

**SOUTH CENTRAL ISLAND**

# DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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**HIGHLIGHTS**



DESTINATION  
BRITISH COLUMBIA

# THANK YOU

The South Central Island Destination Development Strategy is the outcome of a year-long iterative process of gathering, synthesizing and validating information with stakeholders about the current status and future direction of tourism in the South Central Island planning area.

We thank the First Nations on whose traditional territories we gathered for our community meetings including: Tofino and Ucluelet — home of the

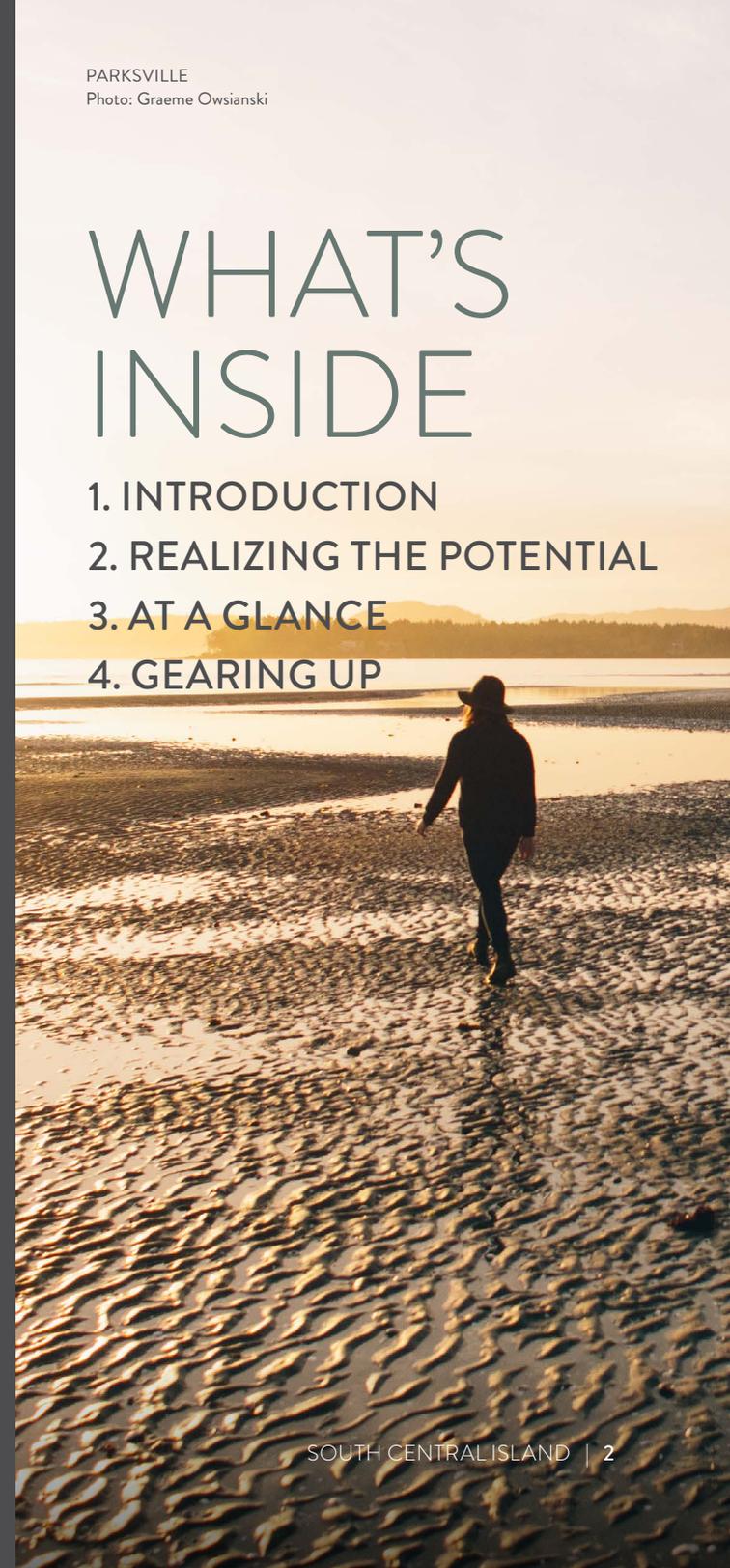
Nuu-chah-nulth, Nanaimo, Saanich, and the Southern Gulf Islands — home of the Coast Salish.

Thank you to our tourism partners who participated in the process by attending meetings, participating in surveys and interviews and engaging in planning workshops. Special thanks to the members of the Working Committee, as well as the facilitators of the South Central Island Destination destination development process.

PARKSVILLE  
Photo: Graeme Owsianski

# WHAT'S INSIDE

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## WHY A STRATEGY?

The South Central Island Destination Development Strategy was developed to enhance the competitiveness of the South Central Island tourism destination over the next 10 years and beyond. The strategy was developed as part of Destination BC's Destination Development Program to support and guide the long-term growth of tourism in British Columbia. This document presents the key highlights of the South Central Island strategy.

## WHO IS IT FOR?

The South Central Island Destination Development Strategy is a guide for tourism partners as they work collaboratively to grow the visitor economy. The strategy will be reviewed and updated to reflect changing tourism objectives, priorities, and market conditions. Results will be tracked and emerging learning outcomes will inform future implementation activities thereby optimizing their effectiveness in increasing economic, social, and cultural benefits for the entire South Central Island area.

## WHERE IS IT FOR?

The South Central Island planning area encompasses an exceptionally diverse range of landscapes and ecosystems; from rainforests, meadows, mountains and marshes, to beaches, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Spanning from the west coast of Vancouver Island to

the inside passage, the planning area comprises three regional districts: Alberni-Clayoquot, Nanaimo and Cowichan, along with the Southern Gulf Islands, and 24 First Nations. The South Central Island is accessible by ferry, airplane, floatplane, and motorcoach. Home to approximately 275,000 residents, the South Central Island has historically relied on its mining, forestry, and fishing industries, supported by its rich endowment of natural resources. Natural-resource industries have since suffered from boom or bust economic cycles, new industries and businesses have been attracted to the planning area, shifting the economy to a service-based model.

## WHERE DOES IT FIT?

South Central Island is one of 20 planning areas across BC for which destination development strategies are being developed. Each planning area represents a logical destination for visitors in and around the province. As planning areas span multiple jurisdictions, the importance of adopting an integrated approach with a shared vision and coordinated investment is critical. The South Central Island Destination Development Strategy is one of three planning area strategies being prepared for the Vancouver Island tourism region. The other two are the North Island and Greater Victoria. In time, informed by the outcomes of all relevant planning area destination development strategies, regional strategies will be developed. These will, in turn, inform the creation

of a provincial strategy, thereby ensuring a truly integrated and cohesive combination of bottom-up and top-down destination planning.

## A KEY IMPERATIVE

The recommendations contained within the South Central Island Destination Development Strategy form the foundation for additional, focused and aligned discussions regarding implementation. It will be important to ensure that the strategy becomes embedded in local, regional, provincial and federal decision making processes. It is only by working collaboratively in an integrated way with a shared agenda that the full potential of South Central Island will be realized.

## AT A GLANCE

In what follows, the distinctiveness of the South Central Island destination is summarized, and its vision for tourism introduced. While acknowledging the challenges the sector faces, its potential for growth is set out in terms of key opportunities and experience development potential. A consideration of each development theme and associated actions then follows. While further detail on each of these elements is available in the full strategy, they are brought together 'At A Glance' to demonstrate the scope of the integrated nature of the approach being taken.

# 2

# REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

## A DISTINCTIVE DESTINATION

Spanning from the west coast to the inside passage, South Central Island is a truly diverse planning area. With its ragged Pacific coastline, it is a place where prodigious amounts of rainfall have created the conditions for the most magical old growth rainforests anywhere in the world. Immense trees, centuries old, stand tall while their multilayered canopies support an incredible profusion of life. Revered by the many First Nations for whom Vancouver Island is home, they have been sustainably harvested for thousands of years. Beyond the rainforests, the destination's marshes, meadows, beaches, mountains, oceans, islands, rivers and lakes set the scene for an abundance of terrestrial and marine wildlife and a wealth of experiences for visitors to enjoy.

The Pacific Rim provides a mix of natural, built, and historical features of interest with iconic draws including the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, Hot Springs Cove, the Clayoquot Sound/UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, McLean Mill National Historic Site, Barkley Sound, and Della Falls. The central part of the destination area has numerous natural and

cultural attractions, including outstanding provincial and city parks (e.g., Carmanah Walbran, Rath Trevor Beach, Englishman River Falls), Cowichan River and Lake, Horne Lake Caves, the iconic West Coast Trail along with a cluster of distinct, small communities. It boasts a vibrant agritourism sector including a collection of renowned wineries. The Southern Gulf Islands include hundreds of islands and islets that form an ecologically rich and diverse land and marine scape, including home to the last remaining pockets of Garry oak ecosystems and a climate of Mediterranean characteristics. The Gulf Islands National Park Reserve, Salish Sea Marine Trail, and Tours des Iles are complemented by a unique Island lifestyle and vibrant arts community.

Destination differentiators such as a diverse but navigable coastline, accessible mountain areas, high quality and accessible wildlife viewing opportunities, and a rich collection of national, provincial, and regional parks have encouraged a relatively strong base of eco-tourism businesses, including many owned and operated by First Nations. The range of products varies from affordable and accessible family vacations to some of the world's most exclusive eco-adventures.

## A SHARED VISION

Adopting a sustainable approach to the development of the destination, partners working together are keen to realise the following vision:



EVERY VISITOR WILL BE INSPIRED BY OUR DIVERSE RANGE OF REMARKABLE WEST COAST EXPERIENCES THAT HIGHLIGHT THE RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ISLAND LIFE AND THE MYSTICAL ELEMENTS OF NATURE WHERE LAND AND OCEAN MEET. WE WILL WORK AS AN INCLUSIVE AND WELL-CONNECTED TOURISM “COMMUNITY” THAT IS HIGHLY RESPECTED FOR ITS CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL “QUALITY OF LIFE”, OUR COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS TO ENSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE DESTINATION AND THE VISITOR ECONOMY, AND THE WARMTH OF OUR WELCOME.

# 2

# REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

## KEY OPPORTUNITIES

The destination faces a number of challenges in terms of access and internal transport, seasonality, meeting and accommodation space, guided activities and staff constraints. However, key opportunities include the need to:

- Enhance the transportation experience, including BC Ferries
- Recruit, retain and train staff
- Develop/enhance product experiences
- Develop Indigenous tourism
- Strengthen support for tourism development
- Enhance quality of service and visitor amenities
- Promote cooperative tourism management

## EXPERIENCE POTENTIAL

Product experiences to motivate travel, encourage longer stays and sustain year-round tourism throughout the destination include:

- **MARINE PLAYGROUND** — with a focus on angling, rafting/ float trips, bird watching and wildlife viewing. The area provides for an extraordinary range of boating experiences from the relatively placid waters of the Salish

Sea, to the wild, untamed open Pacific of the Island’s west coast. Islands and archipelagoes are highly conducive to tourism activities, with power boating, sailing, diving, fishing, wildlife viewing, and sightseeing drawing visitors from around the world. There are few truly iconic destinations in Canada, and the South Central Island is one of them due to its marine environment.

- **NATURE-BASED ADVENTURES** are built around the coastal temperate rainforest, unique biodiversity characteristics, and a complete range of land-based visitor experiences, from mountain to coastal, and back country to front country. The national, provincial, and local park system provides a sustainable land base and is important for drawing visitor interest.
- **INDIGENOUS TOURISM** is in an emergent phase in the region, with numerous destination attractions. The rich cultural traditions of the Nuu-chah-nulth and Coastal Salish peoples have exceptional potential for expanding the experiences sought by the key Cultural Explorer market.

- **THE HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT AND INDUSTRY** is multi-faceted and ever evolving as the region transitions from the mining, fishing, and forestry foundations of the past to new economic activities. Early explorers and settlement activities have their own set of fascinating stories that have strong appeal for US and overseas markets in particular.
- **COASTAL CREATIVITY** refers to the dynamic arts, crafts, and cultural sectors that have attracted thousands of entrepreneurs and independent-minded tourism operators over the years. Whether it be world-class artisans, dynamic farmers markets, growing small-scale food production, innovative restaurants or a vibrant performing arts and festival scene, coastal creativity is a foundational experience for the planning area’s visitors.
- Visitors to Vancouver Island and the South Central Island planning area in particular, quickly experience the relaxed, safe and welcoming **ISLAND-COASTAL LIFESTYLE**. The distinctive small communities have their own charm that resonate with visitors for their genuine authenticity, and complement the regional service centre of Nanaimo.

COWICHAN TRIBAL JOURNEYS  
Photo: Dannielle Hayes



# 3

# AT A GLANCE

**VISION STATEMENT** Every visitor will be inspired by our diverse range of remarkable West Coast experiences that highlight the rich cultural heritage of island life and the mystical elements of nature where land and ocean meet. We will work as an inclusive and well-connected tourism community that is highly respected for its contribution to local quality of life, our collaborative efforts to ensure the sustainability of the destination and the visitor economy, and the warmth of our welcome.

THEME 1	<b>TOURISM MATTERS: PLANNING AND COLLABORATION</b>				
	<p><b>A SINGLE VOICE</b> Establish an inclusive, inter-agency structure to ensure productive dialogue between provincial agencies and a cohesive approach to resolving supply factors.</p>	<p><b>PLAN TO SUCCEED</b> Facilitate a more structured, integrated, and formalized approach to tourism planning. Recognize the potential of sustainable tourism to grow the local economy and mainstream its role within relevant policy and planning frameworks.</p>	<p><b>WISE USE</b> In recognizing the primacy of the natural environment as well as the capacity of communities to adapt to change, adopt best practice in negotiating a sustainable approach to tourism development.</p>	<p><b>DEEPLY ROOTED</b> Supported by a region-specific Indigenous tourism specialist, recognise, amplify, and activate Indigenous cultural tourism as a key component of the visitor experience. Working together with First Nations, ensure that their values as deeply rooted stewards of this special place exert a positive influence on the scale, pace, and nature of tourism development.</p>	<p><b>CAPITAL NEEDS</b> Within the context of a review of existing funding policies, identify new approaches to the sustainable resourcing of destination development needs. Establish a regional funding network to facilitate a coordinated approach to leveraging public as well as private sector investment.</p>
	THEME 2	<b>GETTING PLACES: TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE</b>			
		<p><b>STRATEGIC CONNECTIVITY</b> Ensure that the needs of tourism are reflected in strategic plans to improve connectivity to and throughout Vancouver Island. Within the development of a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan, work with key partners to establish a Tourism Transportation Task Force to ensure sector-specific concerns are addressed.</p>	<p><b>INTER-ISLAND CONNECTIVITY</b> Explore the scope to improve connections within and between the Southern Gulf Islands. Pursue options for non-vehicle, inter-island marine connectivity and other visitor-focused, passenger-only small craft linkages.</p>	<p><b>COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY</b> Drawing on the success of the Pacific Marine Circle Route, pursue the prioritisation of the Port Alberni Connector — a paved, circular route to link Port Alberni with Bamfield and on to Cowichan.</p>	<p><b>BOATERS WELCOME</b> Address the gaps in harbour infrastructure and services to accommodate more visitor boating activity and connect boaters with tourism experiences. Within the context of the Divestiture Program, secure the availability of low activity harbours by ensuring that they are welcoming, well-managed, and well-disposed to small craft boaters.</p>
		<p><b>COHERENTLY SIGNED</b> Whilst recognizing the challenge of providing clear, compelling and coherent signage for visitors, audit the existing situation and assess particular needs and expectations. Advocate a unified approach across federal, provincial and local provision and develop a region-wide signage framework.</p>	<p><b>LOW IMPACT</b> Within the context of enhancing the destination's sustainable tourism credentials, explore the scope to further develop alternative, non-conventional forms of transport such as transit services, rental vehicles, car-sharing, bicycles, and ebikes.</p>	<p><b>ACCOMMODATION NEEDS</b> Profile the specific accommodation needs of tourism workers. Drawing on best practice in devising creative solutions to the provision of affordable housing, garner support for a tourism housing strategy and region-wide housing solutions.</p>	

THEME 3	<b>COMPELLING CONNECTIONS: INTEGRATED MULTI-USE TRAIL SYSTEM</b>			
	<p><b>FIRST THINGS FIRST</b></p> <p>Within the context of Vancouver Island’s Hiking Tourism Master Plan, compile a comprehensive regional inventory of all single and multiple use trails. Establish an agreed basis for prioritizing intervention that goes beyond a focus on the iconic to include the network’s capacity to amplify exceptional experiences and provide economic and social benefit.</p>	<p><b>A SHARED AGENDA</b></p> <p>Support the completion of long-distance trail already underway. Prioritize five trail projects and detail their funding, development, and promotional needs. Identify an integrated regional and community trail system, a loop off The Great Trail, through all the Southern Gulf Islands. Find ways to add value across the trail network through product and experience development.</p>	<p><b>ACCESS FOR ALL</b></p> <p>Building on existing initiatives and aimed at all those committed to promoting universal access, establish a set of guiding principles for trails accessibility. Identify a small group of projects for accessibility improvements, prioritising connectivity with existing urban or park trails that already meet accessibility criteria.</p>	<p><b>SAFE AND ACTIVATED HAVENS</b></p> <p>In light of the ambition to develop the Salish Sea Marine Trail, ensure that value is added to high use staging areas through the provision of excursions, day-trips and other market-ready offerings for the full range of boaters. Identify locations for new destination marina capacity in underserved areas.</p>
THEME 4	<b>DIGITAL ROADMAP: TECHNOLOGY &amp; INNOVATION</b>			
	<p><b>ON THE GO</b></p> <p>Within the context of developing a 10-year region-wide plan to address digital capability, afford priority to those service areas where lack of internet coverage is having a detrimental effect on the visitor experience.</p>	<p><b>SPONTANEOUS ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <p>Develop a tourism technology strategy for Vancouver Island that will identify priorities for tourism application development. Within this context, identify a regionally applicable, community responsive pilot project for app development.</p>	<p><b>ONE STEP AHEAD</b></p> <p>Focus on closing the gap between technology potential and actual adoption by tourism business and community organizations. Showcase local examples of the innovative use of technology in tourism and leverage local government expertise in the use of digital technology to enhance the visitor experience.</p>	
THEME 5	<b>PEOPLE FOCUSED: HUMAN RESOURCES</b>			
	<p><b>BEST IN CLASS</b></p> <p>Promote the role of professional accreditation, certification and training in improving the financial sustainability and competitiveness of businesses. Reinforce the region’s brand image by encouraging accredited, eco-friendly business practices.</p>	<p><b>ENSURE CONTINUITY</b></p> <p>Facilitate access to succession planning advice, resources and supports, to ensure the continuity of business operations in rural and smaller urban centres.</p>	<p><b>ATTRACT &amp; RETAIN</b></p> <p>Maximize the uptake and use of Labour Market Development Agreements and associated programs. Facilitate a more efficient labour market by promoting career, education and training opportunities as well as more effective recruitment strategies.</p>	
THEME 6	<b>YEAR ROUND &amp; MARKET READY: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT</b>			
	<p><b>MARKET READY</b></p> <p>Prepare an inventory of products and experiences, including shoulder season offerings. Assess their market readiness and scope for packaging. Facilitate partnering arrangements in activating themed itineraries and developing and selling integrated packages.</p> <p><b>NATURAL ENCOUNTERS</b></p> <p>Promote the development of backcountry outdoor recreation opportunities and advocate for increased funding for park-related visitor infrastructure. Explore the potential of developing an aquarium/animal refuge cluster associated with the Island’s wildlife and marine-life resources, based on visitor market insights.</p>	<p><b>INDIGENOUS SUPPORT</b></p> <p>Within the context of establishing an Indigenous Tourism Committee, support the development of Indigenous cultural tourism by providing market intelligence, capacity building, business support and mentoring to Indigenous entrepreneurs.</p> <p><b>FUTURE PROOFED</b></p> <p>Introduce a Business Retention and Expansion program to improve understanding of the driving forces of economic change and help businesses become more competitive. Develop an aftercare service for operators who have participated in the Remarkable Experiences program.</p>	<p><b>INTO THE BLUE</b></p> <p>Devise a more focused approach to developing the marine tourism experience. Within the context of developing a Marine Tourism Strategy, focus on the capacity of marinas and small harbours to respond more effectively to the needs of visitors.</p> <p><b>METRICS THAT MATTER</b></p> <p>Implement Destination BC’s value of tourism model for the region. Aimed at enhancing tourism operators’ awareness, access and use of market insights and tourism resource data, develop a tourism dashboard on the Tourism Vancouver Island website for reporting key national, provincial, and local indicators.</p>	<p><b>HOME GROWN</b></p> <p>Building on the destination’s excellent reputation for small scale food production and agritourism, engage farmers, growers, artisans and operators in creating memorable food experiences, including self-guided farm and producer tours.</p>

# 4 GEARING UP

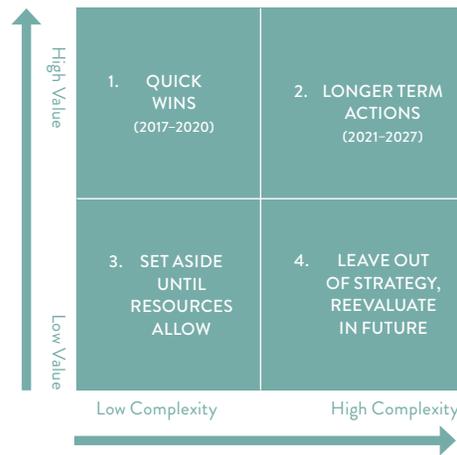
## SUCCESS NETWORKS

This strategy is intended to inform actions for the future, which over time may be embedded in the local, regional, and provincial decision making. The result will be an integrated system of priorities to achieve better development decisions, drive greater tourism revenues, and realize benefits for businesses and communities in the South Central Island destination area. All this will contribute to a thriving, vibrant and growing economy.

Joint strategy ownership among all planning area tourism partners is a critical component of this program's success. The strategy identifies a suggested success network of tourism partners to champion and move actions within each objective forward.

## FRAMEWORK

The strategy presents the destination development objectives using a consistent framework to determine the prioritization of each objective and the relative timing for implementation. Objectives with a provincial or regional scope are identified as well and will inform the regional and provincial destination development strategies.



## CATALYST PROJECTS

The following eight actions were identified as catalyst projects for immediately moving the strategy into implementation.

### Tourism Matters — Planning and Collaboration

- Inter-Agency management model
- Tourism sustainability plan and handbook
- Indigenous tourism specialist

### Getting Places — Tourism Infrastructure

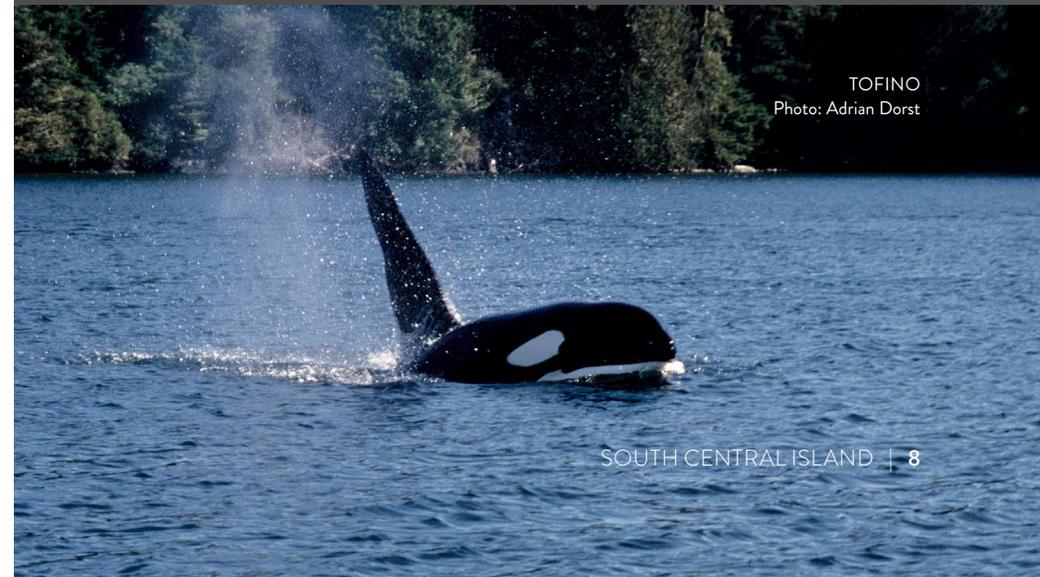
- Divestiture Program policy response

### Compelling Connections — Integrated Multi-Use Trail System

- Five priority trail projects
- Accessible Vancouver Island guide
- Salish Sea Marine Trail

### Year Round & Market Ready — Product Development

- Export-ready product inventory



TOFINO  
Photo: Adrian Dorst

# LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?

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Find it in the more detailed South Central Island Destination Development Strategy or you can reach us at:

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FRONT COVER PHOTO: CLAYOQUOT SOUND, Hubert Kang

HORNE LAKE CAVE  
Photo: Ben Giesbrecht