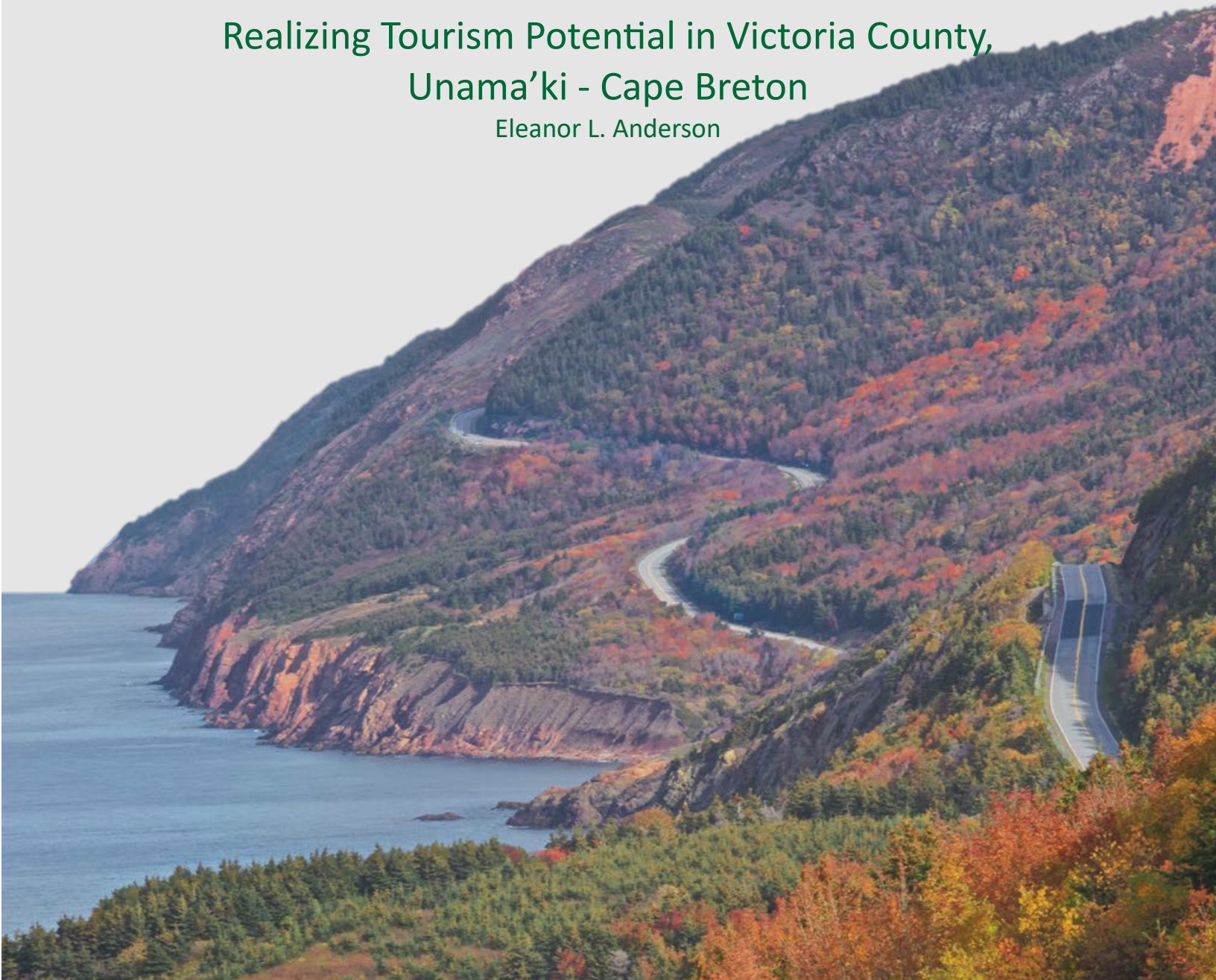




Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island Tourism Case Studies

Realizing Tourism Potential in Victoria County,
Unama'ki - Cape Breton

Eleanor L. Anderson



Cape Breton Island has long been lauded as one of the most beautiful Islands in the world. Cape Breton University has delivered well-established tourism and hospitality training for decades and is a leader in the field of such undergraduate training in Canada. The World Tourism Institute (WTI) at CBU is perfectly positioned and timed to leverage, support, and enhance, a growing tourism industry at home and globally.

The World Tourism Institute (WTI) was founded at Cape Breton University (CBU) in 2019 with a strong foundation rooted in the depth and diversity of the Cape Breton Island Tourism Sector, the long history of Tourism and Hospitality programming at CBU and the established industry and community relationships.

In 2022, the WTI secured \$2.24 million, 3-year project running February 2022 to 2025, for training and research funding from the Canadian government to stimulate post-pandemic recovery, build capacity and grow opportunities for Cape Breton Island's Tourism Sector. This project is called the **Cape Breton Island Tourism Training Network (CBITTN)**.

CBITTN Objectives:

- Ensure inclusivity in all development activities.
- Work with Mi'kmaw partners to explore, design and implement community-based credit programs in Indigenous tourism.
- Develop a foundation of accessible, timely and credible research which will support decision-making by the industry and act as a catalyst in innovation and entrepreneurialism in tourism.
- Identify training gaps and needs associated with labour shortages.
- Promote education and professional certifications for the tourism industry, including the development of micro-credentials and customized training programs.

World Tourism Institute

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Please note that the accuracy of these case studies is subject to change since the publication date. The individuals interviewed may no longer be affiliated with the respective tourism operations or businesses. Changes in business practices, ownership, and other relevant details may have occurred since the time of writing.



This project is funded in part by the
Government of Canada's Sectoral Initiatives



BACKGROUND

Located in central Unama'ki Cape Breton, Victoria County is the smallest municipality in Nova Scotia by population with 7,441 permanent residents according to Statistics Canada in 2021. The County is large in geography however and known for its natural beauty and spectacular coastline from the Atlantic Ocean in the northeast to the Bras d'Or Lakes, Canada's largest saltwater sea, in the southern region of the County. Victoria County has a thriving rural tourism sector with five main communities, Ingonish Village, Cape Smokey, Baddeck, Iona and the Cabot Trail North communities. These Victoria County communities offer outdoor adventure, heritage, and cultural and recreational opportunities.

The tourism sector is an important economic driver for Victoria County and Cape Breton as a whole. This is due in part to the natural beauty contained within Victoria County as well as the capital, development, and promotion that owners and operators have invested in their ventures. These operations include both seasonal and year-around offerings and have been steadily increasing in number and size over the past few decades. The tourism sector is not without its difficulties. There is no shuttle or bus service and very few housing options to help attract a stable, qualified workforce. For visitors, cell and data service is not always reliable, and the tourism operators have faced challenges developing a four-season visitor experience.

The coastline of Victoria County in the east is home to the highest alpine peak in Nova Scotia – Cape Smokey – which, starting in 2019, has been undergoing significant tourism investment to the Ski Cape Smokey resort. This investment and development included the opening of Atlantic Canada's first gondola in 2021. The objective of Ski Cape Smokey is to develop into a four-season tourism destination. Further planned investments include the development of a hotel, houses, and a Czech-inspired village centre. Located an 8-minute drive to the north of Ski Cape Smokey in the village of Ingonish is the Keltic Lodge which has been an accommodation icon since the 1950s. The Keltic Lodge is situated alongside the award-winning Highlands Links Golf Course.

The Cape Breton Highlands National Park is in Victoria County, offering opportunities to explore hiking trails, waterfalls, scenic vistas, dramatic landscapes, beaches and much more to attract nature lovers and outdoor adventure enthusiasts. "Established in 1936, the national park covers 950 square kilometres, protecting about 20% of northern Cape Breton. It is one of the largest protected wilderness areas in Nova Scotia and is one of a system of national parks protecting outstanding Canadian landscapes." (www.pc.gc.ca) One third of the world-famous Cabot Trail runs through the National Park.

Located in the southern portion of Victoria County, along the shores of the Bras d'Or Lake, is the quaint resort village of Baddeck, Cape Breton. Baddeck often promotes itself as the beginning and end of the Cabot Trail and is therefore a common stop for visitors to the Cabot Trail. There

is much to see and to experience in Baddeck including the Bell Bay Golf Club, the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site, quality cuisine, many first-class accommodations, musical entertainment, and seaside activities. Baddeck boasts seasonal activities, for example special festivals, and events such as Aviation Day (August), the July 1st Parade, or the Cabot Trail Relay Race (May). In the summer months Sailing is a very popular pastime in Baddeck and there is an active Yacht Club as well as Amoeba Tours Winstar which can be booked to tour the Bras d'Or Lake. In the winter the Baddeck region boasts snowmobile rentals and access to dozens of trails. The Baddeck region also features snowshoeing trails and the Baddeck public library even rents out snowshoes.

Located in the southern portion of Victoria County is the Nova Scotia Highland Village. The Highland Village, or An Clachan Gàidhealach in Gaelic, is a living history museum located in central Cape Breton that shares the story, culture, and history of Nova Scotia Gaels. The Highland Village is a popular attraction for local visitors and independent travelers coming from other parts of Canada, the US, and overseas as well as cruise ship passengers on pre-booked excursions.

Victoria County's Cabot Trail North Communities are popular with hikers and waterfall chasers with numerous picturesque fishing communities, whale tours, and lots of natural beauty to explore. With so much to see and do, the tourism sector is an important lure for visitors to Unama'ki Cape Breton overall and a significant source of economic value for Victoria County.

THE TOURISM SECTOR IN TRANSITION

Dan Coffin, the Tourism and Recreation Manager for the Municipality of the County of Victoria, has witnessed a shifting tourism sector over the past 10-15 years, starting with pre-pandemic changes. According to Coffin, the tourism sector of Cape Breton Island once depended upon and catered to motorcoach tours while today the tourism operators are targeting higher value independent travellers who are reported to stay longer and be a higher yield than tour bus visitors. This changing demographic influences the products and services developed as well as the content created, and marketing channels chosen.

Coffin also notes the increased importance of technology in tourism related to the digital promotion of experiences and destinations by tourism operations throughout Victoria County. Post-pandemic, the Victoria County tourism industry has seen shifts in visitor profiles, values, and behaviors. The evolution of social media influencers and third-party endorsements in tourism marketing is not only on the rise but is critical to the success of tourism businesses today. The relationship between visitors and a destination now begins before the traveler even arrives because of digital communication, online marketing, and social media channels and

influencers. This changes the way operators market their business and it can provide an additional stress on resources. Excellence in digital communications is key to attracting the right visitor at the right time although not all tourism operators have that technical expertise on hand.

Another significant change that Coffin has identified is the increased market demand for experiential tourism opportunities. Hands-on experiences were paused during the Covid-19 pandemic but have returned to popularity due to pent up demand. These experiences include adventure tourism activities such as quad biking, snowmobiling, and mountain biking, along with more tranquil activities such as kayaking, whale watching, and fishing. One area where the popularity of experiential tourism is rapidly increasing is in cultural tourism. Visitors are looking not only to learn about local Indigenous and traditional cultures but also to experience them through activities, crafts, and personal interactions. Victoria County is rapidly becoming a popular location for visitors seeking to experience and connect with both nature and local cultures. This demand has skyrocketed since the pandemic.

MARKET POTENTIAL FOR TOURISM GROWTH

With the shifting tourism landscape and the significance of tourism to Victoria County, Coffin wonders if government, tourism businesses, and marketing organizations are abandoning other markets and leaving market potential behind. “Discovering and experiencing the Island’s hospitality is important”, says Coffin. “However, today’s travellers are more individual in their demands seeking almost curated experiences be they hiking, beaches, culinary, kayaking, etc.”

When Covid-19 hit in early 2020, Victoria County was just embarking on a new 3-yr tourism strategy to highlight the whole County as a destination. However, the pandemic paused implementation of that marketing initiative. Instead, it was decided that while Victoria County itself does not yet have strong brand recognition in the marketplace, many tourism icons within the County do. Destinations within Victoria County such as the Cabot Trail, Cape Breton Highland National Park, the Alexander Graham Bell Museum, and the Highlands Links, are recognized as popular tourism destinations for their quality and natural beauty. Those destinations could be leveraged for their marketing capital to benefit Victoria County. Therefore, the current tourism strategy is to utilize marketing efforts of the island’s Destination Marketing Organization – Destination Cape Breton - to encourage Victoria County visitation through promotion of specific Victoria County destinations using the funds generated by the tourism marketing levy.

Victoria County has a high proportion of popular Cape Breton visitor attractions relative to its population. While Victoria County makes up approximately 28% of the area of Cape Breton

Island it has only 5.6% of the island's population. Yet, two of the top four searched destinations on Cape Breton Island through cbisland.com are in Victoria County (Ingonish and Baddeck) and it contains 31% of all fixed roof accommodations (hotels, motels, cottage, or cabin rentals, and short-term house or apartment rentals) on Cape Breton Island (Coffin, 2023). For a municipality with limited resources, nurturing an active promotional partnership with Destination Cape Breton is an attractive strategy.

The municipal programs that are designed to support tourism businesses in Victoria County are most often accomplished by investing in, or partnering with, regional tourism organizations or agencies such as the Baddeck and Area Business Tourism Association (BABTA). Coffin sits on the Board of Directors of this non-profit organization as a non-voting member. Coffin also works with the provincial destination marketing organization, Tourism Nova Scotia, to share their business support programs with operators throughout the county. Listing information and deadlines for novascotia.com, information on provincial branding and signage programs are just a few examples of how the municipality connects provincial government funded opportunities with local tourism operators.

Coffin says that a current priority of his office is Tourism Strategic Capacity Building. This is an attempt to identify skills, workforce gaps or barriers to scaling up services as small tourism businesses try to maximize their revenue potential. Coffin says his office is also working to provide business analytics to ensure relevant and timely market information for better decision-making. Destination Cape Breton, the Cape Breton Partnership and the World Tourism Institute of Cape Breton University are all partners in data collection and analysis. Experience development is another area of focus moving forward, to be achieved through alignment with Destination Cape Breton and partnership activities.

Two opportunities that Victoria County participated in which were centered around experience development - best practices missions and market readiness assessment projects. Best practices missions are coordinated educational visits to established destinations with a proven track record of excellence in their product or service development or delivery. Market readiness assessments usually involve a consultant who undergoes a community-focused exercise and asset inventory designed to identify gaps or barriers to a community's market readiness and/or development.

CONCLUSION

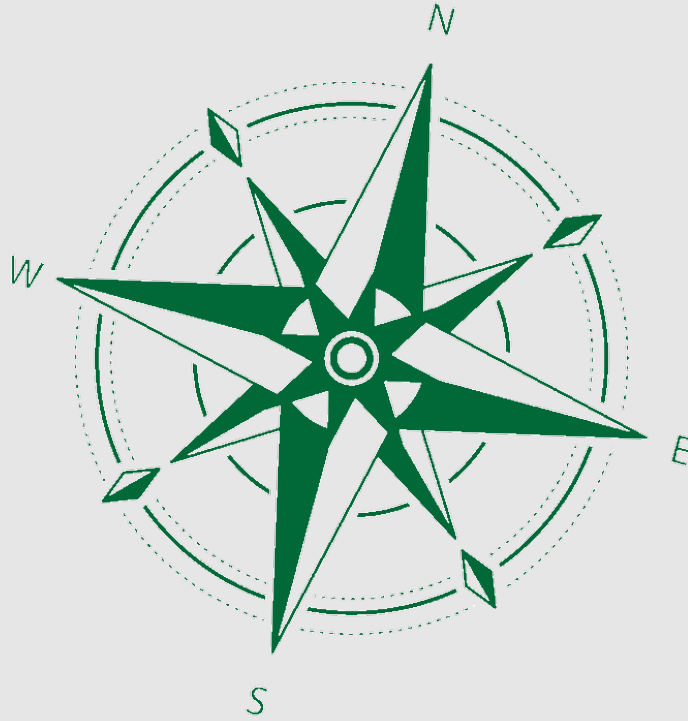
Forming partnerships and developing networking opportunities are key to Victoria County's tourism strategy. Municipal government tourism planners and decision-makers listen to what operators say they need to succeed and respond as best they can with limited resources and within municipal guidelines. The small tourism team understand that better data can lead to better decision-making and so they invest time and money in achieving this and sharing insights with both their tourism small businesses and with potential business investors.

ALTERNATIVE DECISIONS

1. Victoria County is committed to building a four-season tourism destination however it could better use its limited resources by concentrating instead on maximizing their already established summer and fall seasons.
2. Instead of relying on marketing partnerships, Victoria County should develop its own brand and promote all the tourism products, services, and experiences that the County has to offer.
3. Victoria County should lobby the municipality and/or other levels of government for increased tourism dollars with fewer "strings attached". This would mean they would have a larger budget with fewer restrictions on how the funds are expended and allow greater results for tourism operators throughout the County.

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE: STUDY CASE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. Is it a wise or sustainable strategy for Victoria County to prioritize targeting high value visitors who require certain products and services that are not currently readily available in the destination?
2. Dan Coffin talked about tools and strategies that Victoria County offers to support the tourism sector. What more could the municipality be doing to help grow the tourism sector?
3. What does Tourism Strategic Capacity Building mean and how can it be adopted to help Victoria County tourism operator?
4. How are the changing expectations of tourists to Victoria County impacting tourism-related businesses? How can Victoria County help these businesses adapt to their changing customers?



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