

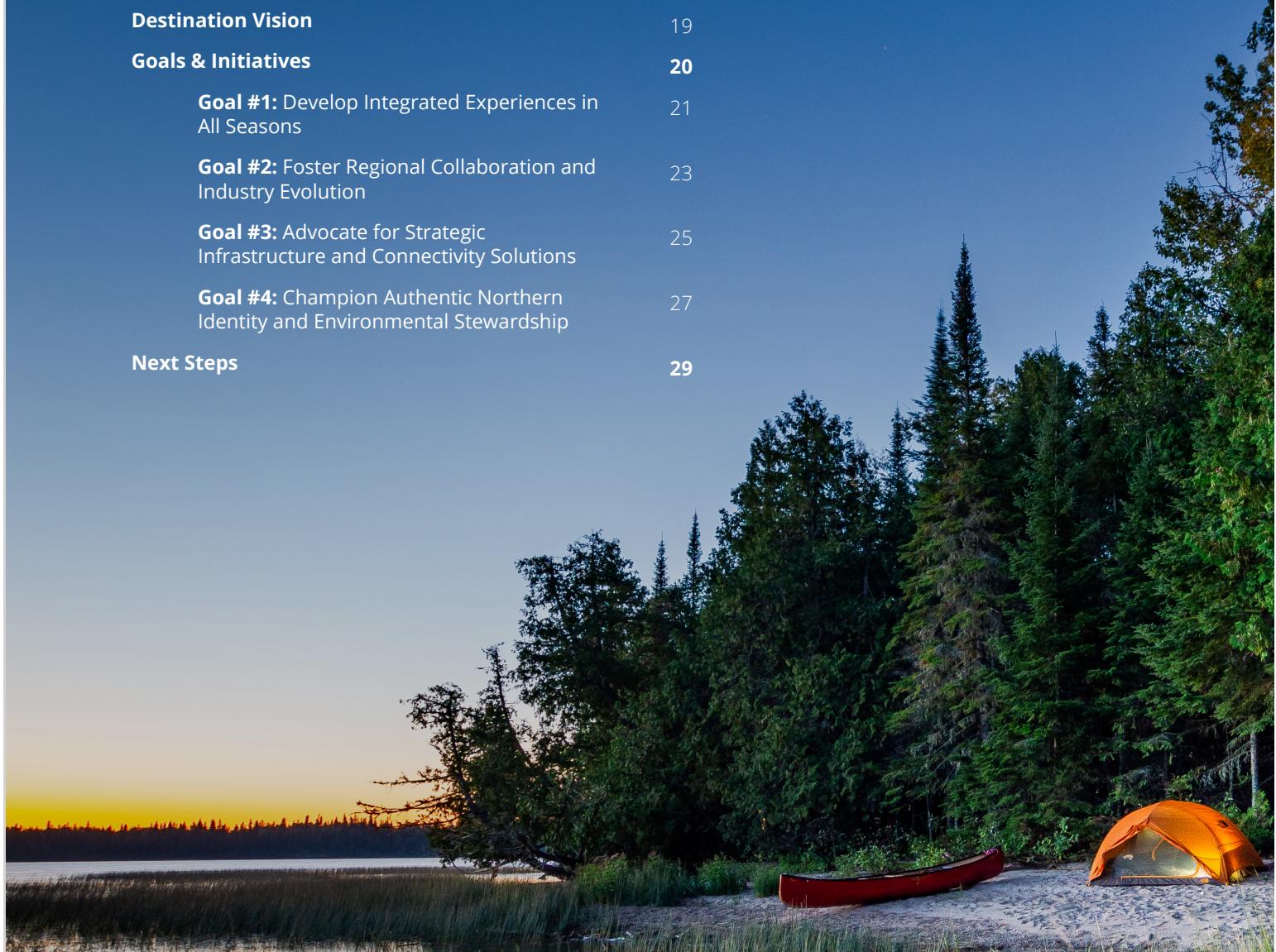
A silhouette of a person standing in a dark landscape under a starry sky. A bright beam of light points upwards from the person's head, symbolizing a connection to the stars or a vision. The background is a dark, textured sky with numerous stars.

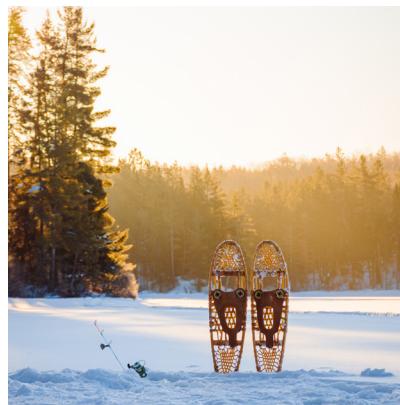
Northern Ontario

2036 Destination Master Plan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS

Destination Northern Ontario's 10-year Destination Master Plan presents a comprehensive strategy to grow and enhance the region's visitor economy through sustainable, year-round tourism development. The plan is grounded in extensive community and industry engagement, including over 1,000 voices from across Northern Ontario and informed by a broad review of previous strategic work.

Strengths

Northern Ontario's natural beauty, Indigenous cultural experiences and community pride stand out as its strongest tourism assets.

Challenges

The region faces significant barriers including limited transportation access, workforce shortages, aging accommodations and gaps in digital infrastructure.

Opportunities

Collaboration among regions, four-season product development, enhanced visitor services and infrastructure improvements can significantly boost competitiveness.

Strategic Goals

The strategic goals outlined in this plan represent the collective vision and priorities of Northern Ontario's tourism community. They were shaped through extensive engagement with over 1,000 stakeholders, including Indigenous partners, tourism operators, municipal leaders and residents, ensuring that the direction of the plan reflects both local values and regional aspirations.

Grounded in data and informed by best practices and current challenges, these goals are critical for addressing long standing barriers such as access, seasonality and infrastructure gaps, while leveraging the region's strongest assets: its natural landscapes, cultural richness and spirit of collaboration. Together, the goals form a roadmap for sustainable growth, improved visitor experiences and long-term economic resilience.

#1 Develop Integrated Experiences in All Seasons

Invest in Indigenous and outdoor experiences, unique accommodations and seasonal programming to combat seasonality and drive year-round visitation.

#2 Foster Regional Collaboration and Industry Evolution

Create seamless visitor journeys through coordinated marketing, service training, product development and industry support, emphasizing inclusivity and digital literacy.

#3 Advocate for Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity Solutions

Improve air, road and rail access; enhance signage, rest stops and digital connectivity to make the region more accessible and visitor-friendly.

#4 Champion Authentic Northern Identity and Environmental Stewardship

Highlight Northern Ontario's character and commitment to sustainability and accessibility to appeal to socially and environmentally conscious travellers.

Implementation

Success will depend on strong regional leadership, ongoing collaboration, transparent reporting and dedicated funding. Destination Northern Ontario will lead implementation, supported by a committed Steering Committee and engaged tourism stakeholders.

This plan provides a roadmap for transforming Northern Ontario into a globally competitive, sustainable destination that reflects the pride, culture and aspirations of its communities.



DESTINATION MASTER PLAN CONTRIBUTORS

Steering Committee

Destination Northern Ontario would like to thank the regional community leaders who gave their time and expertise to serving on the Steering Committee, providing guidance, leadership and support of the development of Northern Ontario's Destination Master Plan.

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Patrick Morash, General Manager, Fort William Historical Park

Victoria Olar, Searchmont Resort

Paul Pepe, Manager, Tourism Thunder Bay

Lacey Rigg, Coordinator, Meetings, Conventions & Sports Tourism, Tourism Timmins

Andrew Siegwart, President & CEO, Tourism Industry Association of Ontario



Project Team

Our appreciation to the dedicated project team members who worked diligently on this important project for Northern Ontario. From concept to completion, the team worked collaboratively with the best interests of the region at the forefront.

This plan is, by design, a living document that will continue to deliver exceptional value to the region as the plan is implemented and new partnerships are forged.



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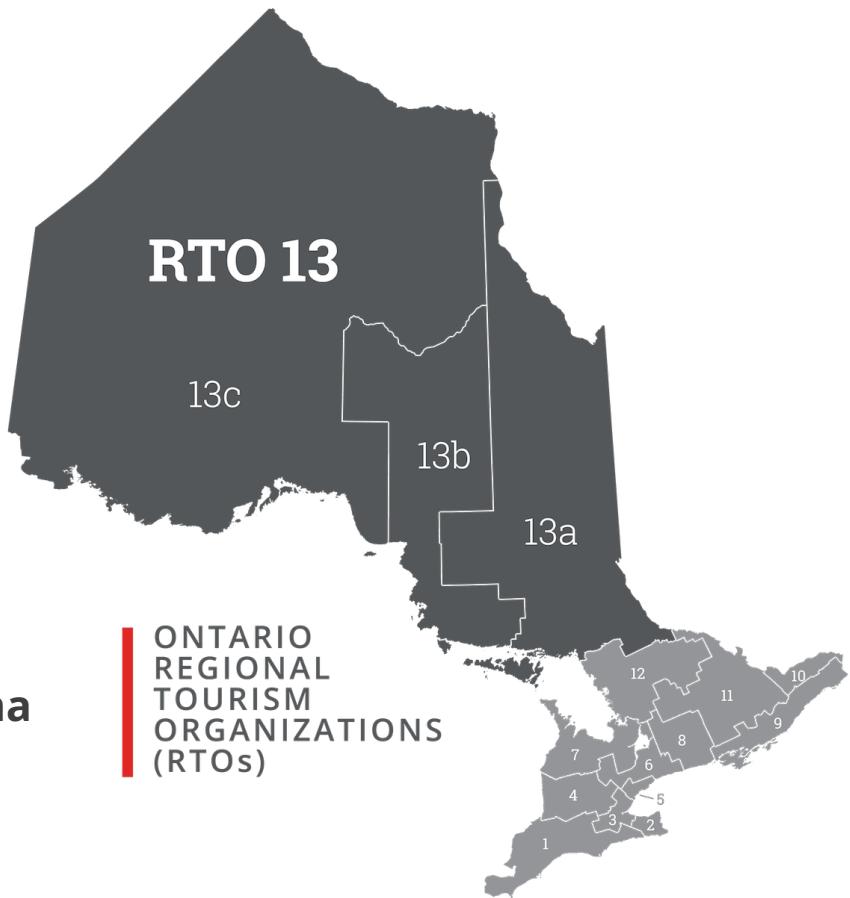
Teresa Allan
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NORTHERN ONTARIO REGION

Destination Northern Ontario is an organization formed at the direction of the northern Ontario tourism industry and funded by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming to lead economic growth through tourism in the region.

Destination Northern Ontario operates in the area north of the French River, west of the Ottawa River to the Manitoba border, and north to the saltwater coast.

Due to its large area, RTO 13 (Northern Ontario) is split into three sub-regions.



13a Northeast Ontario

13b Sault Ste. Marie - Algoma

13c Northwest Ontario

ONTARIO REGIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS (RTOs)



Regional Considerations

To avoid redundancy and build on existing efforts, this project began with a thorough review of prior strategic work in the region.

Work reviewed and taken into consideration included:

Destination Northern Ontario Program Review (CBRE 2024)	Accommodation Needs Assessment, North Shore Of Lake Superior, Ontario (CBRE 2021)
Staff Response to CBRE Program Review (2024)	A Francophone Tourism Plan for Northern Ontario (2018)
Building a Data-Driven Decision-Making Culture Within Ontario's Tourism Industry (Skift Advisory 2024)	Lake Superior Tourism Study: Collaboration Around the Lake: Situational Assessment and Recommendations (Deloitte 2018)
Ontario Cycle Tourism & Cycling Activity Report (Ontario by Bike / Transportation Options 2024)	Northern Ontario Angling Tourism Plan (2017)
Destination Northern Ontario Business Plans (2020, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025)	Northern Ontario Auto & RV Touring Tourism Plan (2017)
The Benefits Of Connecting Canadians (The Economic, Environmental and Public Health Impacts of the Trans Canada Trail (Econsult Solutions 2023)	Northern Ontario Cycling Tourism Plan (2017)
Economic and Tourism Impact Study for the Thunder Bay Waterfront Trail Expansion (Deloitte 2023)	Northern Ontario Gateways & Communities Tourism Plan (2017)
Northern Ontario Accessibility Tourism Product Development Strategy (DRAFT 2023)	Northern Ontario Nature & Adventure Tourism Plan (2017)
Northern Ontario Sustainability Tourism Product Development Strategy (DRAFT 2023)	Northern Ontario Snowmobile Tourism Plan (2017)
Northern Ontario Nature & Wildlife Product Development Strategy (Ferrell & Partners Marketing Inc 2023)	Trends In The Canadian Hotel Industry National Market Report (Monthly)
Northern Ontario Trail Tourism Strategy (2021)	Destination Northern Ontario Hotel Development Opportunity in Wawa, ON
	Destination Northern Ontario Hotel Development Opportunity on Highway 17 - between Nipigon and Marathon, Ontario

INDUSTRY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Understanding the priorities and perspectives of community and industry leaders across Northern Ontario formed the foundation for all decision-making throughout the development of this Destination Master Plan.

Through comprehensive engagement with tourism operators, municipal leaders, Indigenous tourism communities and regional stakeholders, a clear picture emerged of both the tremendous potential and critical challenges facing Northern Ontario's visitor economy.

Engagement Overview

The stakeholder engagement process captured diverse voices from across Northern Ontario's vast geography, ensuring representation from urban centres like Thunder Bay and Sudbury to remote lodge operators and Indigenous tourism enterprises.

This extensive consultation involved 25 interviews with industry and community stakeholders, 13 focus groups with tourism operators and municipal representatives, a DestinationNEXT Assessment capturing 50 industry respondents, a comprehensive resident sentiment survey reaching 869 respondents and 3 listening sessions covering 10 regions across Northern Ontario.

This comprehensive engagement strategy ensured representation from all corners of Northern Ontario, from the shores of Lake Superior to the Hudson Bay lowlands, capturing perspectives from its diverse communities, Indigenous tourism partners, operators and residents who collectively shape the region's visitor economy.

The extensive consultation provided valuable insights into the region's tourism landscape, development priorities and community aspirations that directly inform the strategic direction of this plan.

DESTINATIONNEXT ASSESSMENT

Overview

Developed by MMGY NextFactor, the comprehensive DestinationNEXT Assessment tool is a global tourism industry standard designed to empirically measure how a specific destination's visitor economy is performing across a wide spectrum of indicators.

The methodology incorporates an in-depth survey of government officials, tourism leaders, community organizations, business owners and other key stakeholders. The survey questions focus on 24 different variables related to overall destination strength, including visitor industry infrastructure, experiences and services and overall destination alignment, focusing on how well government, community and industry leaders work together.

DESTINATION STRENGTH VARIABLES

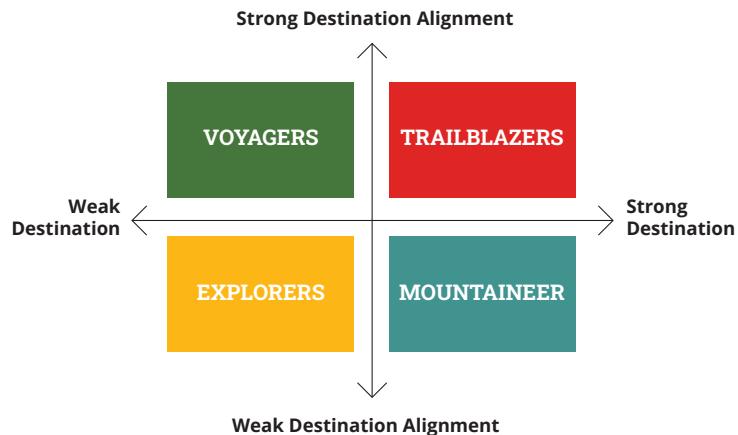


COMMUNITY ALIGNMENT VARIABLES



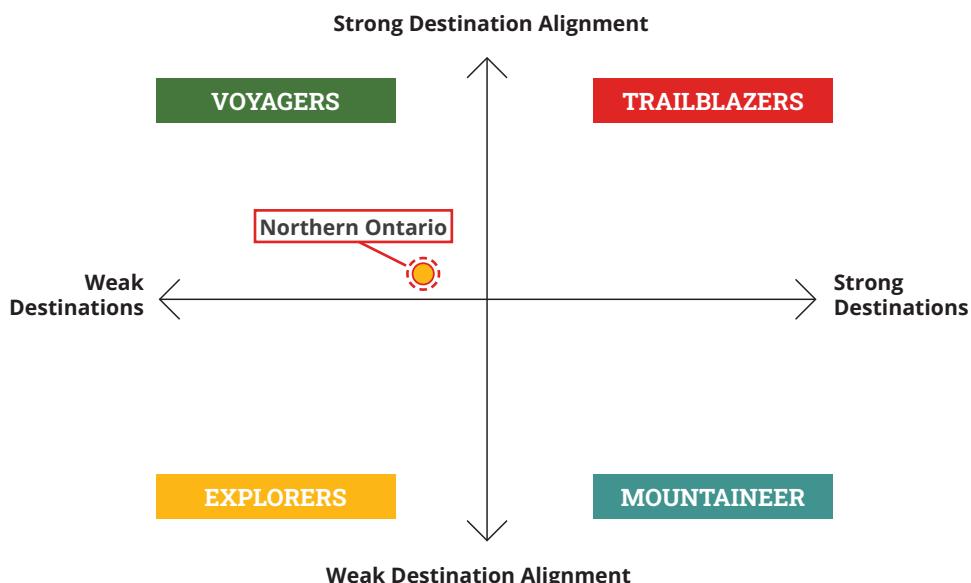
Scenario Model

The survey data is then plotted into a quadrant scenario model that compares the destination with more than 400 DestinationNEXT Assessments in other communities. The results provide valuable business intelligence identifying the greatest opportunities and most significant challenges for the region's visitor economy.



Northern Ontario's Current Position

The DestinationNEXT Assessment, completed by 50 local industry and community stakeholders, reveals Northern Ontario's position in the Voyagers quadrant, characterized by above-average community alignment but below-average destination strength. This positioning indicates strong collaborative foundations and stakeholder unity, yet significant infrastructure and experience gaps that limit the region's competitive tourism potential.



Outdoor Recreation emerges as the region's dominant competitive advantage, validating Northern Ontario's positioning around wilderness experiences and natural beauty. However, critical infrastructure gaps present barriers to visitor satisfaction and economic impact.

Destination Access represents the most significant challenge, reinforcing the strategic importance of connectivity solutions outlined in this plan. **Accommodation** and **Dining, Shopping & Entertainment** present deficits that limit visitor spending and length of stay, while the **Conventions & Meetings** segment indicates missed opportunities for year-round business travel demand.

Northern Ontario demonstrates exceptional community alignment with strong **Government Support, Sustainability & Resilience** and **Regional Cooperation** providing the collaborative foundation necessary for implementing comprehensive destination management initiatives.

Workforce Development and **Hospitality Culture** require immediate attention, representing human capital challenges that could limit the region's ability to deliver exceptional visitor experiences. These findings strongly support the plan's emphasis on industry advancement and training programs.

The Voyagers positioning indicates Northern Ontario's readiness for strategic action, with strong community alignment enabling coordinated investment in access, accommodation and experience development to address destination strength deficits.

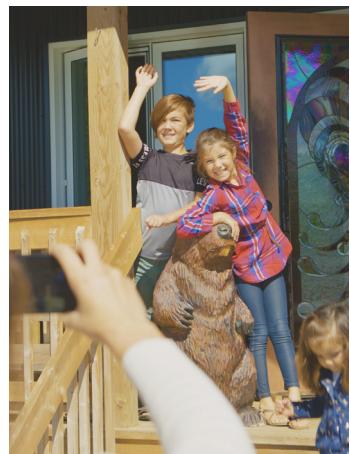
The following are the highest and lowest ranked variables in the DestinationNEXT Assessment survey (on a scale of 1 to 5).

Highest Ranked Variables Destination Strength		Lowest Ranked Variables Destination Strength	
Outdoor Recreation	4.13	Destination Access	2.59
Attractions & Experiences	3.67	Dining, Shopping & Entertainment	2.67
Arts, Culture & Heritage	3.30	Local Mobility & Access	3.00
Events & Festivals	3.30	Conventions & Meetings	3.04
Health & Safety	3.26	Accommodation	3.06

Highest Ranked Variables Community Alignment		Lowest Ranked Variables Community Alignment	
Economic Development	3.97	Workforce Development	2.67
Government Support	3.89	Funding Support & Certainty	3.23
Sustainability & Resilience	3.89	Hospitality Culture	3.40
Regional Cooperation	3.87	Emergency Preparedness	3.47
Business Support	3.82	Equity, Diversity & Inclusion	3.70

Strategic Implications

The position of Voyagers indicates that Northern Ontario is primed for strategic action. Strong community alignment offers a solid foundation to address weaknesses through targeted investment in access, accommodations, and experience development. Workforce readiness and hospitality culture must be addressed in parallel to ensure infrastructure improvements translate into exceptional visitor experiences. These findings reinforce the importance of the plan's emphasis on industry advancement, training programs and workforce development initiatives as essential components of sustainable tourism growth.



RESIDENT SENTIMENT SURVEY

In partnership with Destination Northern Ontario, MMGY NextFactor conducted a comprehensive online survey to gather perspectives from residents across the region about enhancing community appeal and strengthening tourism potential. The survey was provided in both English and French, capturing 869 responses between January 20 and March 7, 2025 (744 responses in English and 125 responses in French).

This data forms a critical foundation for understanding local sentiment and ensuring development strategies reflect the values and needs of those who call Northern Ontario home.

Residents demonstrated overwhelming pride in Northern Ontario, rating their regional pride at 4.32 on a five-point scale, with likelihood to recommend the region as a visitor destination at 8.59 out of 10. This combination creates authentic ambassadorship that enhances visitor experiences and supports destination marketing efforts.

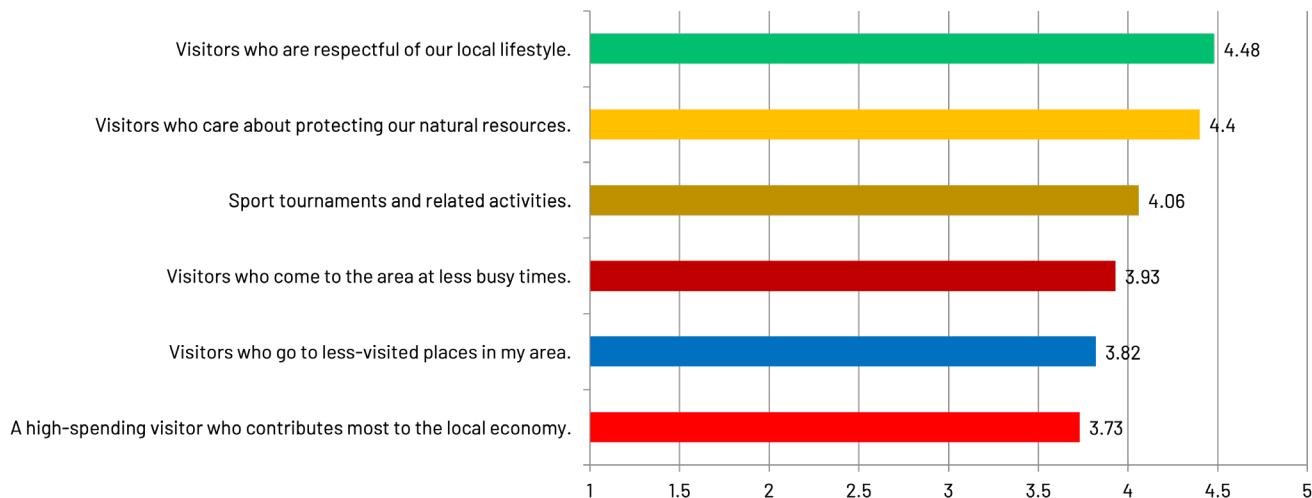
Residents clearly understand tourism's economic importance while not viewing the local economy as overly dependent on tourism, suggesting openness to strategic tourism growth as part of a diversified economic portfolio.

Quality and sustainability priorities emerged clearly, with residents emphasizing attracting visitors who are respectful of local lifestyle and care about protecting natural resources. Support for sports tournaments ranked highly, while high-spending visitors ranked lowest among priorities, indicating residents prioritize respectful, sustainable tourism over maximum economic impact.

Tourism in Northern Ontario

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

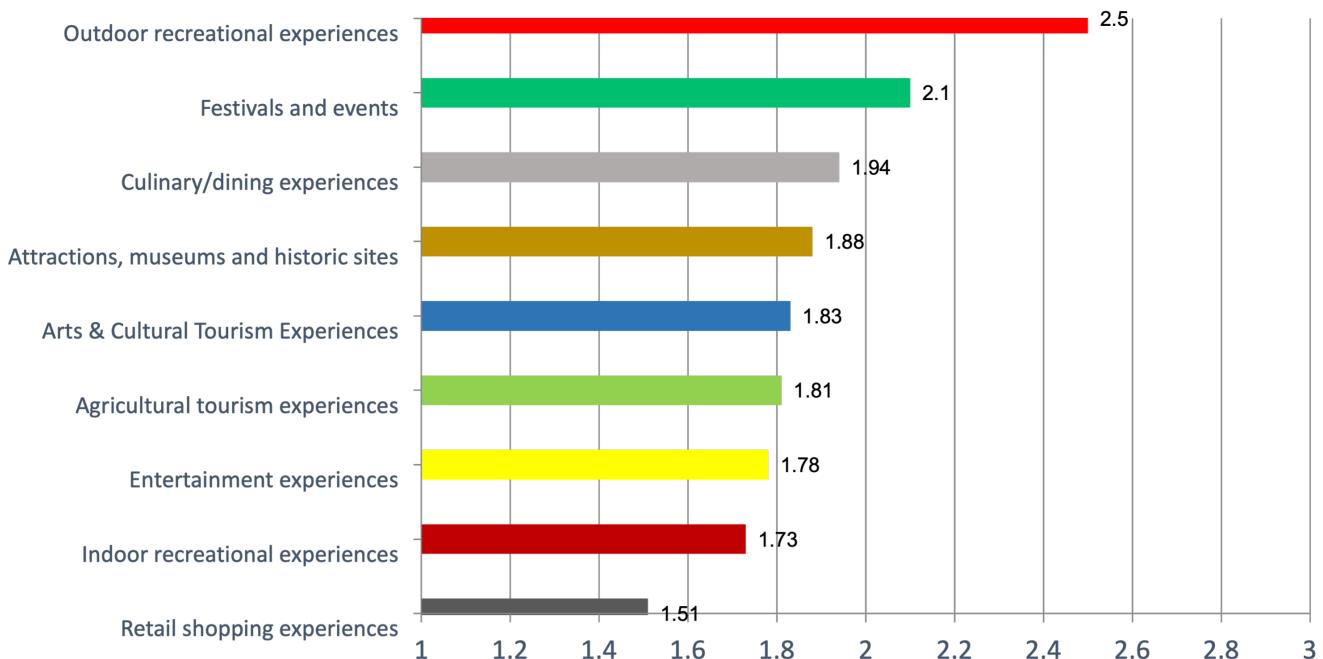
Northern Ontario should focus on attracting ... (1-Strongly Disagree; 5-Strongly Agree)



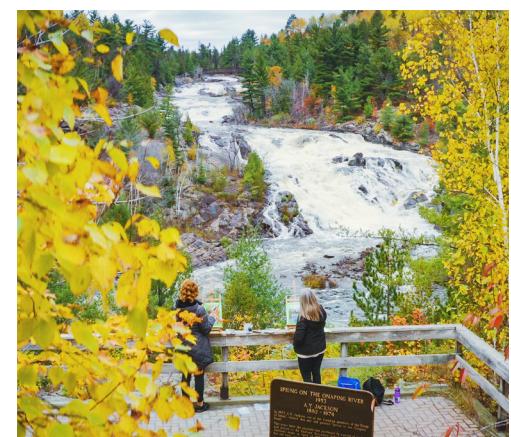
Residents strongly believe tourism's positive benefits outweigh negative impacts and overwhelmingly support encouraging locals to explore their own region. Unsurprisingly, outdoor recreation experiences ranked very high for quality, while indoor recreation and shopping opportunities rated lowest.

Experiences in Northern Ontario

Please indicate your perception of the following experiences in Northern Ontario.
(1-Low Quality; 3-High Quality)



The results reveal a community that prioritizes sustainable, respectful tourism development over purely economic considerations, providing a framework for tourism development that enhances rather than compromises community character.



Summary of Engagement Feedback

Regional Strengths and Competitive Assets

Northern Ontario's stakeholder community identified several core strengths that position the region as a distinctive destination. The most significant competitive advantage was the region's Indigenous market-ready product available across Northern Ontario, with authentic experiences that differentiate the region from other Canadian destinations.

The region's comprehensive outdoor recreation infrastructure emerged as a fundamental strength, including hunting and angling opportunities, extensive snowmobiling networks, water-based activities, Aurora Borealis, dark sky and unique polar bear viewing experiences unavailable elsewhere in Canada.

Established anchor attractions including Science North, the Agawa Canyon Train and Fort William Historical Park provide weather-independent experiences, while Northern Ontario's geographic positioning creates market access advantages within driving distance of major population centres and key U.S. markets. Most importantly, stakeholders consistently identified tremendous Northern pride among residents as creating authentic hospitality that provides a foundation for sustainable tourism development.

Critical Issues and Weaknesses

The engagement process revealed substantial barriers limiting Northern Ontario's tourism potential. The most critical challenge was access to Northern Ontario, particularly insufficient and costly airlift between cities, compounded by poor highway conditions and inadequate rest stops. Accommodation challenges create acute constraints with insufficient summer season availability and aging properties that fail to meet visitor expectations.



Workforce shortages affect service consistency, particularly in remote seasonal operations, while digital infrastructure gaps with poor internet connectivity limit both business efficiency and visitor satisfaction. Market development faces barriers including limited awareness of Northern Ontario's offerings, U.S. market challenges and cost constraints, including prohibitively expensive event hosting and limited access to development capital.

Strategic Opportunities for Growth

Stakeholders identified numerous opportunities that could transform Northern Ontario's tourism landscape. Regional collaboration emerged as the most significant opportunity. As one stakeholder noted, "Each of us on our own doesn't have enough to justify a full trip, but together we do". Better coordination between regions could create compelling multi-destination experiences that extend visitor stays.

Seasonal extension through shoulder season programming, market diversification among new demographics and infrastructure development, including rail service expansion and conference facility upgrades, present significant potential. Experience development remains largely untapped, particularly for Indigenous tourism enhancement and environmental stewardship experiences that could differentiate Northern Ontario from competitors.

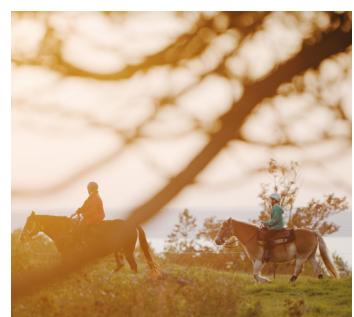
Industry Evolution and Community Support

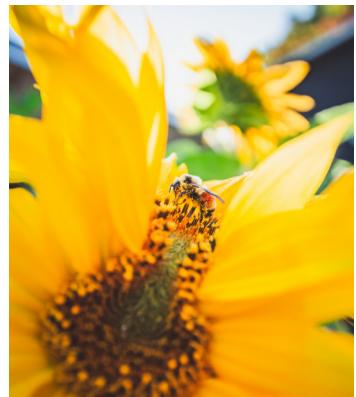
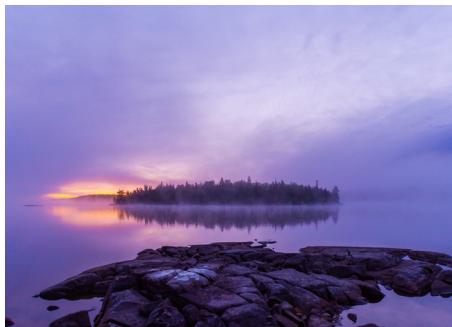
The tourism industry's need for strategic evolution emerged as a central theme. As one focus group participant summarized: "It comes down to three needs: Money, people, skills". Another stated: "We want to be resilient, strong and supported," reflecting the industry's recognition that success requires collaborative approaches.

The engagement revealed strong enthusiasm for collaborative tourism development, with communities embracing hosting opportunities. As one participant noted: "Your event won't get lost in Northern Ontario. Our communities really embrace conferences and events". The comprehensive resident sentiment survey revealed strong community support for tourism development when aligned with local values, particularly emphasizing the importance of preserving culture and environment.

Foundation for Strategic Action

The extensive stakeholder engagement reveals a tourism industry and community ready for strategic evolution. While significant challenges around access, accommodation and workforce require attention, Northern Ontario's distinctive assets, collaborative spirit and commitment to authentic experiences provide a strong foundation for sustainable tourism development. The insights gathered directly inform the strategic goals and initiatives outlined in this Destination Master Plan, ensuring that development priorities reflect the collective wisdom and aspirations of Northern Ontario's diverse tourism community.





KEY TAKEAWAYS

Through deep engagement with tourism operators, community leaders, Indigenous tourism partners and residents across Northern Ontario, five key insights emerged that highlight both the region's untapped potential and the barriers holding it back. Despite these challenges, a strong sense of community and collaboration positions Northern Ontario for meaningful transformation. These insights form the foundation for strategic action that addresses infrastructure gaps while leveraging the region's greatest strengths: its people, natural heritage and shared spirit of cooperation.

- Access to Northern Ontario is a barrier to visitation.
- There is tremendous pride amongst residents of Northern Ontario.
- Residents and industry agree that preservation of culture and environment are critical to the long-term needs and success of the region.
- The industry needs to evolve. To do so requires support in the form of access to capital, insurance and skilled workforce.

"It comes down to three needs: Money, people, skills."
- Sue (Focus Group participant)

"We want to be resilient, strong and supported."
- Melanie (Focus Group participant)

- There are unlimited opportunities for experience development of all kinds and industry collaboration to fill out itineraries.

"Your event won't get lost in Northern Ontario. Our communities really embrace conferences and events."
- Alana (Focus Group participant)

"Each of us on our own doesn't have enough to justify a full trip, but together we do." - James (Focus Group participant)

Visioning Workshop

The results and insights gleaned during the engagement phase of the project were then used in a visioning workshop with the Steering Committee to envision the ideal future of tourism management for Northern Ontario and to develop priorities for the plan.

Validation Session

The workshop findings were consolidated into a comprehensive Destination Master Plan, which was subsequently shared with the Steering Committee, Destination Northern Ontario staff and other key stakeholders for review and input.

Board Ratification

Following the plan's endorsement from the steering committee, the board ratified the plan.

DESTINATION VISION

After months of meticulous assessments, research and invaluable input from stakeholders and residents, the Steering Committee adopted this shared vision for Northern Ontario. It is designed to guide and inspire the strategic direction of this 10-year Destination Master Plan.

The purpose of defining a long-term vision is to imprint an image of what is possible. That mental picture must be realistic to ensure buy-in. At the same time, it also must stretch the imagination to highlight what will be possible when local leaders and residents rally around the plan's strategic framework and work together on its implementation. Ultimately, the destination vision is designed to motivate and encourage people to contribute to making the vision a reality.

This vision was designed to impart:

Inspiration

A vision that the community is motivated to achieve.

Aspiration

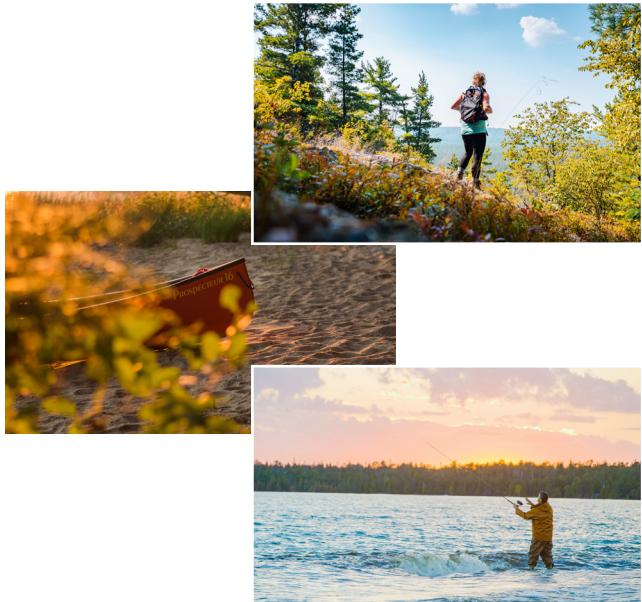
A vision that reflects bold possibilities for the future.

Continuity

A vision that builds on the key priorities, progress and values of the region.

“Northern Ontario is a must-visit part of the Canadian experience.”

GOALS & INITIATIVES



The following strategic goals represent the collective aspirations of Northern Ontario's tourism stakeholders and community members, emerging directly from extensive engagement across the region. These interconnected goals provide a roadmap for sustainable tourism development that addresses the region's most critical challenges while leveraging its distinctive competitive advantages.

Rooted in the fundamental insight that Northern Ontario's success depends on collaboration, these goals recognize that transforming the region's tourism potential requires strategic coordination across vast geography, authentic preservation of Northern character and innovative solutions to access barriers that currently limit visitation. Together, they create a framework for sustainable growth that enhances economic opportunities while preserving the culture, environment and genuine community spirit that residents value most and that provide Northern Ontario's greatest competitive differentiation in today's tourism marketplace.

#1 Develop Integrated Experiences in All Seasons

#2 Foster Regional Collaboration and Industry Evolution

#3 Advocate for Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity Solutions

#4 Champion Authentic Northern Character and Environmental Stewardship

Strategic Goal #1

Develop Integrated Experiences in All Seasons

Northern Ontario's tourism economy faces a critical challenge: pronounced seasonality that concentrates visitor activity into brief summer months, creating significant economic vulnerability for businesses forced to struggle through extended off-seasons. This seasonal imbalance prevents the region from realizing its extraordinary potential as a year-round destination showcasing unparalleled natural assets and authentic Indigenous experiences.

While Northern Ontario possesses distinctive competitive advantages, such as vast wilderness areas, pristine lakes and rich Indigenous heritage, transforming into a dynamic four-season destination requires strategic investment in experiences and infrastructure that operate successfully regardless of weather conditions. The region's Indigenous culture represents a particularly defensible asset, offering authentic experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere and appeal to travellers seeking meaningful, transformative encounters.

Addressing seasonality requires a comprehensive investment strategy combining public and private resources. Exploring a regional accommodation tax can generate sustainable revenue specifically dedicated to tourism product development, ensuring those who benefit from improved infrastructure contribute to its creation and maintenance.

Strategic investment priorities must focus on accommodations that operate profitably year-round, particularly luxury and unique lodging options that command premium rates.

These developments should emphasize authentic Northern Ontario experiences, from Indigenous-operated cultural lodges to eco-luxury wilderness retreats that provide contemporary comfort while showcasing natural assets.

Waterfront development presents exceptional opportunities to create signature experiences leveraging the region's abundant water resources. Strategic investments in waterfront accommodations, distinctive dining venues and recreational infrastructure can transform underutilized shoreline areas into vibrant tourism anchors operating across multiple seasons.

The further development of infrastructure supporting the business event sector, in order to attract conferences and meetings, supports visitation year round in urban and resort areas which results in bleisure visits (leisure visitation extending from business travel) in surrounding areas. Business events also are a catalyst for collaboration, investment and trade.

The de-risking program for entrepreneurs encourages innovation by providing financial support, mentorship and reduced regulatory barriers, fostering the entrepreneurial activity necessary to create distinctive experiences that differentiate Northern Ontario from competing destinations.

Creating four-season experiences requires adapting core offerings to different seasonal conditions while maintaining essential appeal.

Indigenous cultural experiences offer particular promise, as storytelling, traditional arts and cultural education can be presented effectively year-round through indoor cultural centres, interpretive experiences and hands-on workshops.

Each regional area should develop distinctive “must-do” experiences that cannot be found elsewhere, creating compelling reasons for visitors to explore multiple areas during extended stays. This regional approach prevents tourism concentration in single areas while ensuring each region develops products aligned with unique assets and community priorities.

Success depends on connectivity between regions, both physical and experiential, enabling visitors to move seamlessly between areas while understanding how each contributes to their overall Northern Ontario experience.

STRATEGIC GOAL #1

Actionable Initiatives

a. Explore a regional accommodation tax to fund development opportunities

b. Attract investment to the region through:

- Accommodations (including luxury and unique/niche)
- Waterfront experiences: accommodations, dining, boardwalks, etc.
- Meetings and conference infrastructure development and promotion
- Development of a de-risking program for entrepreneurs

c. Develop experiences that will attract visitation in all seasons

Experiences that can be adjusted throughout the year to accommodate year-round visitors

d. Develop areas-of-focus in each region

Develop “must-do” experiences in each region

Strategic Goal #2

Foster Regional Collaboration and Industry Evolution

Northern Ontario's tourism industry operates within a fragmented ecosystem where individual operators often work in isolation, limiting their collective ability to compete with destinations that present unified, professionally delivered visitor experiences. The region's vast geography and diverse communities have traditionally functioned as separate tourism entities rather than as an integrated destination, preventing visitors from experiencing the full spectrum of Northern Ontario's exceptional assets.

The challenge extends beyond individual business performance to encompass the entire visitor journey. Inconsistent service delivery, limited digital presence and workforce gaps create friction points that diminish visitor satisfaction and reduce positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Meanwhile, growing traveler sophistication, particularly regarding digital engagement, personalized experiences and inclusive environments, requires continuous industry evolution to remain competitive in the global tourism marketplace.

Creating seamless multi-destination experiences requires comprehensive industry development that elevates service standards while building collaborative networks among operators. A regional customer service training program represents a foundational investment that can establish consistent service excellence across Northern Ontario's diverse tourism businesses.

This would address the unique challenges of delivering exceptional hospitality in remote locations while celebrating the authentic character that makes the region special.

Training programs for owner / operators about experience diversification are essential for building business resilience and extending visitor seasons. Many operators focus on single-season activities without understanding how to adapt their core strengths to create year-round appeal. Professional development in experience diversification can help businesses identify untapped revenue opportunities while contributing to regional seasonal extension goals.

Advocating for elevated quality standards in accommodations and experiences ensures Northern Ontario can compete effectively with established tourism destinations. This involves setting higher standards while providing resources and support necessary for operators to achieve and maintain elevated service and facility quality.

Technology training addressing social media, Google optimization and AI applications is crucial for helping operators reach contemporary travellers who increasingly rely on digital platforms for destination discovery and booking. Enhanced access to tourism data empowers operators to make informed decisions about market opportunities, pricing strategies and experience development.

Northern Ontario faces significant workforce challenges requiring targeted intervention. Diversity training programs addressing newcomers and LGBTQ2+ inclusion are essential for creating welcoming environments that reflect contemporary traveler expectations while tapping into emerging workforce segments.

Addressing skilled labour gaps requires comprehensive workforce development programs combining traditional hospitality training with region-specific skills, such as outdoor recreation leadership, Indigenous cultural interpretation and remote area operations. These programs should create clear career pathways that encourage local talent retention while attracting skilled workers from other regions.

Success depends on creating a collaborative ecosystem where operators understand their role in delivering exceptional regional experiences, supported by necessary training, technology and workforce development to meet evolving visitor expectations.

STRATEGIC GOAL #2

Actionable Initiatives

Invest in industry development

- a. Develop a regional customer service training program
- b. Develop a training program for owner / operators about importance of diversification of experiences and offerings
- c. Advocate for and support the elevation of quality of accommodations and experiences
- d. Offer technology, social media, Google optimization and AI training to operators
- e. Offer enhanced access to data for tourism industry members

Support workforce development

- f. Develop diversity training for businesses (topics of newcomers and LGBTQ2+)
- g. Develop programs to address skilled labour gaps

Strategic Goal #3

Advocate for Strategic Infrastructure and Connectivity Solutions

Northern Ontario's extraordinary tourism potential is fundamentally constrained by accessibility challenges that prevent many visitors from experiencing the region's natural and cultural assets. The region's geography, which creates its distinctive appeal and authentic wilderness character, simultaneously presents significant barriers to visitor access, limiting economic opportunities for communities. Without strategic infrastructure improvements and coordinated connectivity solutions, Northern Ontario cannot compete effectively with more accessible destinations that offer comparable outdoor experiences.

The accessibility challenge extends beyond transportation logistics to encompass the entire visitor journey, from initial trip planning through departure. Inconsistent air service, deteriorating road conditions, limited rail connectivity and inadequate digital infrastructure, create cumulative barriers that discourage visitation and limit stay duration. These access limitations particularly impact high-value visitor segments, including international travellers, accessibility-conscious tourists and multi-generational families, who require reliable, comfortable transportation options and comprehensive trip planning information.

Addressing air access opportunities through practical and innovative approaches is essential for connecting Northern Ontario to major population centres and international markets.

The region's airports represent critical gateways that require strategic investment and service development to ensure reliable, year-round connectivity. This includes advocating for expanded service, improved facilities and innovative solutions such as regional air partnerships.

Ground transportation improvements, particularly advocating for upgrades to the Trans-Canada Highway and enhanced road conditions, directly impact visitor safety, comfort and accessibility. Poor road conditions and inadequate highway infrastructure not only limit visitor access but create negative first impressions that can undermine the entire tourism experience.

Rail connectivity through VIA Rail service and the Northlander Passenger Train represents an environmentally sustainable transportation option that can serve both residents and visitors while reducing highway congestion. Consistent rail service provides scenic travel experiences and offers mobility options for visitors who prefer not to drive long distances.

Advancing wayfinding programs and addressing government-owned highway signage eliminates confusion and frustration that can diminish visitor experiences. Comprehensive wayfinding systems should guide visitors seamlessly between destinations and highlight attractions and services that support local economic development.

Supporting rental car availability and consistent hours of service addresses a fundamental barrier for fly-in visitors who need reliable ground transportation. Enhanced rest stop programs and inter-community travel options create safer, more comfortable journey experiences and support beautification and placemaking initiatives.

WiFi connectivity improvements are essential for contemporary travellers who expect reliable digital access for navigation, communication and experience sharing, making connectivity infrastructure a prerequisite for competitive tourism development.

STRATEGIC GOAL #3

Actionable Initiatives

Advocate for enhanced access to Northern Ontario, including:

- a. Address strategic air access opportunities
- b. Advocate for government to address ground access (TCH doubling, road conditions, etc)
- c. Advocate for consistent and convenient rail connectivity (VIA Rail and Northlander Passenger Train)
- d. Continue to advance wayfinding program and address government-owned highway signage
- e. Support and advocate for rental car availability and consistent hours of service
- f. Develop program to enhance and maintain rest stops
- g. Advocate for inter- and intra-community travel
- h. Support beautification and placemaking initiatives in communities
- i. Work with government and service providers to address WiFi connectivity

Strategic Goal #4

Champion Authentic Northern Character and Environmental Stewardship

Northern Ontario's pristine natural environment and rich Indigenous heritage represent the region's key competitive advantages, yet these assets face increasing pressure from climate change, overtourism and accessibility barriers that limit their long-term viability and inclusive appeal. In an era where travellers increasingly seek destinations that demonstrate environmental responsibility, a commitment to sustainability and social inclusion, Northern Ontario has an opportunity to position itself as a leader in sustainable tourism practices while ensuring that its extraordinary experiences are accessible to visitors of all abilities.

The region's vast wilderness areas, clean lakes and intact ecosystems provide both the foundation for authentic tourism experiences and the responsibility to protect these assets for future generations. However, without strategic sustainability initiatives and comprehensive accessibility measures, Northern Ontario risks undermining its appeal and excluding significant visitor segments who could contribute to economic growth and cultural exchange.

Creating and elevating market-ready Indigenous experiences represents both a sustainability imperative and an economic opportunity. Indigenous-operated tourism experiences offer authentic cultural encounters and ensure that economic benefits flow directly to Indigenous communities. These experiences must be developed according to Indigenous protocols and community priorities, creating sustainable economic opportunities that strengthen cultural preservation and transmission.

Supporting sustainable practices at events and festivals addresses a critical area where large gatherings can either demonstrate a commitment to sustainability and environmental leadership, or contribute to ecological degradation. By encouraging waste reduction, local sourcing and environmentally responsible operations, Northern Ontario's events can become models for sustainable celebration, and at the same time, reduce their environmental footprint.

Promoting walkability options in urban destinations and increasing mobility through bike trails and walking paths creates low-impact transportation alternatives that enhance visitor experiences and reduce vehicle emissions. These infrastructure investments support both environmental goals and visitor health, and create opportunities for slower, more immersive destination experiences.

Investing in and promoting EV chargers at visitor destinations addresses the growing market of environmentally conscious travellers while supporting the transition to cleaner transportation. Strategic placement of charging infrastructure can influence visitor routing, demonstrating the region's commitment to environmental stewardship.

Collaborating with the industry to support electric and environmentally favourable equipment helps operators reduce their environmental impact and can achieve cost savings through improved efficiency and reduced fuel consumption.

Creating an inventory of accessible experiences and accommodations provides essential information for visitors with disabilities and will identify gaps that require attention. This comprehensive assessment will form the foundation for strategic accessibility improvements and marketing efforts targeting the significant accessible travel market segment.

Partnering with government or private funders to incentivize accessibility adjustments and retrofits at experiences and accommodations recognizes that many operators need financial support to implement necessary modifications. These partnerships can leverage public and private resources to create more inclusive tourism experiences and support business sustainability.

By championing a commitment to sustainability and accessibility as core differentiators, Northern Ontario can attract environmentally and socially conscious travellers, protect the natural and cultural assets that form the foundation of its tourism appeal and create sustainable economic benefits for communities across the region.

STRATEGIC GOAL #4

Actionable Initiatives

Support the advancement of sustainability initiatives:

- a. Continue to create and elevate market-ready Indigenous-owned experiences
- b. Support and encourage sustainable practices at events & festivals
- c. Promote safe and appealing walkability options in urban destinations
- d. Increase mobility options through bike trails, walking paths, etc
- e. Invest in and promote EV chargers at visitor destinations
- f. Collaborate with industry to support electric and environmentally favourable equipment

Assess and invest in accessibility measures

- g. Create and inventory of accessible experiences and accommodations
- h. Partner with government or private funders to incentivize accessibility adjustments and retrofits at experiences and accommodations



Next Steps

The Steering Committee, composed of regional leaders, have indicated their interest in supporting the ongoing implementation of the strategic recommendations of this Plan. It is recommended that DNO staff continue to leverage the expertise, enthusiasm and resources of the Steering Committee members and other industry stakeholders.

It is further recommended that there is public reporting to stakeholders on the progress of the Plan to demonstrate accountability and highlight the efforts and organizations involved. The consideration of funding sources to enable the implementation would also be a critical step in advancing the initiatives outlined.

With dedicated focus, the DNO team and its stakeholders will achieve great success fulfilling the objectives of this long-term Destination Master Plan and growing the visitor economy in Northern Ontario for the benefits of residents and visitors alike.

To be successful, long-term strategic planning requires significant focus on implementation.

It is recommended that as stewards of the 10-year Destination Master Plan, Destination Northern Ontario (DNO) appoint a champion responsible for the implementation and ongoing work related to the Plan.