

NORTH THOMPSON AND NICOLA VALLEYS

DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

HIGHLIGHTS



DESTINATION
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THANK YOU

The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys Destination Development Strategy is the outcome of a twenty-three month, iterative process of gathering, synthesizing, and validating information with tourism partners about the current status and future direction of tourism in the North Thompson and Nicola Valleys planning area.

We thank the Syilx people of the Okanagan Nation and the Simpcw First Nation on whose traditional territories we gathered for meetings in Valemount, Barriere, and Merritt.

Thank you to our tourism partners who participated in the process by attending community meetings, participating in surveys and interviews, engaging in follow-up conversations, and forwarding relevant documents and insights. Special thanks to the members of the Working Group, as well as the facilitator of the destination development process.

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1 INTRODUCTION

WHY A STRATEGY?

The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys Destination Development Strategy was developed to enhance the competitiveness of the North Thompson and Nicola Valleys planning area 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 some of the key highlights of the North Thompson and Nicola Valleys strategy.

WHO IS IT FOR?

The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys 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 learning outcomes will inform future implementation activities, thereby optimizing their effectiveness in increasing economic, social, environmental, and cultural benefits for the entire North Thompson and Nicola Valleys planning area.

WHERE IS IT FOR?

The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys planning area encompasses the portion of the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George (RDFFG) electoral area H east of McBride, and electoral areas A and B, J (from Porcupine Meadows Park southwest to Savona, then remainder south of the area), L (just south of Kamloops, along 5A), M, N, O, P (until Sun Peaks in the east, without communities along Highway 1) of the Thompson-Nicola Regional District (TNRD). Municipalities include McBride, Valemount, Clearwater, Barriere, Sun Peaks, Kamloops, Logan Lake, and Merritt.

The geography of the planning area includes the southern portion of the Robson Valley, the North Thompson Valley, and most of the Nicola Valley. The primary cities are Kamloops and Merritt. The bio-geoclimatic characteristics of the planning area are diverse; with a dry, sunny climate and the landscapes of the Nicola Valley, transitioning to the desert landscape of Kamloops, and moving up to the North Thompson Valley, from rolling fields to the rising elevations of the Monashee and Cariboo mountains and eventually to the world's only inland temperate rainforest in the north.

SUN PEAKS RESORT
Photo: Reuben Krabbe



1 INTRODUCTION

WHERE DOES IT FIT?

The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys 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 across multiple jurisdictions, the importance of adopting an integrated approach with a shared vision and coordinated investment is critical. The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys Destination Development Strategy is one of seven that will be prepared for the Thompson Okanagan tourism region. The six other planning areas include the Shuswap-North Okanagan, Highway 1 Corridor, Highway 3 Corridor, the Gold Rush Trail, Interlakes, and the Okanagan Valley. 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 North Thompson and Nicola Valleys 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 the North Thompson and Nicola Valleys planning area will be realized.

AT A GLANCE

In what follows, the distinctiveness of the 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 priority 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.

MOUNT ROBSON PROVINCIAL PARK

Photo: Megan McLellan



2 REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

A DISTINCTIVE DESTINATION

The North Thompson and Nicola Valleys are two distinct areas that together represent a wide spectrum of landscapes.

Valley and plateau landscapes, volcanic and glaciated terrain, and biodiverse ecosystems stretch from the Rocky Mountain Trench and the gateway to the Rockies, southwards 500 km to Merritt, and located within the rain shadow of the Coastal Mountain Range.

Ecosystems vary considerably and include: the world's only ancient inland temperate rainforest near McBride — the Ancient Forest/Chun T'oh Whudjut Park and Protected Area and BC's newest Provincial Park, the flora and fauna of the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains-North Continental Range, the lush alpine meadows of Wells Gray Provincial Park, Montane spruce and Engelmann spruce and sub alpine fir forests of the Bonaparte Plateau, and the grasslands of the Nicola Valley. These ecosystems, together with the changing valley topography, give the traveller the opportunity to experience a rich array of natural and cultural landscapes, including a range of farmland.

Travellers have long journeyed these two corridors. In early days, Indigenous, nomadic Interior Salish First Nations would have used these corridors to follow

changing food supplies in the different seasons. In more recent centuries, pioneers seeking their fortune in gold, fur traders, or those building the railways, would have travelled through the planning area. Today, the planning area provides arterial routes connecting Vancouver with Prince George, Jasper, and Edmonton, and provides direct access to a range of outdoor recreation experiences and a series of smaller communities along the route. Kamloops provides a hub and key intersection with Highway 1.

A SHARED VISION

The vision for tourism development in the next 10 years reflects the distinctiveness of the destination and the ambition of its communities:



“THE INTERNATIONALLY
RECOGNIZED AND
PREFERRED VALLEY
CORRIDOR CONNECTING
THE NORTH, THE ROCKIES, AND THE
COAST, IS A DESTINATION THAT OFFERS A

DYNAMIC SPECTRUM OF YEAR-ROUND
OUTDOOR ADVENTURE AND THE
OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE A FUSION
OF INTERIOR INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND
FRONTIER/PIONEER HERITAGE IN ITS
WELCOMING VALLEY TOWNS. A VIBRANT
TOURISM INDUSTRY THAT UNDERSTANDS
ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO LOCAL ECONOMIES
AND WORKS TOGETHER TO DELIVER
REMARKABLE EXPERIENCES AND DEVELOP
NEW OPPORTUNITIES.”

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

The planning area faces a number of challenges, including: the limitations of public transportation; declining funds for trail maintenance; conflicting land uses; land and infrastructural constraints on development; labour supply and affordable housing; the limited range of visitor accommodation; and setbacks related to the anticipated international designation of key sites.

2 REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

However, key opportunities include:

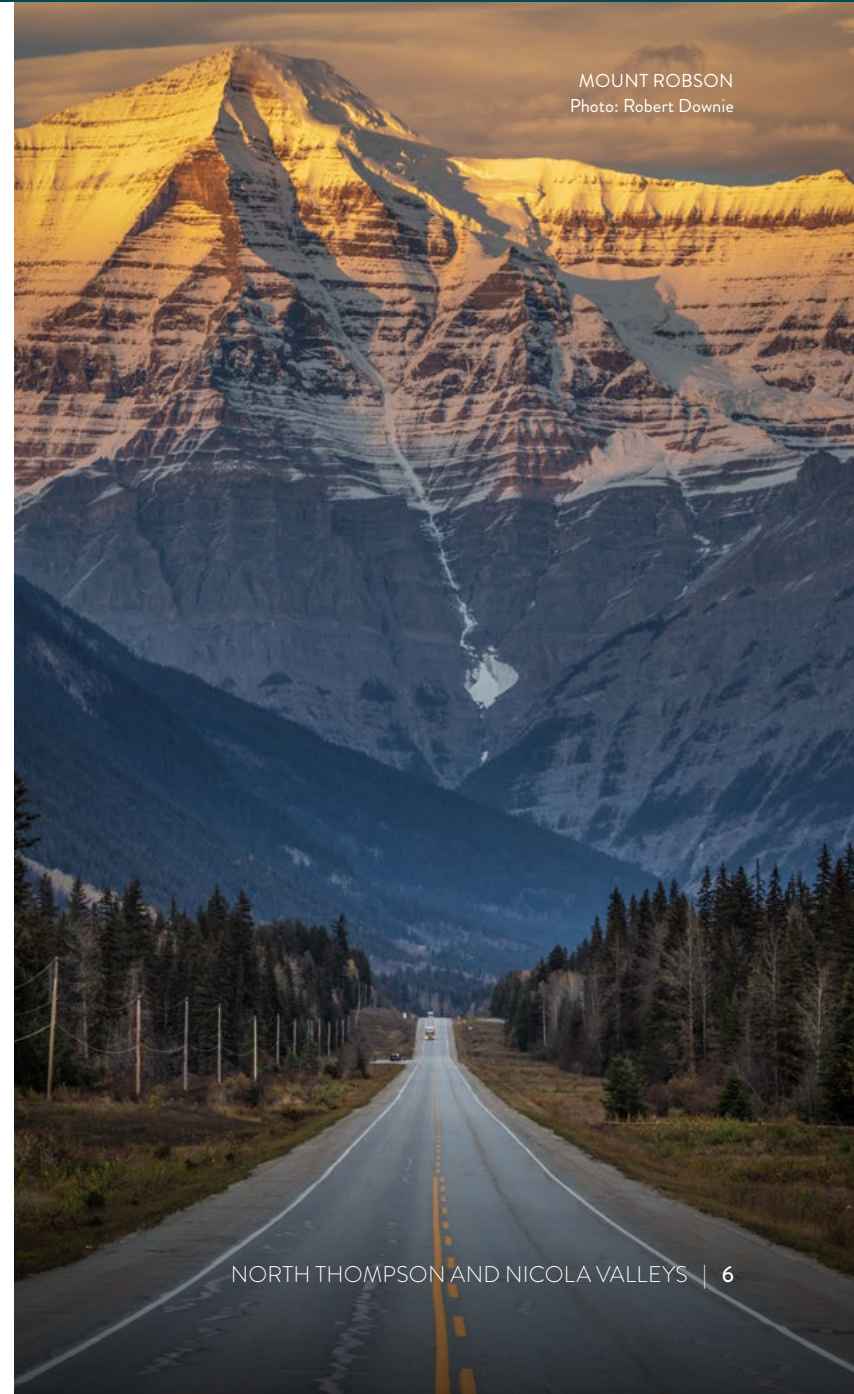
- Valemount Glacier Destination Resort
- Canadian Mountain Holidays plans for expansion near McBride
- Increasing the availability of winter permits
- A more robust approach to land and resource management planning
- Implementing a Resource Road strategy
- Greater emphasis on wildlife viewing
- Beautification of towns
- Increased focus on Indigenous tourism and cultural tourism
- Reinvestment of stumpage and water royalties
- Shuttling services to reach backcountry destinations
- Connecting trail systems with the Simpcw mountain bike trail network and leveraging rail trails
- Circle routes

EXPERIENCE POTENTIAL

The current and future experiences that will motivate travel and differentiate the destination with a compelling, sustainable visitor experience include:

- **GEO-DIVERSITY** ancient cedar inland rainforest, Rocky Mountain Trench, Mt. Robson (WHS)/Wells Gray Provincial Park, convergence of mountain ranges, river valleys, and high plateaus/lakes
- **SUMMER ADVENTURE** growing trail base, mountain biking, backcountry horse riding, hiking/alpine access, kayaking, canoeing, and fishing.
- **WINTER ADVENTURE** world-class winter recreation, heli-skiing, alpine skiing, snowmobiling, ski resorts, backcountry winter, and frozen waterfalls.
- **CULTURAL FUSION** with distinctive elements including a rich Indigenous culture, stories of the pioneers, European culture, western/cowboy culture, and the railway.
- **VALLEY LIFE** transportation corridor, small town atmosphere, Merritt's role as a transportation hub, ranching, farming, forestry, mining, local beer, and coffee.

MOUNT ROBSON
Photo: Robert Downie



3 AT A GLANCE

VISION STATEMENT The internationally recognized and preferred valley corridor connecting the North, the Rockies, and the Coast, is a destination that offers a dynamic spectrum of year-round outdoor adventure and the opportunity to experience a fusion of interior Indigenous culture and frontier/pioneer heritage in its welcoming valley towns. A vibrant tourism industry that understands its significance to local economies and works together to deliver remarkable experiences and develop new opportunities.

THEME 1

KEEP ON TRACK: PLANNING AND SUSTAINING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

<p>FOLLOW THROUGH</p> <p>Establish a Committee to monitor progress and follow up on the implementation of the Destination Development Strategy. Ensure monitoring, measuring, and reporting mechanisms are built into the purpose of the committee, and invite First Nations to be part of this process.</p>	<p>FACILITATE ACCESS</p> <p>Promote a greater awareness of the impact of the Crown land management process has on the interests of tourism. Develop a digital handbook on how to access Crown lands, supported by “How to Do ...” workshops or seminars for tourism operators.</p>	<p>MANAGE THE RESOURCE</p> <p>Encourage government to update the Resource Management Plans for Kamloops and Eight Peaks and prepare a Sustainable Resource Management Plan (SRMP) for the Nicola Valley. Encourage further analysis of the long term impacts of the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic and extreme weather events and the role of tourism in optimizing economic benefits of Crown land use.</p>	<p>REPURPOSE THE RESOURCE ROADS</p> <p>In adopting a regional approach to resource road deactivation, identify those which are no longer required for industrial use and designate them as recreational roads. Follow through on the recommendations contained in the 2010 Resource Roads and Communities report and consider establishing a “High Public Use” resource road class and associated funding model.</p>	<p>ACKNOWLEDGE & AMPLIFY</p> <p>Encourage local government to include tourism policies in Official Community Plans, regional growth strategies, regional context statements, and implementation agreements. Through regular dialogue with the tourism industry, ensure destination planning is taken into account in the municipal planning process.</p>
<p>BE PREPARED</p> <p>Develop a tourism disaster and emergency program designed to help communities to understand, prepare for, mitigate, and adjust to major natural environmental events. Disseminate best practice on industry responses to managing the business impact of such events in terms of cancellations, refunds, re-bookings, and guest relations policies.</p>	<p>EXCEL TO COMPETE</p> <p>Within the context of TOTA’s Biosphere Destination accreditation, promote the adoption of sustainability and environmental standards by tourism operators. Work with local government to promote the beneficial aspects of the sharing economy.</p>	<p>LEVERAGE BIG DATA</p> <p>Continue to work with partners to find the most effective ways to employ big data in understanding and influencing the pattern of visitor movement within the planning area and across the region as a whole.</p>	<p>FOCUS ON WELLS GRAY</p> <p>In developing a new management strategy for Wells Gray Provincial Park, ensure tourism objectives are taken into account. Advocate for more investment in park infrastructure, prioritize access to exceptional features, whilst encouraging visitors to go beyond the park boundaries to experience nearby communities.</p>	<p>JOIN THE TRAIL</p> <p>Develop a vision and strategy forum for an integrated trail network in the Thompson Okanagan tourism region. Focus on a regional rail trails network that includes the Okanagan, the Shuswap, the North Thompson, and Nicola Valley. Connect trail planning to broader experience development and sustainability initiatives.</p>

3 AT A GLANCE

THEME 1 CONTINUED

STAND OUT

Identify, assess, and develop at least two epic trails that will provide the foundation as a major attraction for the region. Adopt a cost-benefit approach to prioritizing trail development to optimize economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits. Develop a hut-to-hut experience, and a steward toolkit to help local communities plan for and manage local trails.

COLLABORATE WITH FIRST NATIONS

Negotiate an MOU with First Nations for trail development and management. Encourage First Nations to become more actively involved in rail trail activities and experience development. Promote the interpretation of indigenous themes throughout the trail network, and develop a TOTA Indigenous Tourism Strategy that prioritizes trail experiences.

BE CLEAR

Working collaboratively with local government and trail organizations, prepare a coherent trail signage strategy. Ensure highway and trail signage guidelines are aligned so as to facilitate clear, consistent, and cohesive wayfinding and interpretation.

THEME 2

KEEP MOVING: TRANSPORTATION, CONNECTIVITY, AND SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE

FOCUS ON HIGHWAY 5

Work with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (TRAN) to increase the number of passing lanes on Highway 5 between Kamloops and Vale, and generally improve visitor services, amenities, and interpretive signage along the route.

OFFER SEAMLESS TRANSIT

In promoting inter-regional transportation, encourage BC Transit to commit to short, medium, and long-term transit strategies. Research, assess, and market test the case for developing shuttle services to attractions and high use areas; providing car rentals; and developing car, ride-share, and bike share programs.

ARRIVE BY RAIL

Work with VIA Rail to improve the viability of using rail as a form of public transportation for visitors wanting to stop and visit in the North Thompson.

FUTURE PROOF

Research electrification trends and developments in transportation to assess the implications for supporting infrastructure within the region for cars, buses, bicycles, and marine vessels.

UPDATE AND INNOVATE

Compile and communicate best practices in technology and innovation. Develop a Remarkable Experiences style course for tourism operators on how to work with, and integrate, the latest technologies to enrich their products and enhance their competitiveness.

STAY CONNECTED

Develop a region-wide strategy designed to close gaps in wi-fi coverage and broadband services. In light of the Connecting British Columbia program, ensure visitor services informs visitors, through apps and maps, about the availability of mobile coverage and wi-fi services especially in more remote locations.

MAKE IT AFFORDABLE

Work with local government to address the affordable housing issue. Review best practices adopted elsewhere and identify remedies that could be applied in the planning area. Adopt short-term rental policies that balance visitor choice with regulatory equity, and promote a more realistic division and development of rural lots to attract younger families and workers.

BLACK, GRAY, AND GREEN MATTERS

Develop a planning area-wide policy for sani-stations. Identify gaps in the provision of sani-stations and work with partners to address gaps through developing new facilities. Develop information services and/or an app to promote existing facilities and improve usage of these sani-stations.

3 AT A GLANCE

THEME 2 CONTINUED

FOCUS ON NICOLA LAKE

Develop an infrastructure strategy for Nicola Lake to enable visitors to stop and take advantage of its recreational activities. Create more wildlife viewing and birding sites, and develop interpretive content that reveals the uniqueness of the lake and why it should appeal to visitors.

UNDER THE STARS

Work with Recreation Sites and Trails British Columbia (RSTBC) and BC Parks to coordinate and align new campsite investments. While focusing initially on replacing wildfire damaged infrastructure, also address the interests and potential impacts to visitors.

EXIT HERE

Assess the feasibility of developing a “gateway to Merritt” facility at Exit 286 — the junction of highways 5 and 5A on the Coquihalla Highway. Engage local First Nations in the re-purposing of the former visitor centre in line with the proposed master plan being developed for the Exit 286 lands.

FOCUS ON BARRIERE

Assist the District of Barriere in expediting the North Thompson Interpretive Centre. Explore how interpretive centres can be positioned to revitalize rural shopping cores, and provide follow-up assistance to the Lower North Thompson Community Forest Society’s feasibility and business strategy development.

FOCUS ON VALEMOUNT

Support the Simpcw First Nation in their diversification of the visitor offer at the resort. Identify and promote more winter destination products and experiences that will take advantage of the anticipated year-round skiing. Prepare a housing affordability strategy to deal with property price inflation in the Village.

THEME 3

STAY FOCUSED: INDUSTRY READINESS

TRAIN, RECRUIT, AND RETAIN

Work collaboratively with educational institutions to identify industry requirements in terms of skills, training for seasonal jobs, and other labour supply issues, including creating more flexible access to temporary workers. Assist tourism operators in working together to access information on these issues.

INDIGENOUS SUPPORT

Promote training programs and tourism career strategies for Indigenous Peoples. Encourage Indigenous Tourism British Columbia (ITBC) to identify tailored solutions for connecting Indigenous workers with local tourism employers, and build tourism training programs into impact benefit agreements negotiated with major industry.

FOLLOW THROUGH

Continue to enhance tourism operator competitiveness through the delivery of a Remarkable Experiences style of program. Work with local DMOs to deliver the program in smaller communities to increase outreach and uptake, and identify ways to pool funding to facilitate business participation.

RECOGNIZE AND REWARD

Develop a community volunteer best practices toolkit using resources from major volunteer organizations. Assist communities in implementing ambassador programs to enhance visitor services. Consider the BC Parks Park Enhancement Fund (PEF) in supporting projects involving volunteers and/or partners in provincial parks.

VALUE AND COMMUNICATE

Distribute and promote DBC’s annual Value of Tourism study. Create an online tool and dashboard that communities can use to determine the local value of tourism. Work with First Nations and the Indigenous Tourism British Columbia (ITBC) to develop a similar tool as a way of promoting tourism careers and business opportunities in their communities.

COLLATE AND DISSEMINATE

Provide opportunities for tourism operators and stakeholders to access information across a range of best practices. Focus on those which relate to the Biosphere Destination Certification program. Explore how best to access information on particular strategic directions such as leveraging UNESCO designations.

ATTRACT INVESTMENT

Develop a tourism investment attraction strategy for the North Thompson Valley and the Nicola Valley. Use a regional reporting dashboard to support this initiative.

3

AT A GLANCE

THEME 4

AMPLIFY, ANIMATE, ENGAGE, AND INSPIRE: VISITOR EXPERIENCE

DEVELOP THE FARM EXPERIENCE

Building on the strength of Nicola Valley's critical mass of producers and farms, and its rail trail/cycling network, develop a farm tour program. Assess the feasibility of developing farm camping, farm study, as well as products and activities that take advantage of country and western themes for which the area is already known.

TELL A UNIQUE STORY

Work with museums and historical organizations to develop a "story project" that captures the essence of the area's cultural and heritage significance. Provide story narratives for tourism operators to use in enhancing the appeal and distinctiveness of the experiences they offer.

AMPLIFY INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES

Work with First Nations to increase the availability and competitiveness of Indigenous experiences. Promote the concept of developing new experiences to bands and aspiring Indigenous entrepreneurs. Establish a local tourism enterprise facilitator to work directly with Indigenous businesses. Work with ITBC and local First Nations on a local storytelling project.

ANIMATE THE CIRCLE ROUTES

Develop more circle route activities and tours to take advantage of the high volume of traffic through the Highway 5 corridor. Focus on side routes which have the capacity to provide stops of interest, attractions, and visitor services. Work with DMOs, First Nations, and interested operators on developing self-guided itineraries and a dedicated website.

BRING THE STORY TO LIFE

Encourage tourism operators to create, package, and deliver trail experiences that bring the natural, historical, cultural, and industrial landscapes to life for visitors. Using EQ standards for content, photography, and storytelling, develop one or two interpreted trails for packaging through local DMOs, and create a trail-specific itinerary page on the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association website.

EXTEND THE SEASON

Work with accommodation providers to develop packages around the mountain recreational areas. Encourage tourism business operators to offer more winter activities, including new tours such as ice walking, sled dog tours, Nordic, downhill, and heli-skiing. Work with campsite operators to find ways of making their facilities available beyond the summer season.

SENSE OF PLACE MATTERS

Expand on DBC's tourism asset inventory to include the cultural heritage of towns (architecture, art, commerce, customs, cuisine, history, geography, people) and use this information to bundle experiences. Promote connectivity between the highway network, downtowns, and the trail network. Develop a critical mass of downtown experiences.

KEEP AIMING HIGHER

Work with the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNR), the Thompson-Nicola Regional District (NRD), and the Simpcw First Nation to keep the ambition for the North Thompson Robson Valley Global Geopark initiative alive. Continue to develop geotourism activities thereby retaining the area's ability to act as a de facto park, pending any future designation. Adopt a similar approach for the Wells Gray World Heritage Site initiative.

4 GEARING UP

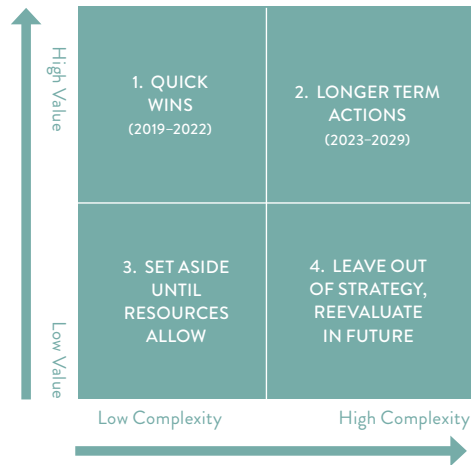
SUCCESS NETWORKS

This strategy is intended to inform actions for the future, which over time may be embedded in local, regional, and provincial decision making processes. 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 North Thompson and Nicola Valleys planning area. All of 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.



BLUE RIVER
Photo: Jordan Slabbynck

4 GEARING UP

CATALYST PROJECTS

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

Keep on Track: Planning and Sustaining the Natural Environment

- Develop a more streamlined Crown tenure process that facilitates investment in more tourism products.
- Encourage BC Parks to undertake a new management strategy for Wells Gray Provincial Park.
- Develop a vision and strategy forum for an integrated trail network in the Thompson Okanagan tourism region.
- Encourage greater First Nations involvement in trail experiences.

Keep Moving: Transportation, Connectivity, and Supporting Infrastructure

- Promote inter-regional transportation and transit strategies. Promote inter-regional transportation and transit shuttle service between communities and the airports.
- Investigate a gateway development concept at Exit 286 on the Coquihalla Highway in Merritt.

Stay Focused: Industry Readiness

- Develop a tourism investment attraction strategy for the North Thompson Valley and the Nicola Valley.

Amplify, Animate, Engage and Inspire: Visitor Experience

- Work with First Nations to increase the availability and competitiveness of Indigenous experiences.

CLEARWATER
Photo: Kari Medig



LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Read the North Thompson and Nicola Valleys Destination Development Strategy or reach us at:

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FRONT COVER PHOTO: LAC DU BOIS GRASSLANDS, Andrew Strain



BATTLE BLUFF, KAMLOOPS
Photo: Andrew Strain