRATEGY

FINAL REPORT TO DESTINATION CAPE BRETON

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Introduction

Tourism Opportunity Strategies

Tourism Opportunity Strategies (TOS) provide direction for the sustainable development of tourism activity at a given destination with a focus on maximizing potential opportunities. A TOS assesses the current state of existing tourism products, identifies potential future opportunities, and provides strategic direction for local economic development. Conducted with the support of local economic development agencies and local tourism businesses, the Cape Breton Island Northern Highlands Adventure Tourism Opportunity Strategy is being conducted by Ross Cloutier of Bhudak Consultants Ltd. for Destination Cape Breton.

The goal of this project is to provide perspective on how local adventure tourism product relates to other national and international product as a way to gauge the ultimate success of new and existing offerings on the world stage. The project will also identify gaps in current tourism offerings and prospective new activities, new business opportunities, and attractions.



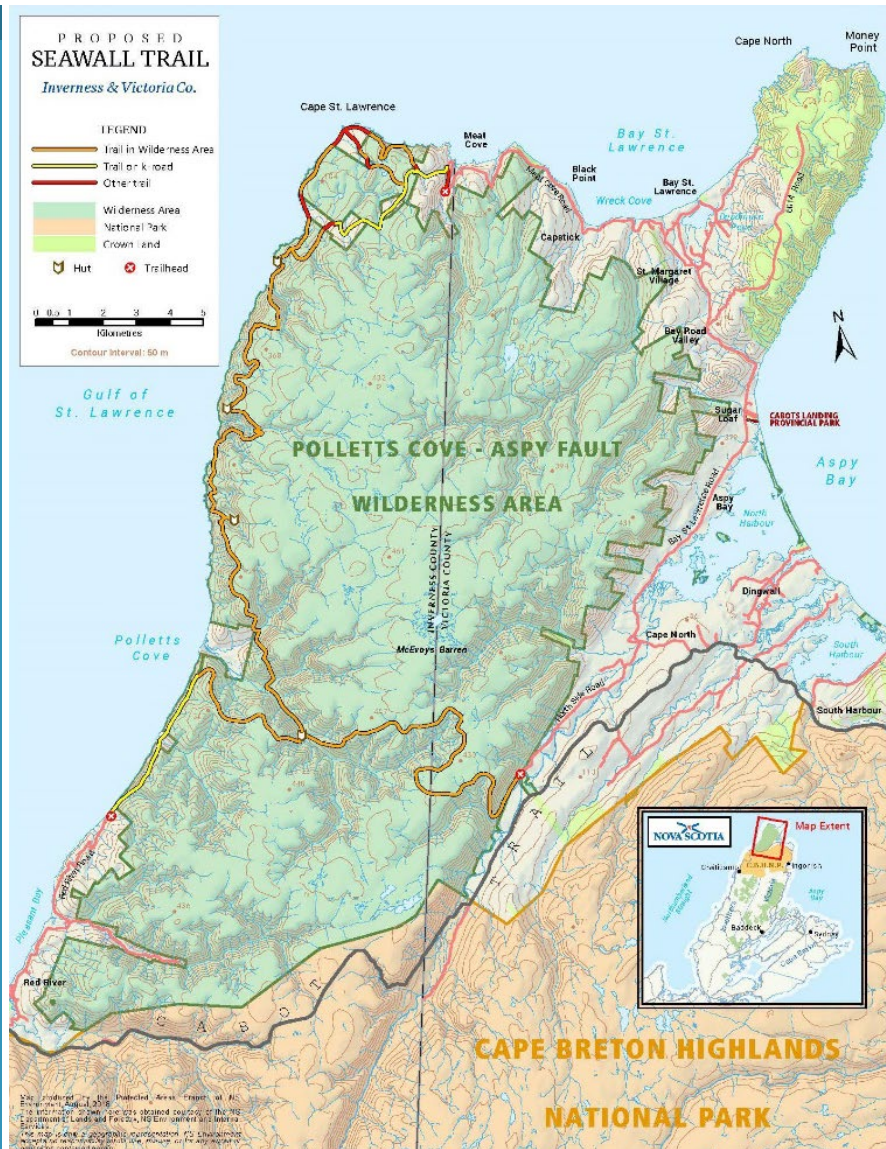
Study Area

Although this TOS will primarily focus on adventure tourism and recreation activities, it will also touch on the wide range of tourism offerings in the Northern Highlands of Cape Breton Island. The study area includes portions of Victoria and Inverness Counties, as well as the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area, Cape Breton Highlands National Park, and the communities of Neils Harbour, White Point, Dingwall, Cape North, Bay St Lawrence and Meat Cove.

While Cape Breton Island has many regions that lend themselves to varying degrees of outdoor adventure activities, from cycling to kayaking to surfing, the Northern Highlands has the potential to be a world-class adventure tourism destination. Shining a spotlight on this particular area would not only boost the small, local economy, it would also lead to more outdoor adventure opportunities for the island as a whole.

Map of the Project Study Area

(Source: Seawall Trail Society)



Methodology

Prior to preparing this report, the author visited Cape Breton on numerous occasions, including dedicated visits to the study area in June, 2018 and October, 2019. In addition to these visits, an exploration of winter activities and backcountry skiing potential was conducted during the winter of 2020, with the assistance of Pat Morrow, Robert Kennedy, Sandy Miller, Gregor Wilson, Rob Betts, Andrew Stevenson, and Martin Kejval.

Numerous one-on-one and small group interviews have been conducted with local residents and business owners, and two public meetings were held, as well as meetings with various government personnel responsible for managing or influencing decisions related to tourism development in the region. An inventory of tourism offerings in the study area has also been conducted.



Findings

General Observations

The following general observations can be made about current and future adventure tourism development in the region:

- The study area has significant natural assets that provide the backdrop for tourism and adventure tourism activities and has the potential to support much more development. For example, the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area, North and South Harbours, and Cape Breton Highlands National Park are all potential world-class destinations.
- Private land ownership between shoreline to height-of-land along the Bay St. Lawrence and Meat Cove Road corridor limits public access to the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area. This dictates that future development along this corridor will be determined, at least in part, by development and access with private landowners, unless the provincial government were to acquire strategic parcels.



Provincial Wilderness Areas



Real or perceived restrictions related to the potential commercial use of provincial wilderness areas will determine what kinds of commercial activities take place in the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area. Wilderness areas are managed differently than provincial parks, and commercial enterprises that support adventure tourism can be authorized, but the existing policy and regulatory framework is unsophisticated.

Conversations with residents of the study area pertaining to the legalities of commercial adventure tourism activity in wilderness areas suggest that local perception and provincial messaging are inconsistent and unclear.

Depending on the management philosophy of the elected government, provincial wilderness areas are natural assets that can support and promote high-yield, low-impact and sustainable adventure tourism activities; backcountry recreation opportunities; local economic development; private business and provincial revenues; a positive investment climate, and unique business models.

The process to apply for and receive commercial use permits (business licenses) in provincial wilderness areas is ill-defined, unsophisticated, and difficult to navigate. To date, commercial permits have not been encouraged and wilderness areas are not managed as an asset for economic development. This has led to uncertainty with respect to the process and confusion as to what is possible, and it will continue to discourage investment until goals, policies and regulations are defined with more clarity. Businesses need long-term tenure and economic certainty before undertaking significant investment in tourism enterprises. Without this, the sector will continue to develop small, insecure, seasonal, and unprofitable businesses that are unable to attract investment.

One of the locations with the most likely potential for multi-use and commercial development in the area is the south-to-north ridgeline that runs from Gray's Hollow to Sugarloaf, including Tenerife Mountain. The ridgeline is perfectly situated for hiking, mountain biking and backcountry skiing activities and falls within the wilderness area. This location is discussed at length further in this document.

As an example of what is possible, commercial Crown land tenure in British Columbia has been available to adventure tourism businesses for over 50 years. The vast majority of these permits are set at 30 years or more, which instills confidence and provides much-needed certainty for banks and investors. There are currently over 3,000 adventure tourism businesses with tenure in British Columbia, and long-term tenure security has formed the basis for what is now a \$3 billion-per-year industry.

Cape Breton Highlands National Park

Parks Canada has a well-defined process for business licensing and the staff at Cape Breton Highlands National Park are interested in providing more commercial services; however, residents of the Northern Highlands are, by and large, unaware of the positive impact this economic potential may have on them as individuals.

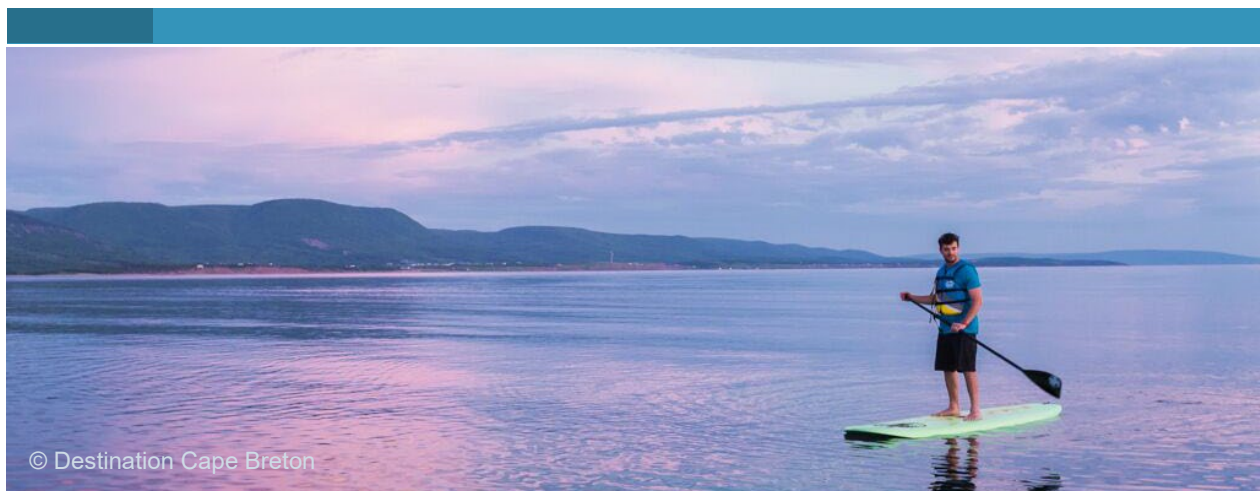
Because it is possible to acquire long-term business licenses within national parks and to benefit from the world-renowned Cape Breton Highlands National Park brand, developing adventure tourism opportunities in this location could provide more economic certainty, a marketing advantage, and a higher chance of success than in the adjoining Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area, which has none of the same supports.

Parks Canada is interested in more entrepreneurial activities in Cape Breton Highlands National Park, but without interest from Northern Highlands residents, these opportunities will default to the residents of Ingonish and Cheticamp.

Attracting Visitors to the Northern Highlands

Estimates of the number of tourists who drive the Cabot Trail range anywhere from 300,000 to 600,000 per year. This is a significant drive-by tourism market and a concerted effort should be made to steer more of these travelers north along the Dingwall, Bay St. Lawrence and White Point roads. These efforts should include clearer and more attractive signage, more polished and professional visitor information, and much more focused and engaging communication about the attractions, trails, and communities to the north.

There is a need to develop a marketable brand for the Northern Highlands. Ideally, it would leverage itself using the widely recognized Cabot Trail. Some examples include “Cabot Trail North,” “Cabot Trail Highlands,” “Top of Cape Breton Island,” and “Cape Breton Highlands.”



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The Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area is not a viable marketing idiom and should be renamed as a primary asset of the new brand. Other regions and businesses around Cape Breton are using the recognition of the Cabot Trail brand to their advantage and the Northern Highlands is in a good position to formalize this affiliation. As a related aside, Polletts Cove is not even located in the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area; more strategic branding is essential. Some examples of a very marketable brands are “Cabot Trail Wilderness Area,” “Cabot Trail Highlands Wilderness Area,” “Northern Highlands Wilderness Area,” or “Cape Breton Highlands Wilderness Area.”

Few, if any, of the adventure tourism activities found in the Northern Highlands are likely to attract a substantial international market independently. Thus, this report recommends using a cluster or critical mass development model, in which numerous assets and activities generate the necessary competitive advantage and magnitude to draw visitors to the area.

For example, a summer adventure tourism cluster comprised of hiking trails, mountain biking trails, whale watching, sea kayaking, surfing, paddle boarding, pontoon boat tours on North or South Harbour, evening beach BBQs, zip-line activities, sailing, kite-boarding, hiking-painting tours, theatre productions, music concerts, Cape Breton Highland National Park tours, etc. are all possible in the region and would form a highly marketable cluster. A very good example of the concept of an adventure tourism cluster is the “Adventure Centre” concept implemented in three separate communities throughout New Brunswick in the 1990s. Clusters need to be linked to a brand and have a marketable critical mass.

The Creation of an Iconic Attraction

A significant man-made attraction on the Cape Breton Northern Highlands would draw traffic north off the Cabot Trail. It would need to be iconic and widely recognized as worth making a detour off the Cabot Trail to spend more time in the area.

The site should match Parks Canada interpretive centres in quality and its scale should be similar to the Highland Village Museum or L’Anse aux Meadows. One local business owner has suggested this attraction be a living fisheries museum in Dingwall, White Point or Bay St. Lawrence. Another suggested it be at Cabot’s Landing Provincial Park. It could include activities and exhibits such as dory crafting, net knitting, cod salting, mackerel smoking, period costumes, live fish tanks, square dancing, and fisheries conservation, and could incorporate historical elements of local Gaelic, French and Indigenous cultures.

This attraction could also act as a Visitor Information and Activity Booking Centre, with sales operating on a commission basis to create an additional revenue stream. For example, sales of local whale watching, sea kayaking tours, mountain biking trail passes, local concerts, and much more, would all be possible.

Regardless of the theme or attraction, the general idea has merit and is the type of incentive needed to draw significant traffic, not to mention economic benefits, north of the Cabot Trail.

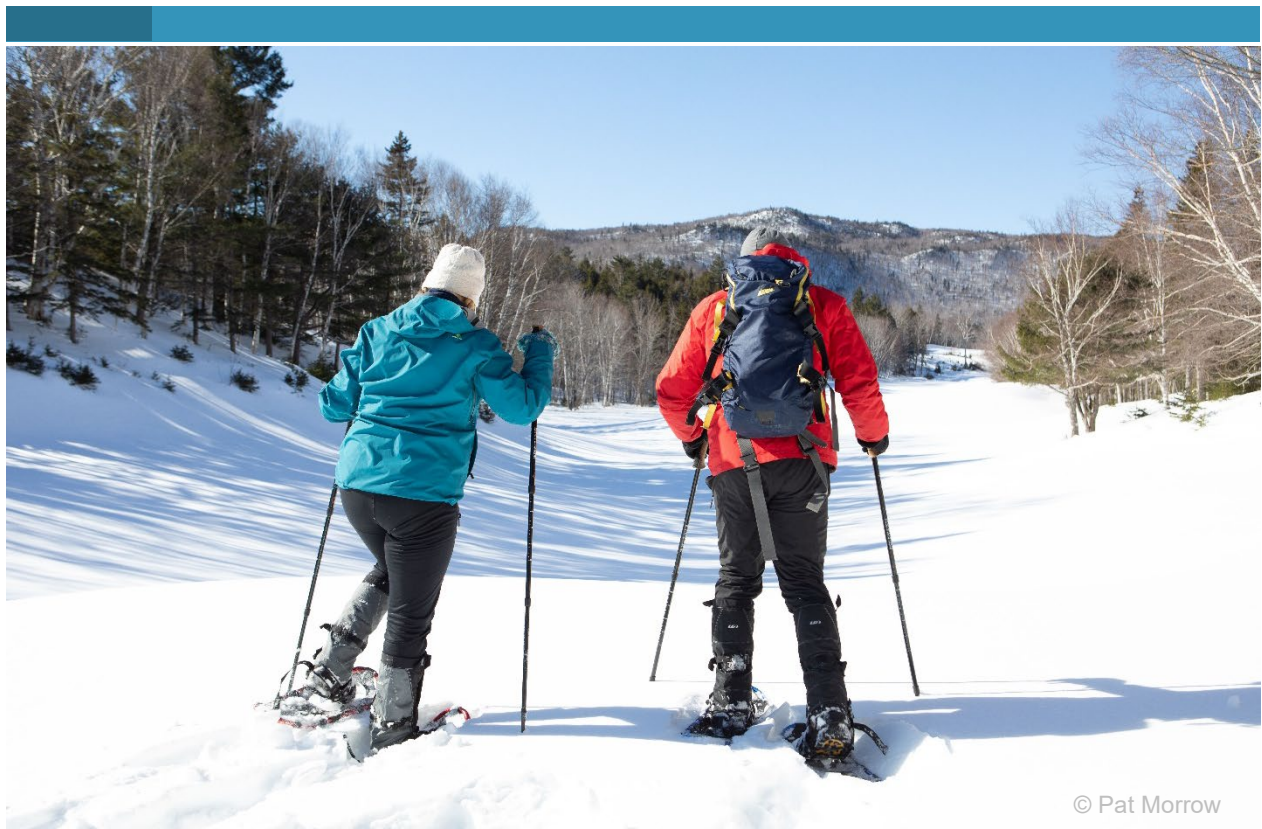
Marketing and Visitor Purchase Patterns

Generally speaking, tourists planning a trip to the Cabot Trail do not consider the Northern Highlands region when booking accommodations, guided tours, and car rentals. Instead, they tend to localize their visit in the main centres of Baddeck, Ingonish or Cheticamp, all of which have more effective marketing campaigns, modern accommodations, and user-friendly websites. Travelers then drive the loop in one or two days, without a notion to leave the Cabot Trail and head north.

Visitors need to be made aware of the tourism offerings in the Northern Highlands before or as they are planning their trip, while they are still at home. Communicating through local signage along the highway or through brochures in local visitor centres does not give travelers sufficient incentive or opportunity to change their plans in terms of accommodations and itineraries. Local brochures and signage do, however, direct traffic to quick, independent activities such as zip-lines, bungee jumping, beaches, trails and tree walks.

While it does occur late in the purchase pattern of travelers, there is considerable need for professional signage and visitor information at the junction of the Bay St. Lawrence, Dingwall and Cabot Trail Roads, with the goal of educating travelers about the recreational possibilities to the north. Existing signage is ineffective, substandard, and poorly placed.

For visitors driving the Cabot Trail, a website and smartphone app, as well as a detailed annual map of the Northern Highlands needs to be developed that shows the location of local accommodations, tour operators, food services, recreation opportunities, landmarks, place names, music and theatre events, markets, trails, campsites, and other facilities.



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Adventure Tourism Activities

While there are many adventure tourism activities that could be developed or expanded in the region, few are marketable as international attractions on their own merit; however, the wide variety of possibilities within a small geographic area, such as those found within a one-hour drive of Cape North, makes this region unique and is the distinguishing characteristic that would enable a cluster development model to evolve and thrive.

Mountain Biking

There is a lot of potential for the development of mountain biking trails. The ridgeline and east-facing slopes above Aspy Bay and the Bay St. Lawrence Road could be developed into a world-class destination. To build and develop a viable trail facility in this area would likely cost in the realm of \$300,000 but it would be unique in Atlantic Canada and a large draw for bikers. Revenue to the region would come in the form of trail construction, trail user fees, and guided tours, as well as accommodation and food services. Return on investment would be short.

Destination mountain biking is growing rapidly as an industry and enthusiasts are constantly looking for new and exotic locations. Note, for example, the growth of mountain biking in places like Iceland, a country where bicycling of any kind was rare 15 years ago. It is now not uncommon for groups from Canada to travel to Iceland solely for a week of mountain biking. For example, Backroads, Sacred Rides, and Freewheeling Adventures (a Lunenburg, Nova Scotia business) all sell mountain biking trips to Iceland. With the right attention to detail and development of quality infrastructure, Cape Breton can easily compete against destinations like Iceland and Moab, Utah for international mountain bike tourism.

Any future trail development in the wilderness area would require construction and management plan approval from Nova Scotia Environment and would need to be consistent with Nova Scotia's Wilderness Areas Protection Act (1998).

A few trail development options are available:

- Trail development could occur on a block of private land outside the wilderness area. This would entail a private landowner choosing to engage in this.
- Trail development could occur in the wilderness area if public access could be found or created from the roads servicing Bay St. Lawrence or Meat Cove.
- Trail development could occur in the wilderness area in conjunction with access across private property, or through granted public access right-of-way.
- Trail development could occur on the unprotected Crown lands at Money Point.
- Consideration should be given to whether more gentle biking trails are possible on the North Highlands Nordic Ski Club trail system in the summer season.

Hiking Trails

Trails are popular attractions and provide recreation opportunities for a wide variety of users. Trails also serve to slow travelers down and encourage them to stay an extra night or two in the area, which should be a priority strategy for destinations like the Cabot Trail with their large volumes of drive-through traffic. For most tourists, trails need to be 0.5 to 3.0 hours in length and oriented to a destination and/or viewpoint(s) so there is a time, goal and endpoint to the attraction.

There are a number of hiking trails and hiking destinations already in the region, but the area lends itself to many more opportunities. Existing, informal trails need to be improved with marked parking lots, appropriate trail signage, and some trail construction. Trails such as the Tenerife Trail have dangerous rockfall near the summit ridge and should be re-routed for hiker safety.

One large consideration in the use of local trails is that many of the trails are located on private land and right-of-way access will need to be considered.

Cabots Landing-Money Point-Bay St. Lawrence Trail: A route from Cabots Landing around Money Point to Bay St. Lawrence is a logical location for a hiking and biking trail system and would add a complementary product to the proposed Seawall Trail. This should be given some consideration.

A web survey of local trails includes:

- Abandoned Mine Trail at Meat Cove
- Cape St. Lawrence Trail (Lighthouse Trail) at Meat Cove
- Little Grassy Trail at Meat Cove
- Lowland Cove Loop at Meat Cove
- Lowland Cove Trail at Meat Cove
- Brook Trail at Meat Cove
- Mountain Trail at Meat Cove
- Money Point Trail at Cape North
- Tenerife Trail at Cape North
- Wilkie Sugar Loaf Trail at Cape North



Sea Kayaking

There are at least two local operators who rent sea kayaks and North Harbour has the potential for a range of activities. Guided paddling trips in North and South Harbour could be a world-class product but finding trained sea kayak guides and building up guest volume will be an initial hurdle. It would be worthwhile to look at North River Kayak Tours as a model of what is possible for a Cape Breton Island day-trip sea kayak business.

Surfing and Kite Boarding

There is surfing and kite boarding potential in the area and there are local experts to provide advice on locations and to develop these activities.

Sailing

Within North and South Harbours there is the potential for small-boat sailing. There is some interest in sailing tours to St. Paul Island and in youth sail training as well, both of which have some commercial potential.

Whale Watching

Whale watching is one of the local activities that is truly world class and could be expanded with activity-specific boats.

Aerial Activities

Professionally designed and engineered zip-lines, bungee jumps, roped trust falls, aerial swings, flying fox, and aerial ropes courses are family-friendly and high-adrenaline activities. None are sports in-and-of themselves, nor do they exist outside of the commercial or camp realm. The geography of the Northern Highlands lends itself well to this kind of development. They are very profitable activities and can run as high-volume businesses. The new Cape Smokey ski hill development will have some of this type of product, along with a treetop walkway and tower.

Beach Barbeques

There is a lack of good food service in the region and new and unique solutions are possible without the infrastructure of a full-service restaurant. One of these solutions could be services such as evening barbeques on the beaches or islands of North or South Harbours. With the addition of local musicians, stories, and screened and roofed gazebos (for weather and bug proofing) these would be well received and would draw from all the local accommodation providers who do not serve evening meals.

Cultural Events

One key to building unique and profitable tourism product is to link it to local culture. Whether this be gaucho culture in Patagonia, Maori culture in New Zealand, or Indigenous culture in British Columbia or the Canadian Arctic, culture sells and adds profits.

Art, music, stories, history, beliefs, norms, customs, habits, language, architecture, social institutions, personal characteristics, and achievements all describe the diversity of a unique, local culture. A large impetus for people who travel internationally is to experience and understand these cultural characteristics first-hand.

This is evident in the longstanding success of the Celtic Colours International Festival, but tourism product in the Northern Highlands typically does not do enough to tap into the strength and wide-spread recognition of Cape Breton Island culture. New product needs to be developed with this in mind. One creative idea being tested locally is a series of hiking trips to viewpoints and beaches guided by a local painter. With a bit more exposure and marketing support, this concept could be highly successful.

Lighthouse Accommodation

A softer form of adventure for a broad clientele, staying in unique accommodations like historic inns and lighthouses is in increasingly high demand. Products such as Quirpon Lighthouse Inn and Cape Anguille Lighthouse Inn in Newfoundland & Labrador, as well as the Four Mile Beach Inn in Aspy Bay, are good examples of this type of product. Developing similar accommodations by rebuilding the Cape North (Bay St. Lawrence) and the Money Point historic lighthouses has significant potential.



Winter Activities

As part of this study, an exploration of the winter adventure tourism product potential was conducted in February, 2020. This particular month saw significant snowfall, illustrating the considerable potential for developing increased winter adventure tourism activities in the Northern Highlands. Local residents are active during the winter, engaging in snowshoeing, snowmobiling, cross-country and downhill skiing. While some winter tourism activity does exist, there is great potential to expand the product and market the Northern Highlands as a winter destination.

Snowshoeing

Many of the local summer trails and much of the open geography lends itself well to snowshoeing, given the annual snowfall. Many of the Cape Breton Highlands National Park trails see considerable snowshoe use and the Highlands Hostel sees some snowshoe group bookings.

Generally speaking, snowshoeing requires much less skill, experience, and equipment than backcountry skiing, so the entry and price point is much lower. This makes marketing the Northern Highlands as a snowshoeing destination very doable. Many of the comments regarding backcountry skiing below will relate to snowshoeing as well.

Nordic Skiing

The North Highlands Nordic Ski Club (NHN), founded in 1977, operates out of a heated waxing, warmup, and ski rental room in the Northern Victoria Community Centre in Cape North. A trail network consisting of 12 kms of mechanically groomed track offers panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and harbours. NHN provides trail access, daily trail grooming, ski and snowshoe equipment rentals, children's ski lessons, adult ski lessons, race team coaching, and event organization.

This is northern Cape Breton's longest continually running winter outdoor recreation facility and the club has hosted numerous national and regional ski races, including the Canada Winter Games in 1987, the Canadian Junior Nationals 1989, and the Atlantic Championships in 1986, 1987, 1994 and 1998, as well as numerous loppets and provincial championships.

NHN is currently considering expansion and the possibility of moving to a more efficient, skier-friendly location, which will go a long way in attracting more skiers to the region and will help to continue establishing the northern Cape Breton region as a true and dependable winter destination. Expanding the Nordic skiing facilities is a key component of a broader winter strategy in keeping with the recommended cluster development model.

Snowmobiling

The annual economic impact of snowmobiling is \$31 billion in the USA and \$22 billion in Canada. Over 85,000 full-time jobs are generated by the snowmobile industry in North America.¹ Snowmobiling is an enormous economic driver in many parts of Atlantic Canada. Although this study needs to be updated, a 2005 Economic Assessment Report conducted by the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism estimated annual snowmobile-related expenditures at \$22 million. This number will be much higher today.

Statistics² show that there are:

- 7,200 registered snowmobiles in Nova Scotia; 19,550 in New Brunswick; 58,700 in Newfoundland and Labrador; 155,000 in Ontario; and 201,732 in Quebec.
- 4,200 km of maintained snowmobile trails in Nova Scotia; 7,200 in New Brunswick; 3,600 in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia; 34,224 in Ontario; and 32,446 in Quebec.

The Snowmobilers Association of Nova Scotia (SANS) represents approximately 2,400 members across the province. As a service to their members, SANS published a web-based interactive snowmobile trail map that shows the extensive trail system throughout Nova Scotia (<https://sans.evtrails.com/#>). This map is instructive because it clearly shows what local Northern Highlands residents have been saying for many years, which is that it is not possible to cater to the commercial snowmobile market because they need to be able to snowmobile through the Cape Breton Highlands National Park in order to access the northern peninsula.

Local residents, SANS, and Parks Canada have been talking for many years about the possibility of creating a “snowmobile corridor” through the Park to enable snowmobile travel to the Northern Highlands region. The potential to make the Northern Highlands a destination trip is noteworthy and the economic benefits of doing so would be sizable. For the benefit of the communities in this region, a corridor should be developed.

Backcountry Skiing

As part of this study, a group of expert backcountry skiers from British Columbia and Nova Scotia explored the backcountry skiing potential of the Cape North to Meat Cover area, as well in Cape Breton Highlands National Park.

Depending on the application and where the discussion is taking place, there is a wide variety of terminology used to refer to backcountry skiing, which is essentially defined as skiing in areas other than in-bounds at an alpine ski resort or on groomed cross-country ski trails. Some examples are backcountry skiing, ski touring, ski mountaineering, alpine touring (AT), randonee skiing, off-piste skiing, and telemark skiing, all of which could mean more-or-less the same thing but some might require slightly different equipment.

There is also a difference between the terms listed above, which typically involve moving vertically up and down a given slope or piece of terrain, and a product referred to as a ski traverse, which is what one might be doing by skiing from one point to another, for example across the Cape Breton Highlands.

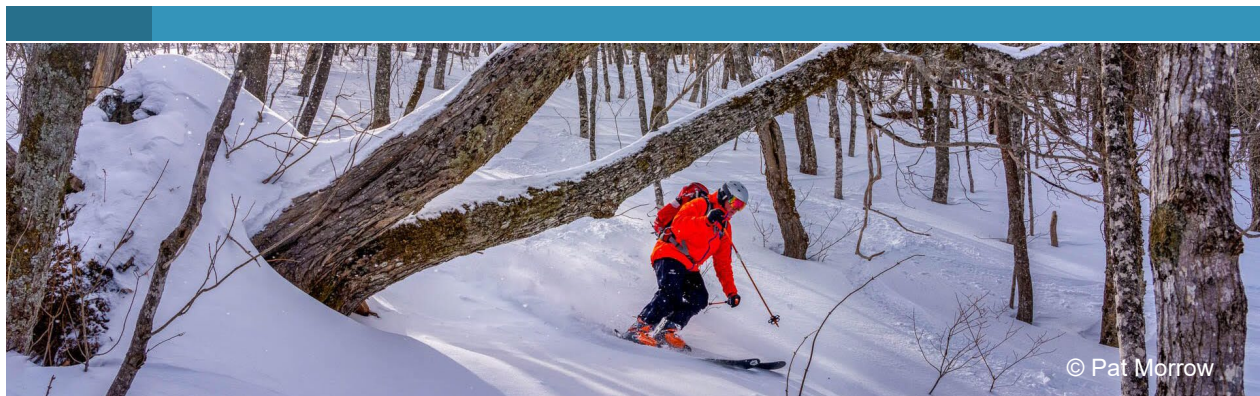
¹ Snowmobilers Association of Nova Scotia (<https://www.snowmobilersns.com/nova-scotia/about-sans/>).

² 2019 Snowmobiling Fact Book produced by the International Snowmobile Manufacturers Association (<http://www.snowmobile.org/docs/isma-snowmobiling-fact-book.pdf>).

Developing Backcountry Skiing Product

The following conclusions can be made about developing the region as a backcountry skiing destination:

- There is a lot of potential for backcountry skiing in the region. When the snowpack is good, primarily after a recent winter storm cycle, this, combined with other backcountry skiing areas in Cape Breton, could form the nucleus for a marketable skiing product.
- The ridgeline that runs south to north from Gray's Hollow to Sugar Loaf (including Tenerife Mountain) is a key feature for hiking, mountain biking and backcountry skiing. This area should be the focus of a multi-use trail development that caters to all three of these activities.
- The backcountry skiing in Cape Breton is worthy of regional focus and promotion, as well as marketing in select areas throughout the Atlantic Provinces, Quebec, Ontario and New England.
- While a lot of snow accumulates in the area, conditions are highly variable and change frequently. Eastern Canadian and American skiers would understand this and have patience with these types of conditions; however, backcountry skiing conditions in Western Canada are much more reliable and, in general, western skiers would likely be disappointed with the quality of skiing found in Cape Breton. Marketing in western regions would have to focus on the novelty of skiing in the Cape Breton Highlands, with particular emphasis on the accompanying cultural aspects of a visit out east. (See below for ideas and examples.)
- The geography along the eastern slopes of the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area is steep and treed. There is very little in the way of skiable terrain for a novice or intermediate; skiers need to be accomplished. There is some terrain suitable for intermediate skiers inside Cape Breton Highlands National Park.
- To develop backcountry skiing in the area, the Nova Scotia Highway Department would need to cooperate in plowing strategically-placed parking areas. Parking areas are needed in the summer as well, so this is not specific only to winter.
- To create an iconic winter product, the experience needs to incorporate elements of local culture and music. By far, the highlight of the February 2020 backcountry skiing exploration was that meals were catered in-house by a local restaurateur and evening entertainment included live, local music. The trip was made worthwhile by the cultural elements associated with it.
- A ski traverse from Cape North or Aspy Bay to Polletts Cove and/or Meat Cove has much potential as a true backcountry wilderness ski route. A route linked from a hut on the ridgeline above Aspy Bay to Polletts Cove or Meat Cove would be a serious and worthwhile venture. This could complement the existing backcountry skiing in the area off local highways, which is currently limited to day trips. It could also connect to a future Seawall Trail hut system.



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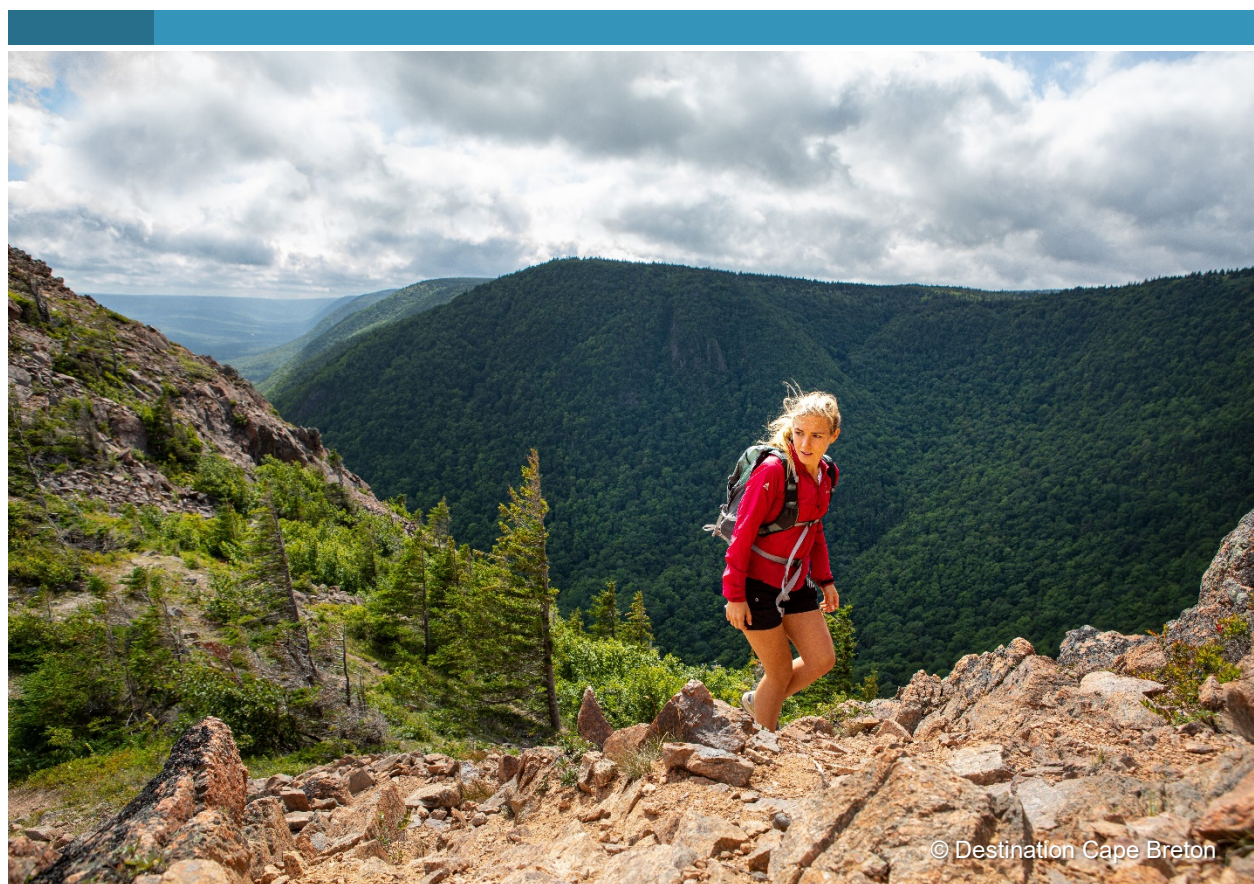
- Glading (thinning) of alder and willows is necessary in a number of areas in order to establish skiable runs. This will not entail cutting mature forests or entire hillsides but needs to focus on cutting back the underbrush and alder in select areas to create approximately 12-15 skiable runs in the region, which would be enough for a week's backcountry skiing. This is a very common activity in the British Columbia helicopter and snowcat skiing industry. The layout of the runs would need to be done by someone familiar with the activity, but the runs could be cut by local loggers. This could cost as little as \$30,000.00.
- Signage, online information, a GPS waypoint handbook, and ski trail maps are necessary in order to assist skiers and snowshoers in finding parking lots, trail entry points and skiable terrain, particularly in foggy or inclement weather. The terrain is complex and winter weather is highly variable, so without these resources, visitors to the area could spend a whole week looking for good places to ski. Having such resources in place also helps instill confidence that the skiing is worthwhile.
- Tourist information and website copy must be developed and should include an overview of the skiing, a description of the best locations, trip planning logistics, when to come to find the best snow, safety information, weather links, and contact numbers, as well as options for food and accommodation.
- Adding winter backcountry skiing and snowshoeing to the product mix brings the need to consider search and rescue, emergency response, and safety. Skiing in steep, treed terrain will bring injuries and creates complex evacuation scenarios. Navigating on the wilderness area plateau in foggy winter conditions may increase search and rescue needs. Although this also needs to be considered as summer backcountry use increases, it is essential as winter activities are developed.
- There are a number of specific ideas that would help facilitate access to backcountry skiing and snowshoeing. Although more will surely be identified, the following are early discussion points:
 - Lone Shieling: Maintain a winter parking area and washrooms within Cape Breton Highlands National Park. Possibly add 1-2 bridges.
 - Grand Anse River: Develop a winter parking area on the highway plateau within Cape Breton Highlands National Park.
 - Powerline: Develop a winter parking area near where the powerline meets the highway within Cape Breton Highlands National Park. The powerline cutline needs to be closed to skiing because with deep snow the powerline is too close to the ground and creates a hazard.
 - Aspy River & North Side Road: Develop a winter parking area or drop-off/pick-up zone to access a winter trail northwest of Aspy River to the Wilderness Area and the North Side Road.
 - Archies Brook: Develop a trailhead at Polletts Cove trail access, add a bridge, and slope glading.
 - French Gulch/Elementary School: Provide public parking, develop a trail into French Gulch, and glading on French Gulch slopes.
 - Sugar Loaf: There is potential for a cabin at Sam's Col and/or flats southwest of Wilkie Sugar Loaf, slope glading, and a possible snowmobile equipment shuttle.
 - Meat Cove: Develop a winter parking area near the bridge, develop a trail up the east side of Meat Cove Brook, add a bridge, and slope glading.

Visitor Ready, Market Ready, Export Ready & Package Tours

Visitor Ready refers to a business which has all their product, licenses, permits and insurance in place in order to operate legally. **Market Ready** refers to a business that markets to potential visitors, communicates with potential visitors year-round, and is ready to accept advanced reservations. **Export Ready** refers to a business that markets to and through travel trade distribution sales channels, understands commission or net rate pricing, and agrees to trade bookings and a cancellation policy.

A **package tour, package vacation, or package holiday** comprises transport, program activities, and accommodation advertised and sold together by a vendor known as a tour operator, or by a Regional, Provincial, or National Destination Marketing Organization (DMO). Packages may be sold as wholesale priced tours to other tour operator resellers or may be sold at retail prices directly to guests.

Currently, there appears to be a lack of understanding with respect to these concepts among operators in the area, and there are very few packaged tours that are market or export ready. Other than some of the accommodation providers, most product is seasonal, not market ready, and would benefit greatly from coaching in business and product development.



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Seawall Trail

The Seawall Trail Society has proposed to develop a five-day, forty-eight kilometer, hut-to-hut hiking trail along the western slopes of the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area. Approximately 80% of the proposed Seawall Trail falls within the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area.

(<https://www.seawalltrail.com/>)

The concept is locally driven, has substantial community support, and the proponents have shown an abundance of patience while government analyzes the proposal. This project has the potential to significantly increase Cape Breton's viability as an adventure tourism destination and is one of a few products that would have international appeal.

While government is analyzing the validity of the proposal, it is not appropriate to comment here on the capacity of the proponent group or the financial feasibility of the project. However, the idea has significant merit and, if well managed, could have a sizable impact on both the Cape Breton adventure tourism brand and the local economy. There are literally thousands of mountain huts worldwide and Cape Breton would garner a lot of attention from developing such a trail system.

Linking the Seawall Trail to Cape North

Moving the southern trailhead of the Seawall Trail from Red River to the Cape North/Aspy Bay area would generate much more economic impact than the present proposal. Serious consideration should be given to moving this trailhead to the Cape North/Aspy Bay area and adding a hut on the ridgeline above Aspy Bay (north of Gray's Hollow).

Moving the southern trailhead would change the trail experience slightly, but the trail vistas on the North Harbour side of the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area are spectacular in their own right and add product variety. The eastern slopes of the wilderness area are more protected from the wind, leading to warmer weather in the summer and better snow in the winter. This location would also allow easy access to the trail system for visitors in winter and for emergency services year-round.

When linked to the other activities suggested above, the impact of this trail multiplies. Trailhead services such as food and accommodation increase, shuttles between north and south trailheads become much closer and simpler, and opportunity increases for day trip and multi-day activity use to a hut located on the ridge above Aspy Bay.

Hut on the Ridge Above Aspy Bay

Accessed from the Bay St. Lawrence Road, a hut strategically located above Aspy Bay high up on the eastern slopes of the Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area, with deck views over the world-class North Harbour vista, and accessed by a multi-use trail, would provide a perfect day trip and overnight destination for hiking, mountain biking, backcountry skiing and snowshoeing alike. In addition to being used as part of the Seawall Trail hut-to-hut system, this particular hut would become a destination objective.

The use of this hut would far outstrip any of the other Seawall Trail huts because it would act as a day trip and overnight purpose point for both summer and winter users at a location where many travelers are (along the Bay St. Lawrence road). In summer, this facility could act as a “tea house” and would quickly become the number one day-trip on the North Harbour side of the Wilderness Area.

Because of its destination potential, the size of this hut would need to be larger than any of the other huts on the Seawall Trail system. The logistics of servicing a larger and busy facility need to be considered and access provided. The type of access trail would need to be designed for multi-use and trail management needs to mitigate conflicts. For example, downhill mountain biking on such a trail would seriously conflict with hikers, but if the trail were only an up-track for bikers and there were other designated down-track bike trails elsewhere, this could be mitigated. Because the business viability of a hut like this is substantial, private investment to build and operate this hut would be a possibility worth serious consideration.

Moose Hunting

Non-motorized moose hunting exists within Polletts Cove-Aspy Fault Wilderness Area.

Guided moose hunts in Newfoundland sell for \$7,500 per week. British Columbia guided moose hunts commands similar pricing. Prices for a similar hunt on the Northern Highlands of Cape Breton start at \$1,500 but there is no reason they couldn't be on par with Newfoundland or British Columbia.

There is no other adventure tourism product in the Northern Highlands capable of drawing these kinds of prices; an opportunity is clearly being missed. Any guided adventure tourism product that can sell at \$7,500 per week is in the same price range as snowcat skiing in British Columbia and African safaris and could be a major economic contributor to the region.

As with other adventure tourism opportunities in the region, government needs to make a concerted effort to resolve the moose hunting impasse and consider how to maximize the economic return for local residents, regardless of how complex the topic may be.

Cape Smokey Ski Hill Development

While not specifically in the study area of this project, the proposed Cape Smokey Ski Hill development will have a significant impact on the Northern Highlands. Employment opportunities will arise, all-season traffic will increase to the area, and new and complementary product ideas and partnerships will emerge.

The Cape Smokey developers have extensive experience with ski hill and summer tourism development in Europe and their vision for the site has the potential to create additional momentum for tourism development in the Northern Highlands.

While it is not likely that the Cape Smokey ski product will create financial viability for the project, planned summer activities such as a gondola and tree walk, as well as supporting facilities such as hotels and condominium sales, make the concept viable. There is ample summer traffic past the site and very little

product in the region like what is being proposed, such that the philosophy of combining extensive and unique activities with quality accommodation and real estate facilities is sound. Ultimately, products like those planned at Cape Smokey are also real-estate developments and their financial success depends to a large extent on the success of attracting real estate participants.

Supporting Infrastructure Needs

In order to support a tourism industry on the Northern Highlands, there are a number of needs with respect to general tourism infrastructure. These include visitor information, construction of an iconic attraction, trail construction, and road work. A number of these topics have already been raised earlier.

Visitor Information

There is need for much better visitor information and signage at the junction of Bay St. Lawrence Road or Dingwall Road and the Cabot Trail highway. Existing signage currently leads to dangerous and confused decision-making on the part of drivers and does not provide adequate information for travelers. The goal should be to attract travelers to turn off the Cabot Trail and explore offerings to the north.

Dingwall Harbour Walkway

There is real potential to develop a first-class and attractive walkway and bike path along Dingwall Harbour from the Markland Coastal Beach Cottages, past the St. Paul Island Museum & Lighthouse, and around the harbour. This route is completely flat, has beautiful beach and marina views, and would make for an interesting walk and/or bike ride.

Visitor Education Centre

There is need for a major attraction in the Cape Breton Northern Highlands that would draw rubber tire traffic north off the Cabot Trail. One concept for this has been described above. It would need to be iconic and widely recognized as significant enough to be worth detouring off the Trail and staying extra nights in the area.

Road Work

Roads in the Northern Highlands, especially the Dingwall Road, need substantial remedial work. Because cycling could play such a key role in future local economic development activity, high consideration should be given to their safety through wide and paved road shoulders. Road shoulders within Cape Breton Highlands National Park are generally sufficient for cyclists, but outside the Park roads in the Northern Highlands are dangerous.

Indigenous Tourism

Indigenous Tourism is defined as a tourism activity in which Indigenous people are directly involved, either through managerial control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction. Indigenous tourism is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors in Canada; it represents a step toward reconciliation with First Nations and helps to stimulate the economic growth of Indigenous communities.

Much of Indigenous tourism is nature-based or adventure-related and Indigenous tourism product should be given consideration in the Northern Highlands. While there are numerous Mi'kmaq-related tourism products on Cape Breton Island there is none visible in the Northern Highlands.

Indigenous tourism is an intensified economic contributor because it tends to impact low-income demographics; incremental income goes a long way. In Canada, Indigenous tourism helps brand an area, and has much potential in Cape Breton as an economic contributor - both in general overall terms and for the Mi'kmaq Nation. If a goal is to help reduce poverty and social conditions in the local Mi'kmaq Nation, then tourism is a great way to do this. It is achievable but needs concerted focus and effort.

Given Canada's strong commitment to reconciliation, developing Indigenous tourism is also the right thing to do. We need to be doing this. It is value laden, it is best practice, and it produces optimal results.



Summary

The One Nova Scotia Coalition website³ summarizes the “Ivany Report” very well when it describes the local situation as follows:

“The Ivany Report found Nova Scotia is staring into an abyss that will lead to extended decline if it is not reversed. Particular challenges that have been identified include poor economic performance; an aging workforce; high dependence on government support; youth outmigration, particularly from rural communities and limited business investment in innovation and productivity.

Our weak economic performance exacerbates our population outlook. Nova Scotia’s outlook has worsened since the Ivany Report; the provincial Department of Finance projects our population will drop from about 943,000 last year to approximately 878,000 by 2040.

Nova Scotia needs more immigrants, more inter-provincial migration, and to improve youth retention. Our population is aging, a trend that is amplified by our outmigration of youth, especially as employment opportunities have declined in rural communities. The Ivany Report emphasizes the need for more vibrant private sector growth to strengthen rural communities.”

The immigration, migration, youth retention, and private sector growth referred to in this statement is achievable, at least in part through the development of an adventure tourism economy in the Northern Highlands of Cape Breton. Adventure tourism can be a noteworthy economic development tool in remote and rural regions and is already used as such in many remote regions around the world.

Economic growth drives optimism, which drives immigration, migration and youth retention. However, to be successful using tourism development as the driver takes a large enough vision on the part of the destination to create enough critical mass to move the dial and draw visitors from national and international markets. Adventure tourism can be a high-yield and profitable sector, but it operates in a competitive and global marketplace. An unprofessional or inexperienced approach does not produce a competitive destination.

For the Cape Breton Northern Highlands to be successful at developing an adventure tourism economy, it will require generous incremental investment in infrastructure, product development, business training, and youth training, all aimed at inspiring and fostering a sense of pride and optimism in a private sector who sees the potential. This needs to be supported by good branding and marketing to present such possibilities on the world stage. There are numerous examples of successful adventure tourism economies; the Northern Highlands of Cape Breton Island is more than deserving as a worthy participant.

³ <http://www.wechoosenow.ca/overview/>

There are, however, some sizable but realizable challenges associated with going down this pathway. All come with solutions, some of which include:

- Assisting local tourism businesses in the creation of market- and export-ready product.
- Public and private investment in the infrastructure of trails, attractions, visitor information, branding and marketing to provide the basis for opportunities in this new economy.
- The consideration of provincial wilderness areas and provincial parks as economic drivers and assets to be used in support of existing, new and emerging recreation and commercial activities. Of course, this must be balanced with additional conservation values; however, adventure tourism, if developed correctly, can have very little impact on wildlife and other elements of the natural environment.
- Providing training in adventure sports, travel and hospitality to local high-school and college-aged youth in order to develop knowledge, interest and motivation about careers in adventure tourism. To young people, adventure tourism careers are desirable and attractive and can be lucrative, but they do not represent the extraction-based workforce of earlier generations.
- Helping entrepreneurs and employees see that wealth can be built through building equity in sustainable nature-based business initiatives.
- Government making brave decisions in support of this new economy by adopting Ivany Report recommendations as local economic development goals. One must recognize that this is not the first destination to go down the path of an “emerging adventure tourism economy” and that with a concerted effort the Ivany Report recommendations are completely achievable on the Northern Highlands. These include:
 - Reversing out-migration
 - Tripling the number of immigrants to the area
 - Growing the number of new businesses by 50 per cent
 - Reducing youth unemployment to the national average
 - Doubling the revenue generated by tourism
 - Doubling research partnerships between universities and businesses
 - Increasing by 50 per cent the number of companies who export, given that international tourism is an export industry
 - Raising the labour force participation rate of First Nations and African Nova Scotians
 - Increasing the percentage of those in the area with training after high school to 65 per cent
 - Recognizing that there is no one, single iconic product or solution to developing an adventure tourism economy on the Northern Highlands of Cape Breton Island, and understanding that it will be achieved through the development of a critical mass of small, complementary, profitable, well-positioned, and well-branded businesses. These unique products, combined with natural and man-made assets, will create an export-ready adventure tourism destination.



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