

RIVER OF RELATIONSHIPS: OUR JOURNEY AS PARTNERS

A REPORT BY TRAVEL ALBERTA AND INDIGENOUS TOURISM ALBERTA

2024



Travel
Alberta
Canada 



INDIGENOUS
TOURISM
ALBERTA

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the spirit of respect, reciprocity and truth, we honour and acknowledge the traditional territories of the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Alberta. We value these sacred gathering places and aim to inspire others to appreciate and embrace stewardship of the land as they explore our great province.

Alberta is situated within historical and present-day lands that Indigenous Peoples have cared for and lived on for generations. We honour the territories of Treaty 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10 and their signatories, including the Blackfoot Confederacy, Cree, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Stoney Nakoda, Tsuut'ina, Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota homelands. We also honour the homeland of the Métis, the Otipemisiwak Métis Government, the 22 Métis Districts, and the 8 Métis Settlements within the historic North-West. We acknowledge the many Indigenous Peoples living in urban areas throughout the province. We appreciate that modern borders do not align with traditional land use, and we honour the neighbouring Indigenous communities outside of Alberta who have travelled and inhabited this land throughout history.



Wild West Badlands Tours, Drumheller

TRAVEL ALBERTA AND INDIGENOUS TOURISM ALBERTA

LETTER FROM THE CEOs

In the Cree language, the word *wahkohtowin* describes the interconnectedness of relationships. It's a big idea that describes the bonds between people, communities, nature and spirit, and even offers us ways of moving through the world in meaningful ways. These ideas exist in Indigenous cultures all over Turtle Island, but there isn't a word in English that perfectly captures its full meaning.

In the business world, we often hear of the importance of partnerships, but the ideas of *wahkohtowin* go deeper than transactional business arrangements. It ties parties together in deeper ways, through shared values, goals and commitments to each other. It brings mutual benefits to everyone involved in ways that are impossible alone. It's coming together to move forward.

This is the foundation — and the aspiration — of the relationship between Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta. Yes, there are business goals to be achieved through this relationship to grow the visitor economy, increase the GDP contributions of the tourism sector and build jobs and businesses for the future. But achieving these goals through reciprocity means it will be done together in ways that will benefit all. Growth will come with understanding. Opportunity will come with openness. Challenges will be met with respect.

It's important to acknowledge that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in the tourism industry in Alberta haven't always lived up to these ideals. Promises have gone unfulfilled, and opportunities squandered. As we move forward, missteps are inevitable. But the great opportunity of Indigenous tourism is that it can do so much. It can provide transformative experiences for visitors while also benefitting Indigenous entrepreneurs, families and communities, support the revitalization of language and culture and foster true reconciliation across the industry, all while growing the visitor economy in ways that benefit everyone.

Only by building a relationship that stays true to the guiding principles detailed in this document — partnership, responsibility, respect and reciprocity — can we truly seize these opportunities. Not only will this be a competitive edge in a hyper-competitive industry in which demand for Indigenous tourism experiences continues to grow, but it can also be a foundation for tangible reconciliation. It is by staying true to the spirit of *wahkohtowin* that we can all succeed together.



David Goldstein
Chief Executive Officer
Travel Alberta

Shae Bird
Chief Executive Officer
Indigenous Tourism Alberta

INTRODUCTION



Travel Alberta

Travel Alberta is the Destination Management Organization for the province of Alberta. Established in 2009, Travel Alberta is a Crown corporation, responsible for driving the growth of the visitor economy by developing and promoting must-visit destinations throughout the province. We do this by helping businesses build memorable products and experiences, marketing those products and experiences to the world and ensuring visitors have access to them. As a Crown corporation, Travel Alberta understands the difficult legacy between the Crown, who we represent, and Indigenous Peoples. As we walk along our reconciliation journey, we are cognizant of this history.



Indigenous Tourism Alberta

Indigenous Tourism Alberta provides leadership in the development and promotion of authentic Indigenous tourism experiences in the province. We are actively working towards fostering a thriving Indigenous tourism economy that shares authentic, memorable, and enriching experiences. With nearly 200 members, Indigenous Tourism Alberta is one of the fastest growing Indigenous tourism organizations in the country.



Our Individual and Shared Histories

Since its inception in 2009, Travel Alberta operated as a destination promotion organization, marketing export-ready tourism experiences domestically and internationally. As Indigenous tourism operators sought our assistance with marketing, Travel Alberta incorporated these operators into our promotional strategies.

In 2018, Indigenous Tourism Alberta (ITA) was founded with the support of Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) by creating a board made up of Indigenous tourism businesses owners across Alberta that were already working with ITAC. From there, ITA established a funding agreement with the province of Alberta to create an organization, including matching funding from ITAC. There was limited funding with this agreement.

In 2020, ITA hired a new Executive Director to help build out the foundation of the organization, build up a team while renewing trust for the organization, and creating support systems for the industry that was greatly impacted by COVID-19. The priority of the organization from March 2020 onward was to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 to ensure there was an Indigenous tourism industry to support post-pandemic. The Majority of pandemic supports provided by the Federal government did not support Indigenous-owned businesses, so ITA advocated and worked strongly with ITAC to find supports for direct liquidity for their members. In doing so, Indigenous tourism businesses in Alberta mitigated the impacts of COVID twice as strong as the national average of insolvency numbers for Indigenous tourism throughout COVID.

In 2021, the Government of Alberta expanded Travel Alberta's mandate from destination promotion to destination management. Under this new mandate, the organization partners with destination organizations, communities, and operators to develop tourism products and experiences. This expanded capacity also provided an opportunity to connect on a more grassroots level with established and aspiring Indigenous tourism operators.

Concurrently, Indigenous Tourism Alberta has grown exponentially since 2018. The organization had established meaningful relationships across the province, fostering an Indigenous tourism industry within Alberta. ITA continued to prove themselves as a reputable organization, building trust with partners and providing industry-leading results for mitigating the impact of COVID while ensuring the growth of the new organization.

In light of the expanded capacity of both our organizations, we decided to deepen this partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2021. Together as partners, Indigenous Tourism Alberta and Travel Alberta would work together to not only promote Indigenous operators, but to support the development of new Indigenous tourism experiences and drive the growth of the sector. This MOU showed the trust between Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta, establishing ITA's first multi-year funding agreement, creating consistency that would be leveraged for further sustainable funding.

In 2023, Indigenous Tourism Alberta and Travel Alberta renewed our MOU for a second time. With the largest ever commitment in our histories, this agreement cemented our relationship with a dedicated, intentional focus to build, grow, and promote authentic Indigenous tourism experiences across the province. Further, this MOU created an avenue for Travel Alberta to incorporate Indigenous tourism into our strategy, affirming Indigenous partnerships play a key role in our future.





Fallen Mountain Soap, Grande Cache

TRAVEL ALBERTA AND INDIGENOUS TOURISM ALBERTA

A RIVER OF RELATIONSHIPS



Over the last four years, Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta have been on a journey. We invite you to see this journey as a river of relationship building. ITA began this journey in 2018, and Travel Alberta joined with our first MOU and detailed funding agreement in 2021. Since then, we have brought other industry, operators, and Indigenous partners onboard. Together, we are in the same boat, rowing towards our shared goal of a flourishing Indigenous tourism sector in Alberta.

In our boat, we are travelling together as equals. Each traveller on our journey has an important role to play. ITA has largely been our navigator, setting the course for how we get to our destination through their connection to communities. Travel Alberta has been the rudder, driving sector-wide alignment, as well as navigating rocks and other barriers. Our industry partners have been the rowers, working within their communities to provide localized support. Indigenous communities and partners are the north star of this journey. We are led by Indigenous partners to foster an industry that celebrates authenticity, sustainability,

and connection. As the journey stretches further down the river, we may each take on different roles, but the vital role of collaboration and responsibility to one another will not waiver, nor will our commitment to ensuring that all Indigenous tourism development is Indigenous-led.

This journey is long, and we have only just begun. But as with any journey, we have come to place where it makes sense to take a moment, pause and reflect on our journey so far; ensure those who started with us are still with us; invite other travellers to sail alongside us; and chart the best course forward.

We hope the following document creates a clear picture for our Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners about who Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta are, what we hope to offer as partners in tourism development, and our intentions for relationship building.



River Ranche Lodge, Siksika



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The principles below are the basis of the relationship between Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta. On our relationship river, we look to these principles as our paddles. With these principles as our framework, we will pull our boat forward, ensuring our journey is shaped by these core values.

Partnership

Equity, sharing of knowledge, collaboration, trust, accountability

Reciprocity

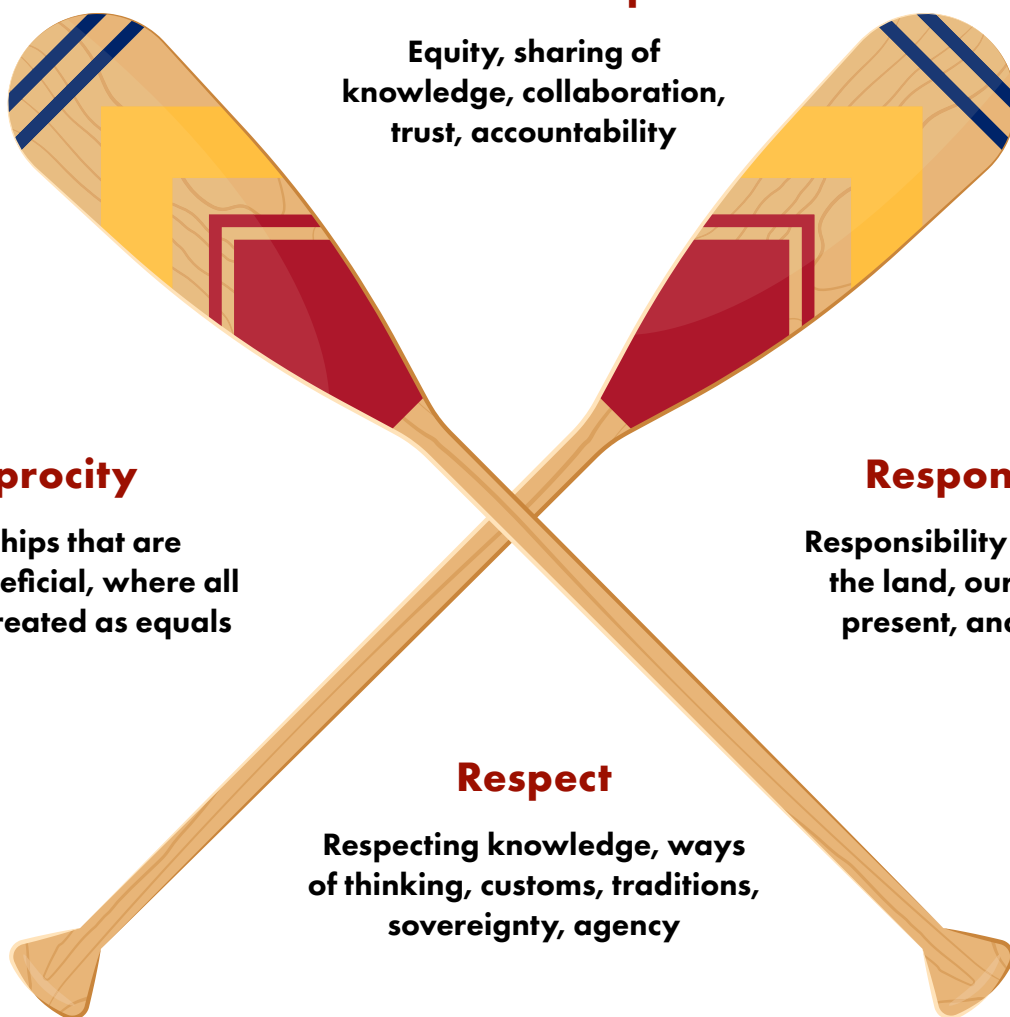
Relationships that are mutually beneficial, where all parties are treated as equals

Responsibility

Responsibility to each other, the land, our history, our present, and our future

Respect

Respecting knowledge, ways of thinking, customs, traditions, sovereignty, agency



INDIGENOUS TOURISM

In its simplest terms, Indigenous tourism describes tourism products, experiences and businesses that are majority-owned by Indigenous Peoples.

But Indigenous tourism is so much more than that. Every day, at both Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta, we see the incredible impact that Indigenous tourism has. Indigenous tourism can foster thriving communities, create a platform to share cultures, inspire a deeper connection to the land, and create economic sovereignty. For many non-Indigenous travellers, authentic Indigenous experiences are also a key component to learning about reconciliation.

In the tourism market, there is a strong demand for authentic Indigenous tourism experiences. One in two Albertans are looking for an Indigenous tourism experience, and so are one in three international travellers.

INDIGENOUS TOURISM ALBERTA PROGRAMS



Indigenous Tourism Alberta offers a robust system of programs to help grow tourism businesses from idea to export ready.

Entrepreneur Workshop

In partnership with Business Link, we provide an entrepreneur workshop that outlines the

Indigenous Tourism industry and how to move your idea into a business plan and next steps.

Strengthening Our Roots

This is an innovative initiative designed to match Indigenous tourism operators in Alberta with experienced business coaches, known as Mentors, to provide practical, meaningful one-on-one guidance.

Using customized resources such as the THRIVE tourism assessment tool, the Tourism Business Builders, and other training resources/initiatives from ITA, ITA team members work

with the tourism operators to identify gaps in their business operations and work with them to find solutions and set positive direction.

The program is aimed at supporting businesses in Alberta's Indigenous tourism industry, with a particular focus on smaller scale independently owned companies in the visitor and early market ready stages within ITA's Market Preparedness categories.



Six Senses Experiential Development

Six Senses is a one-of-a-kind program designed to nurture the growth of exceptional Indigenous tourism experiences by providing participants with culturally relevant tools, land-based learning, and accessible training, which leads to a stronger, diverse tourism industry in Alberta. This program pairs ITA members

with export-level mentors who are also tourism business owners themselves. Through experiential learning, resources, mentorship and a piloting stage, this program helps take market-ready Indigenous tourism member experiences to an export-ready level based on the National Indigenous Tourism Guidelines.



Good Relations Mentorship

Good Relations is a mentorship program delivered in partnership between Indigenous Tourism Alberta (ITA) and Catalyste+. The program supports Indigenous tourism operators in Alberta to help accelerate the maturity of their tourism business and goals.

Through the program, tourism operators work 1-on-1 with Catalyste+ Advisors to expand

their skills in areas such as business planning, marketing, grant writing, operations, hiring strategy, managing reservations, social media strategies, building partnerships and streamlining services. The overall objective is to support the expansion and success of Indigenous Tourism in Alberta through capacity building.



Pathway 1.0

The Indigenous Cultural Tourism Pathway is an innovative grassroots training program designed to empower Indigenous community members to discover and achieve their tourism vision, while remaining grounded in their traditional values and local realities. This program is designed to guide participants toward understanding the benefits of Indigenous tourism for cultural preservation, environmental safeguarding, social progress, and local economic growth. The program's methodology is based on providing participants with tangible, hands-on knowledge that will enable them to implement their community's tourism vision. The groundwork activities engage the participants and their greater community to start taking the first steps toward planning and implementing grassroots cultural tourism.

Walk Your Path

Walk Your Path is the sequential next step following ITA's Pathway Program. Walk Your Path is an innovative grassroots mentoring program designed to empower Indigenous community members to implement their tourism vision and start their own community-based tourism organization. Whereas the Pathway Program introduced participating communities to Indigenous tourism foundational knowledge and topics, Walk Your Path facilitates the actual implementation and application of this knowledge within tangible activities supporting tourism development in their communities. Of note, a beneficial outcome of this program is the creation of a 2-Year Organizational Community Tourism Plan which will be developed by the Mentor during the mentorship period, alongside the work the participant is completing in their community.



Marketing

TA's marketing team supports Indigenous entrepreneur in two ways: By supporting their own marketing initiatives through training, education, content creation and joint marketing programs, and also by raising awareness of Indigenous tourism among domestic and international travellers by conducting award-winning and innovative marketing campaigns that are rooted in authenticity and Indigenous values.



Buffalo Stone Woman

TRAVEL ALBERTA PROGRAMS



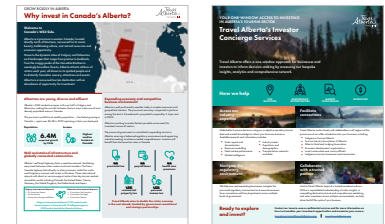
Tourism Investment Program

Travel Alberta offers a Tourism Investment Program to emerging and existing tourism operators across the province. Through this program, they fund new and expanded tourism experiences, events and festivals, and community tourism initiatives. Since this program's inception, the organization has invested millions of dollars in dozens of Indigenous-owned businesses across the province.



Investor Concierge Service

Travel Alberta works to attract private investment to Alberta's tourism sector by matching potential investors with tourism businesses and projects across the province. Private investment can be used for new or enhanced tourism products, experiences, and accommodation.



Destination Development Team

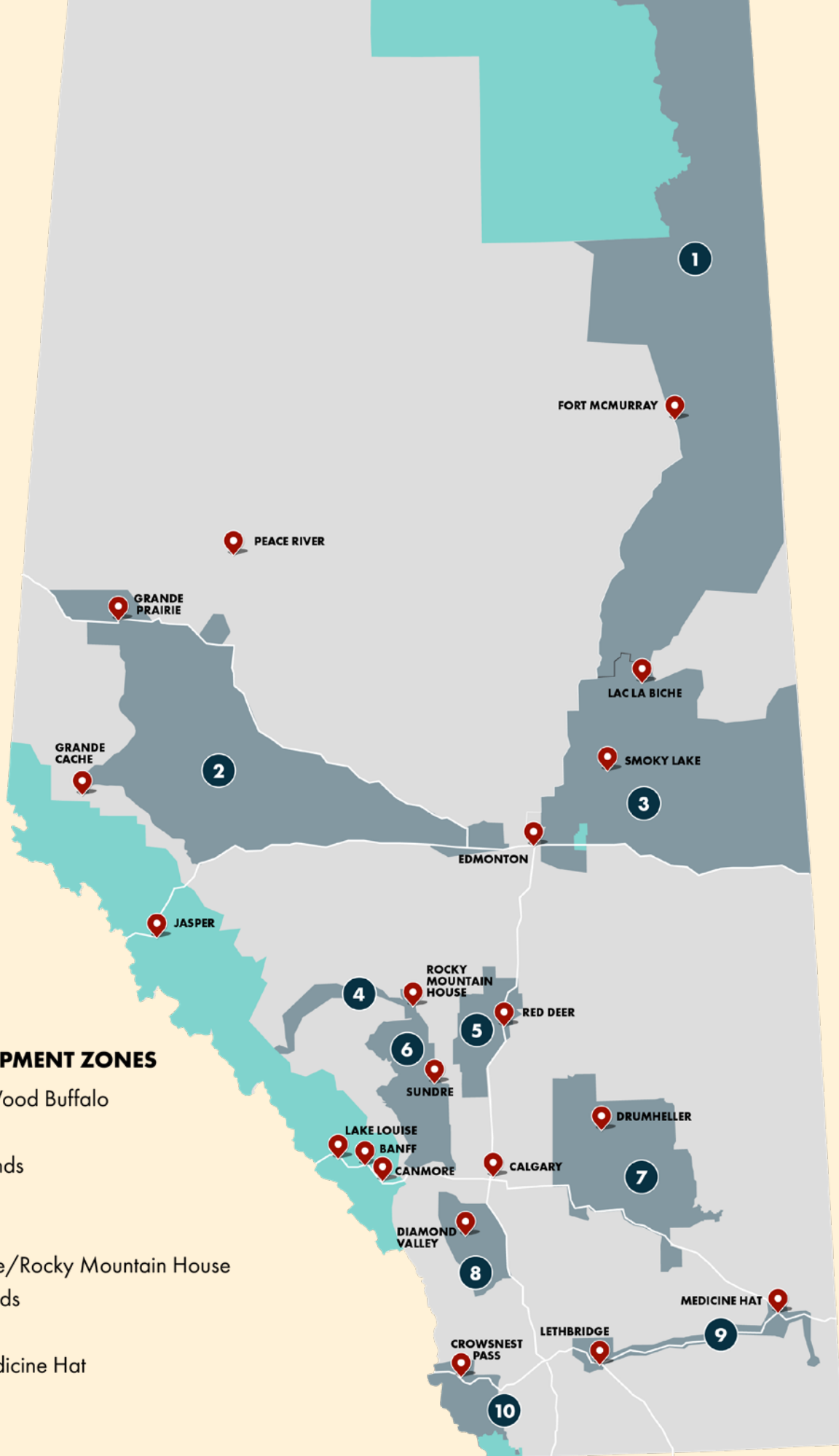
Travel Alberta has seven destination development managers who each oversee a region of the province. These managers work directly with operators, municipalities and tourism industry partners to support the development of tourism products and experiences in their region. This looks like designing and implementing tourism master plans, business coaching for new and emerging operators, navigating red tape, facilitating investment and funding opportunities, local government relations, and many other initiatives.



International Marketing

Travel Alberta has an award-winning marketing department that promotes Alberta as a destination to the world. Through social media, media advertising campaigns, publication features, and pre-packaged travel itineraries, Travel Alberta has ample resources to ensure travellers are aware of and choose authentic Indigenous experiences in Alberta.





TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONES

- 1 Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo
- 2 Northern Rockies
- 3 Northeast Lakelands
- 4 David Thompson
- 5 Olds to Lacombe
- 6 Cochrane/Sundre/Rocky Mountain House
- 7 Canadian Badlands
- 8 Foothills
- 9 Lethbridge to Medicine Hat
- 10 Southern Rockies
- National Parks

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ZONES (TDZs)



History of the Tourism Development Zone Project

In 2022, Travel Alberta embarked on the Tourism Development Zone project. This project identified 10 zones across the province that have a high potential for tourism growth. To kick off this project, Travel Alberta enlisted the support of consultants to engage residents and operators across the 10 zones. Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta also partnered to engage communities across Treaty 6, 7 and 8 through three consulting firms. In addition, the consultants engaged Métis communities across the province.

We received feedback from our Indigenous engagement in 2023. The words from community have been eye opening to the successful moments of our journey and guiding on where we must go as we continue forward. Below is a short summary of our engagement.

TREATIES 6 AND 7

This consulting was performed by Tataga Inc.

Communities Engaged

- Stoney Nakoda Nations
- Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations
- Tsuut'ina Nation
- Kainai Nation
- Blackfoot Confederacy
- Métis Nation of Alberta
- Paul Band First Nation

Key Feedback

- Indigenous partners need to be the driver in the growth of Indigenous tourism – “nothing about us without us.”
- Travel Alberta needs to engage with both grassroots organizations and leadership in Indigenous communities.
- Travel Alberta needs to be aware of lateral violence issues in communities and mitigate these risks when engaging with community.
- There are concerns around data sovereignty and the sharing of Traditional Knowledge.
- Engagement should be done in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Treaties in Alberta.
- Ensure that the wealth generated by Indigenous tourism directly supports Indigenous communities and livelihoods.
- Many communities are interested in tourism but also dealing with other crises including opioid issues, clean water access, food scarcity, and other areas of concern. Travel Alberta must approach engagement and development conscious of community priorities.
- Communities are looking for more support from Travel Alberta to access federal funding initiatives.
- Communities and operators are looking for additional ways to engage with Travel Alberta, especially at the grassroots level.
- Given the colonial history between governments within Canada and Indigenous Peoples, these budding relationships must be treated with delicacy and a focus on healing and strengthening ties between Travel Alberta and communities.



TREATY 8

This consulting was performed by Legacy Tourism Group.

Communities Engaged

- Fort McKay Métis
- McMurray Métis
- Fort McMurray 468 First Nation
- Willow Lake Métis
- Fort Chipewyan Métis
- ACDEN
- Athabasca-Chipewyan First Nation
- Fort McKay First Nation
- Northeastern Aboriginal Business Association

Key Feedback

- All nations engaged reported a strong interest in tourism development.
- Not all communities in the region openly communicate or collaborate with each other.
- Previous engagement in some communities regarding tourism development was not comprehensive or done through the proper channels, leading to trepidation.
- There is interest in tourism opportunities where businesses will be wholly Indigenous owned.
- There is interest in tourism opportunities that further Indigenous agency on traditional territories.



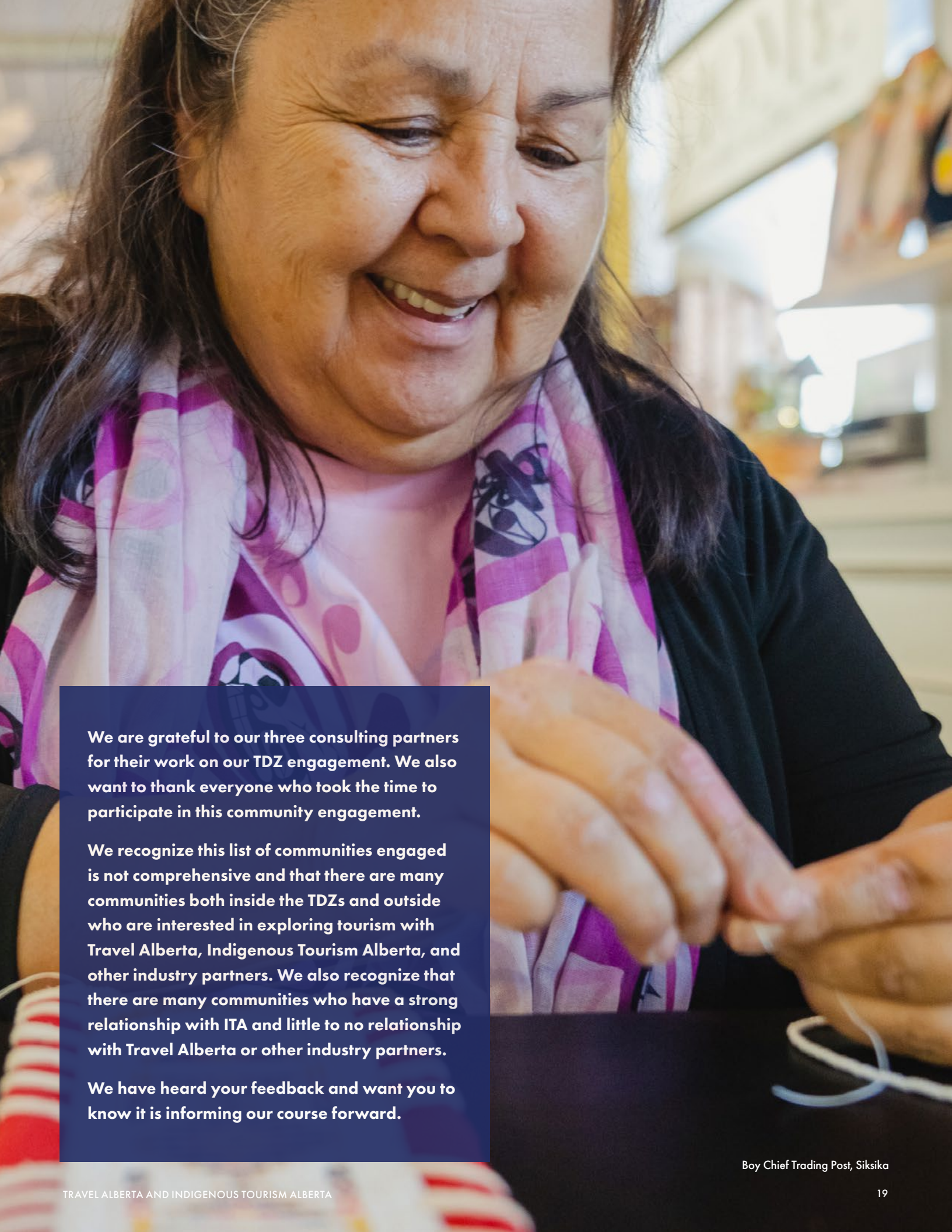
This consulting was performed by Cadence Strategies.

Communities Engaged

- Aseniwuche Winewak Nation
- Beaver First Nation
- Bigstone Cree Nation
- Bonnyville Métis Regional Council
- Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement
- Calgary Métis Regional Council
- Cold Lake First Nation
- Dene Tha' First Nation
- Driftpile Cree Nation
- Duncan's First Nation
- East Prairie Métis Settlement
- Edmonton Métis Regional Council
- Elizabeth Métis Settlement
- Fishing Lake Métis Settlement
- Frog Lake First Nation
- Gift Lake Métis Settlement
- Grande Cache Lake Enterprise
- Horse Lake First Nation
- Joachim Enterprise
- Kamisak Enterprise
- Kapawe'no First Nation
- Kikino Métis Settlement
- Lac La Biche Métis Regional Council
- Little Red River Cree First Nation
- Loon River
- Lubicon Lake Band
- Muskeg Seepee Co-operative
- Onion Lake Cree Nation
- Paddle Prairie Métis Settlement
- Peace River Métis Regional Council
- Peavine Métis Settlement
- Peerless Trout First Nation
- Sawridge First Nation
- Slave Lake Métis Regional Council
- Sturgeon Lake Cree
- Sucker Creek First Nation
- Susa Creek Co-operative
- Swan River First Nation
- Tallcree Tribal Government
- Victor Lake Co-operative
- Wanyandie Flats East & East Co-operative
- Whitefish Lake First Nation
- Woodland Cree First Nation

Key Feedback

- Relationship building takes time; communities appreciate and would like more in-person visits from Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta.
- There is a lack of awareness about Travel Alberta.
- There is a stronger awareness about Indigenous Tourism Alberta in areas surrounding market-ready operators.
- Engagement should be at a community level, not only Council level.
- Many communities have support programs for entrepreneur training that could benefit emerging tourism operators.
- There is a strong interest in creating higher-end accommodations and experiences.
- There needs to be strategic direction to tourism development so that operators do not compete, they collaborate to make an authentic destination itinerary and experience.
- In larger centres, there is opportunity to incorporate authentic cultural experiences into existing tourism operations with compensation to Knowledge Carriers.
- There is strong potential for development along the shores of Lesser Slave Lake where many First Nations own property.



We are grateful to our three consulting partners for their work on our TDZ engagement. We also want to thank everyone who took the time to participate in this community engagement.

We recognize this list of communities engaged is not comprehensive and that there are many communities both inside the TDZs and outside who are interested in exploring tourism with Travel Alberta, Indigenous Tourism Alberta, and other industry partners. We also recognize that there are many communities who have a strong relationship with ITA and little to no relationship with Travel Alberta or other industry partners.

We have heard your feedback and want you to know it is informing our course forward.

PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta believe that Alberta will become the premier destination for Indigenous tourism in Canada. In order to achieve that, we will continue to collaborate through our memorandum and in other important ways. Staff will continue to review together investment opportunities through the Travel Alberta investment programs; we will work together on town halls with Tourism Industry Association of Alberta to engage communities; we will collaborate on research; we will seek advice on significant Indigenous tourism opportunities in the province; and we will work together to ensure our travel trade and marketing sections are sharing the growing Indigenous tourism experience internationally.

In order to better understand how communities interested in creating Indigenous tourism experiences should interact with both organizations – we provide the following guide on our complementary roles.

When to Contact Travel Alberta

1. You are an Indigenous entrepreneur or community leader and want to participate in your region regarding the action plan on the Tourism Development Zone.
2. You have an Indigenous-owned product or experience that is export-ready, meaning that it has all the elements that can be found and sold in the international market.
3. You have an export ready product that you want to have sold in the international marketplace.
4. You are looking for a grant or investment in a product or experience.

When to Contact Indigenous Tourism Alberta

1. You are an Indigenous entrepreneur or community leader that is interested in tourism and developing an experience.
2. You have an Indigenous product or experience that needs work and you want to learn more about how to get it to the market-ready/export-ready stage.
3. You are looking for a grant or investment in a product or experience.
4. You have a product or Indigenous-owned experience that is export-ready, meaning that it has all the elements that can be found and sold in the international market.
5. You have an export-ready product that you want to have sold in the international marketplace.
6. You want to prioritize Indigenous tourism development in your community and are looking for support navigating the sector.

Travel Alberta has recently hired a Vice-President of Economic Development, who is responsible for liaising with Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs. Travel Alberta will be continuing to engage and reach out to communities over the next year to support Indigenous tourism and emerging opportunities. ITA has also recently hired a new Director of Industry Development who will continue to build the organization's mandate to increase the Indigenous tourism economy.

Travel Alberta and Indigenous Tourism Alberta have agreed that there needs to be stronger protocols and engagement timelines between our organizations to effectively serve Indigenous operators and communities. We are working together to develop a process which will inform our work moving forward.



NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

While it is early in this journey as partners, we wholeheartedly commit to moving forward together in a way that is led by Indigenous Peoples and is supported by meaningful, long-term relationships that are built on partnership, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. We recognize that in order to have strong business relationships downstream, we have to build strong personal relationships upstream, which is where we find ourselves today.

We cannot guarantee that we will always get it right, but we can commit to a continued and earnest effort to learn through this journey together. We commit to keeping the right people in our boat, to pulling our own weight, and offering the best of our individual skillsets to grow the Indigenous tourism industry in Alberta. We commit to showing up as a team and providing a holistic approach to Indigenous tourism growth. Above all else, we commit to keeping Indigenous Peoples as our north star on this journey, to following you wherever you lead us.



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Métis Crossing, Smoky Lake