

# SUSTAINABLE TOP 100 DESTINATION SUCCESS STORY

## Thompson Okanagan – Canada

When did the story of the Thompson Okanagan as a sustainable destination begin? At the start of time when continental drift and volcanic activity shaped our mountain ranges, river beds and landscapes? Through time immemorial - etched in pictographs depicting a promise entrusting the care of our earth mother to the hands of her first children; or in 2012 when ninety towns, hamlets and cities united with thirty-three indigenous communities to create a 10 Year Regional Tourism Strategy, Embracing our Potential? Filled with legacies, legends and hope our Strategy is an informed roadmap; a creed forged on the belief that we are all responsible to preserve authentic experiences, culture and lands for those yet to arrive.

Sometimes, it's hard to know what will be published when you first put pen to paper, but it's not hard to imagine the future when the story being written is a pledge to protect it. Criss-crossing a Region the size of Ireland, it took eighteen months to inform our Strategy. We listened to understand, we challenged assumptions refusing to accept the status quo, and we dug deeper seeking responsible enlightenment capable of transforming the role of sustainable tourism in the Region. In 2012, our Strategy was released to the world and today serves as a roadmap for others driving for sustainability.

Witnessing signs of over-tourism and visitor fatigue we knew we had to address the challenges we faced from a new level of engagement that helped disperse visitors across the region, and the seasons. Adopting big data and informed innovation, the Strategy advanced our search for an inspired designation to advance our common effort. In 2017, the Thompson Okanagan became the first Region in the Americas to achieve Biosphere Certification aligning the most ecologically diverse Region in Canada with the 17 UN Sustainable Goals.

To fully appreciate that which we protect, one needs only experience the essence of the Thompson Okanagan - slowing down to savour the unspoiled gems waiting just around the next bend. From dramatic desert hikes to the rugged romance of our northern ranches, the Region shelters one of Mother Nature's most diverse all-season playgrounds.

Breath-taking geography, four mountain ranges and an endless strand of pristine lakes offer all-season recreation and experiences. Canada's longest Rail Trail network meanders 650 kilometres providing unspoiled biking and hiking experiences. If you prefer to paddle, the North and South Thompson Rivers connect Shuswap Lake to the mighty Fraser River as it carves its way through Gold Country.

Our history and culture are diverse and bountiful. Home to three Indigenous Nations, the Nlaka'pamux, Okanagan Syilx, and Secwepemc, whose ancestral lands provide sanctuary to Canada's largest representation of sensitive plant and animal species, we are a nation on the road to reconciliation and preservation.



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Pioneering immigrants planted the seeds of the slow food movement, growing fruit and vegetables on fertile lands while others ran cattle on ranges that dominate higher ground. The harmonious relationship our chefs, winemakers, farmers, and artisans share with the earth offers enthusiasts a plethora of organic small-batch breweries, cideries, distilleries, and markets serving everything from cheese to candied salmon and local art.

Bird watching enthusiasts, fishermen and stargazers from around the globe come to experience the natural wonder of our Region and its inhabitants, while travellers come to immerse themselves in remarkable experiences and accessible spaces.

Our job is to ensure that our community continues to thrive for generations yet to come. That the contributions of those who came before are respected and fortified as together, we change the story of our times.

To do this we needed to create a powerful platform to connect sustainable and responsible tourism operators to an eco-system focused on attracting the right visitors to the right place, at the right time. We needed to hone our communications to reach travellers who share our values and deep regard for life on a finite planet, and we needed to do it with conviction.

Today, we are humbled to share that we are changing the story of our times one experience, one operator, one partner, and one endorsement at a time. What began as a dream of creating a tourism foundation based on responsible practices and aligned practitioners is becoming a reality. Through our Biosphere Adhesion Initiative, we are uniting local operators to address the 17 UN Sustainable Goal Areas connecting our communities to the social and economic benefits of tourism, for good.

Partnering with Indigenous Tourism British Columbia and the Okanagan Nations Alliance on sustainable and mobilized retail business models, we are setting the standard for advancing and preserving our Indigenous culture, arts and authenticity. Through a memorandum of agreement with Spinal Cord British Columbia, we have founded Accessible BC, an organization working towards ensuring accessible access to all our Regions assets further advancing tourism for people of all ages and abilities. For our efforts we have seen our tourism days grow from 45 in 2012, to close to 120 active days in 2017.

We are humbled to be recognized as ambassadors for sustainable and responsible tourism winning the World Travel and Tourism Council's Tourism for Tomorrow Award for 2018, the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual World Travel Award (WTA), and the WTA North America's Responsible Tourism Award along with a respected list of awards celebrating our commitment to advance practices that connect people to the sustainable economic and social benefits of responsible tourism.

In closing, in fall 2019 we will welcome the world to the Indigenous Tourism of Canada (ITAC) Conference hosted on the ancestral territory of the Syilx Nation. In partnership with all three



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Indigenous Nations of the Region, we will announce our Regional Visitor Sustainability Pledge fulfilling a promise entrusting the care of our earth from a mother to her first children.

Learnings:

“Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others; it is the only means”. Albert Einstein

“Sometimes the questions are complicated, and the answers are simple.” Dr Seuss

Getting to where we are today didn't happen overnight, it didn't happen because an organization put pen to paper and signed off on a Strategy – it happened because the people of a community joined hands, shared ideas and committed to preserving the common ground they called home. Realizing that we are not competing, we joined forces to promote our Region, our values and inherent right to choose who we invite to visit our home. Understanding that when we declared “we will not do tourism for tourism's sake” it was really a rallying call for our Biosphere Destination Certification, unifying us in pursuit of tourism that protects and preserves what we value most. The rest is pretty straightforward.

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