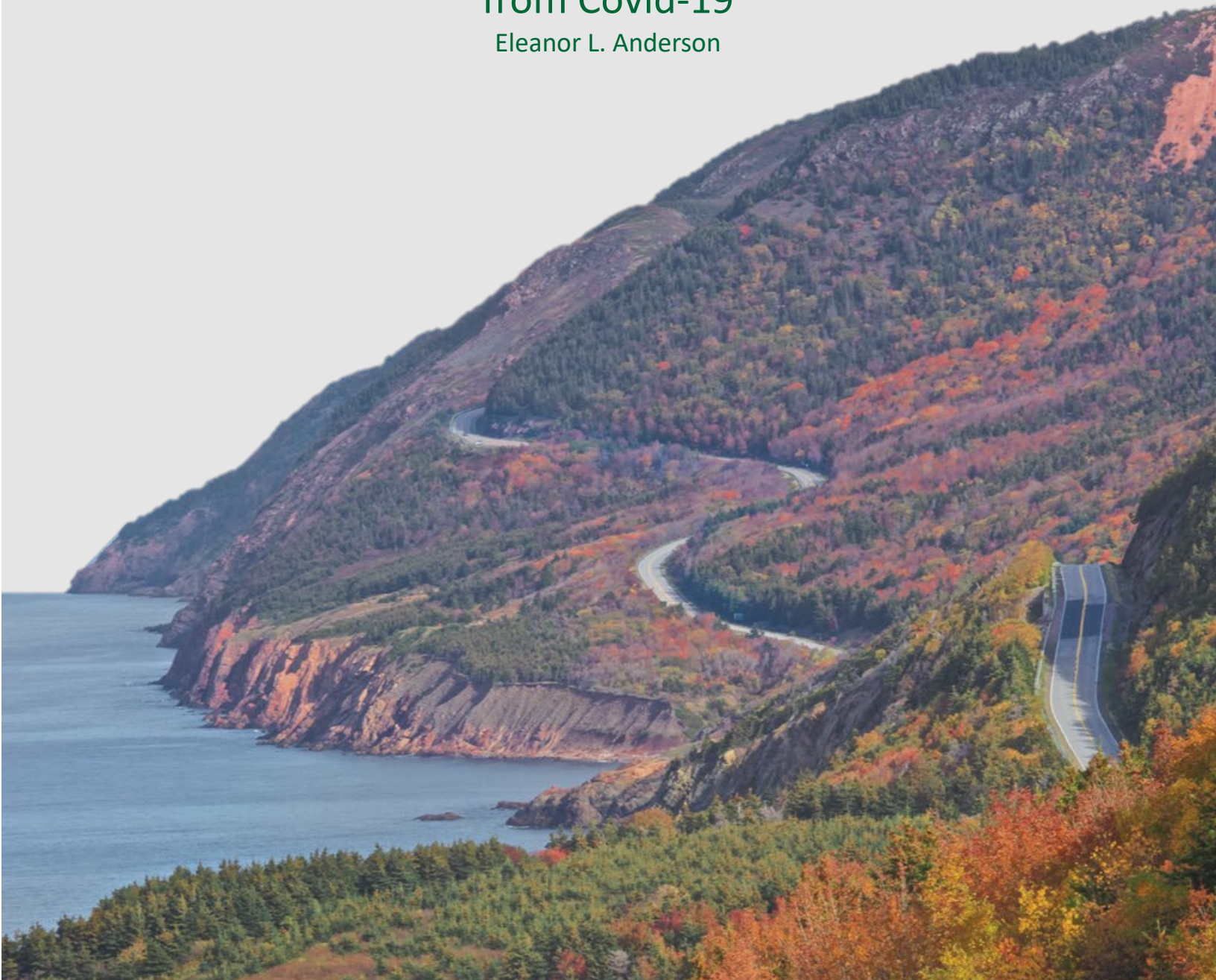




Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island Tourism Case Studies

Celtic Colours International Festival Building Back from Covid-19

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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.

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INTRODUCTION

Every year in October, Unama'ki – Cape Breton Island hosts hundreds of artists and visitors from all over the world for the annual Celtic Colours International Festival. The festival, which began in 1997, is held for nine days starting the Friday of Canada's Thanksgiving weekend, taking advantage of the island's autumn colors. By taking place in October, Cape Breton businesses found that the festival extended the tourism season and provided reasons to stay open later into the year (Noble, n.d.).

Unlike most music festivals, Celtic Colours is not restricted to one large performance facility, one community, or one cultural event. Instead, the festival takes place all over Cape Breton Island in communities who choose to participate. The festival encompasses nearly 50 different musical concerts (as many as six concerts every day), and over 200 cultural community events and outdoor activities. Thousands of visitors from dozens of countries have attended Celtic Colours, some returning year after year (*About Celtic Colours*, n.d.). The festival involves many hours of hard work and dedication from hundreds of volunteers all over the island, and the festival continues to bring in thousands of visitors.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

For over 200 years, Unama'ki – Cape Breton Island has cultivated music and culture unique to the island due to its relative isolation and lack of external impact on local cultures (*About Celtic Colours*, n.d.). Celtic Colours International Festival was founded in 1997 by Max MacDonald and Joella Foulds, the co-owners/founders of Rave Entertainment, drawing inspiration from the Celtic Connections Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. The two partners, both musicians themselves, built the festival upon a dream of both sharing and preserving Cape Breton's unique cultures. Some Cape Breton musicians had already gained international notoriety and celebrity status and were touring throughout the world. The Celtic Colours founders built the festival on two main goals: to draw in visitors from all over the world by bringing popular Cape Breton musicians to one main festival, and to draw in local concertgoers by inviting popular international musicians to perform alongside them. Many artists make Celtic Colours an annual show, ensuring that their schedules remain clear in order to perform at the festival (Mahalik, 2013).

Early in the festival's development, tourism was not the focus. The founders considered tourism to be a "by-product" of the festival's cultural showcases (*Rambles.NET: Team Cape Breton: Max MacDonald & Joella Foulds*, n.d.). However, to find greater success while seeking government funding, the partners portrayed the festival as a tourist attraction. Even as Celtic Colours has become an increasingly popular, award-winning attraction for visitors, festival leadership

continues to downplay the role of tourism income as motivation. Festival leadership chooses instead to promote the importance of preserving, supporting, and sharing Cape Breton's unique combination of living Gaelic, Mi'kmaw, and Acadian cultures (CBC, 2021).

One issue that festival administrators continue to face is how can they ensure that the local communities and cultures remain respected, even as festival attendance continues to grow? The drive to preserve local cultures led to the decision to make the festival island-wide, allowing individual communities to highlight their cultures however they chose, as well as allowing visitors and locals a wide variety of choices to support different tastes, priorities, and activity levels.

ON WITH THE SHOW(S)

Over the years, the festival has also experienced growing pains, with ever-increasing numbers of communities interested in participating, and increasing demand for tickets to shows playing in small venues with small audience capacities. Event tickets go on sale in July each year, sold by phone or in person at the box office, or, with increasing popularity - online. The audience members are predominantly mature adults, with many being repeat visitors. (Mahalik, 2013). While initially the split of local audience members versus visiting members was around 50/50, in recent years the number of visitors from away has continued to increase (Boudrot, 2022). Some local concertgoers have experienced challenges trying to obtain tickets, or to afford increasing ticket prices.

The variety of cultural and community events have expanded to include arts and crafts workshops, education, and organized group outdoor activities, capitalizing on the island's natural beauty while allowing more space for participants to roam while exploring between concerts. One popular attraction of the festival continues to be the Festival Club. Concert performers gather at the Gaelic College to socialize, play music, improvise, and enjoy drinks and meals together until dawn the following morning.

With around 50 concerts and over 200 cultural and educational activities, planning Celtic Colours is a daunting, year-round task for festival leadership. Administration for Celtic Colours includes both full-time and seasonal office workers. Additionally, ensuring that the large number of events run smoothly requires hundreds of volunteers with varying skill levels in every community. Hundreds of volunteers often stay up all night preparing venues and meals for large crowds, including providing food for all of the visiting festival performers. The Festival Drive'ers Association is a group of volunteer drivers who work 24-hour shifts transporting artists between venues and airports around the island. Still other volunteers are needed to be ushers as well as

for stage production, site management, venue set-up, ticket collection, program distribution, and traffic and parking management (Mahalik, n.d.).

PANDEMIC IMPACTS AND RECOVERY

As reported by Tourism Nova Scotia, non-resident visitation to Nova Scotia was down 74% in August 2020. Festival leadership grappled with the challenges producing a live-entertainment event in uncertain times while facing increasing public health restrictions. The decision was made to livestream concerts but from a significantly reduced number of venues. The result was a loss of community and negative economic impact due to a lack of visitor spending on tickets, food, accommodation, gas, rental vehicles, etc. Celtic Colours was not solely affected by these negative impacts, as severe effects were being felt across all sectors of the tourism industry in 2020.

Another unfortunate repercussion of moving online was the decrease in sponsorship revenue. It is challenging to build and nurture relationships and secure partnership funds in a virtual environment. Delivering value on sponsorship investment is difficult in the online format.

Currently, one concert performance each night is livestreamed for free online through YouTube and social media. Previous experience with livestreaming performances became valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic, when festival leadership made the decision to livestream the festival performances online. In 2022, technology evolved to include more video series production, including profiles focusing on individual artists, communities, and locations of cultural importance (Boudrot, 2022).

CONCLUSION

2023 was a building-back year and in 2024, the Celtic Colours International Festival is on track to regain its live audience, with a full schedule and thriving partnerships, generating economic impact in communities across Unama'ki-Cape Breton.

ALTERNATIVE DECISIONS

1. Celtic Colours leadership could have built its partnership base during the pandemic by targeting online entertainment partnerships (such as online gaming, retail outlets, education partners) and then continue to cultivate these sponsors as the transition back to live entertainment took place.
2. To grow the revenues of the festival, the Board of Celtic Colours International Festival could expand its mandate to produce concerts in other months of the year. This would increase the opportunity for locals to enjoy concerts and to attract visitors to Unama'ki Cape Breton in other seasons.

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE: STUDY CASE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. How might Celtic Colours continue to grow while retaining its roots in cultural respect and identity?
2. How could Celtic Colours attract a younger audience while still honoring the festival's roots and values?
3. What strategies should festival leadership follow to ensure that visitors keep coming to Celtic Colours?
4. In what ways could leadership better support festival volunteers?
5. Should Celtic Colours set aside tickets specifically for local residents to attend shows in their communities at the cost of fewer visitors coming to those communities from outside of Cape Breton Island? Why or why not?

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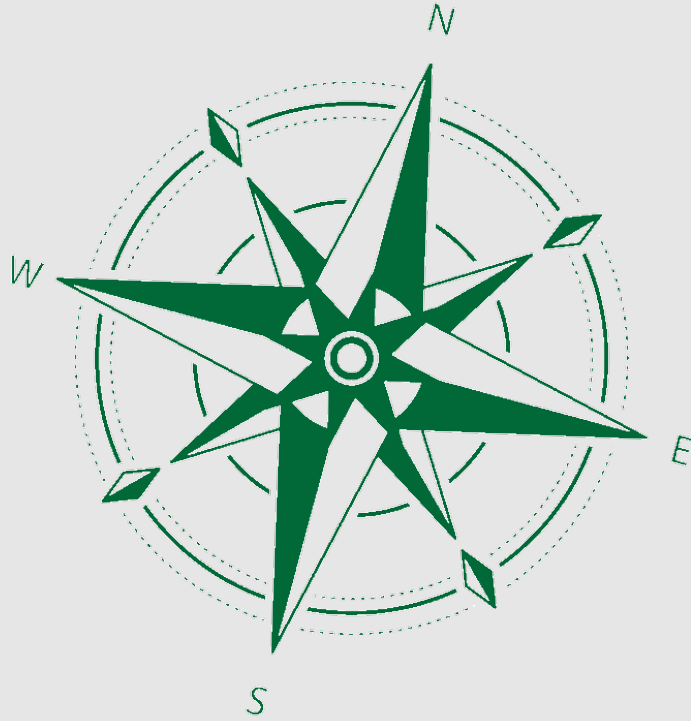
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