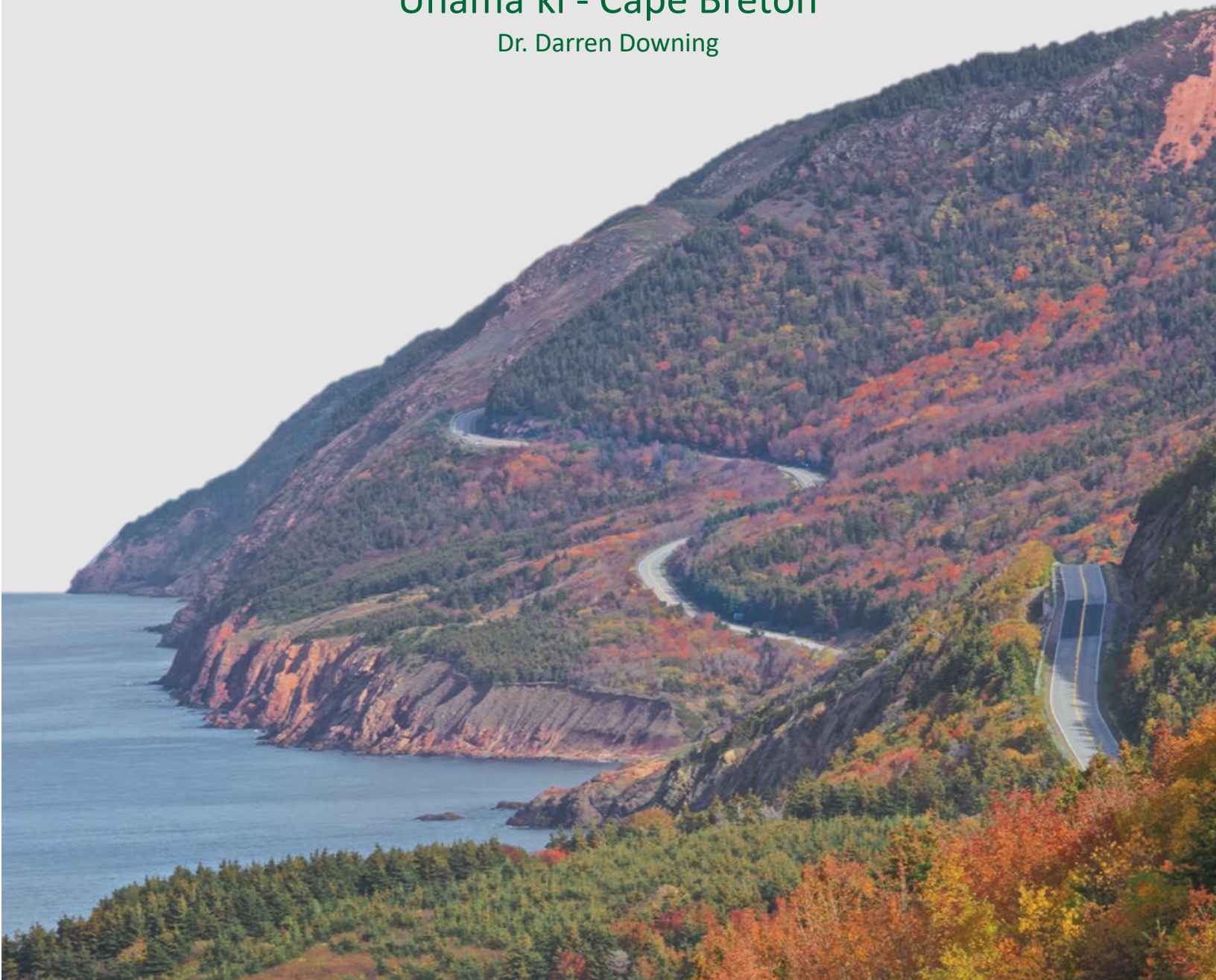# Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island Tourism Case Studies

Crisis Management at the Port of Sydney, Unama'ki - Cape Breton

Dr. Darren Downing

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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HISTORY

The Port of Sydney, located in eastern Cape Breton Island, is a crucial hub for cruise ships and plays a significant role in Cape Breton's tourism industry. For 2023, the Port of Sydney has 112 vessels scheduled to arrive and is expecting more than 200,000 visitors to pass through the port. Being a significant hub for travel and transportation means that incidents including security, extreme weather, and health emergencies can all present significant challenges. Because of the substantial number of tourists passing through the Port of Sydney, emergencies and crises can have a major impact on both the city of Sydney and the Cape Breton Tourism industry. The port must manage a variety of crises including natural disasters like Hurricane Fiona, security risks, and operational challenges. This case study explores the types of emergencies the Port of Sydney prepares for and their crisis management strategies.

BACKGROUND

Founded in 1785, the Port of Sydney was the capital of the Cape Breton Island Colony until 1820. In the 19th century, the port was a major transportation hub for local coal and steel. By the early 20th century, the port was home to one of the world's largest steel plants and was a major part of Cape Breton Island's economy. During World War II, a Royal Canadian Naval base was established at the Port of Sydney to supply Europe-bound convoys. In the mid to late 20th century, Cape Breton's coal and steel industries began to shrink and were taken over by the Government of Nova Scotia which closed the industries at the end of 2001. The decline and loss of these traditional industries forced the Port of Sydney to diversify its economy. The port has capitalized on Cape Breton's natural beauty, and traditional Celtic culture and music to expand into tourism. The port typically welcomes over one hundred vessels a year, and several hundred thousand tourists disembark and explore the region including the near-by Sydney historic Old Town. Additionally, the Port of Sydney contains restaurants, shops and facilities for trade shows and conferences.

TYPES OF EMERGENCIES AND CHALLENGES

The Port of Sydney primarily prepares for three types of emergencies: natural disasters, medical emergencies, and security incidents including threats or attacks on the port. Unusual and unexpected events can also impact the port but are much more difficult to prepare for. Decisions and planning are the responsibility of the leadership team at the port which includes the Acting Cruise Manager Samantha Ash, the General Manager Paul Kerrigan, the CEO Marlene Usher, and the Security Officer and Operations Supervisor Peter Hill. Samantha Ash discussed her responsibilities and the port's procedures to ensure smooth operations and address

emergency situations. Ms. Ash asserts that the most important goal of the leadership team is safety for everyone.

Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Fiona, pose a significant threat to the port and its operations. Samantha Ash notes that the port receives about the same notice as everyone else regarding hurricanes and must assess the situation and make decisions quickly. These decisions include evaluating if ships would be better off harbouring at the port during the storm or dealing with the storm out at sea. The port decisions regarding storms and hurricanes are situational and can change quickly depending on factors such as the availability of power, damage caused by the storm, and the needs of the community. These decisions are communicated to the ships at sea days in advance of their scheduled arrival. During storms and hurricanes, the Port of Sydney communicates with the Nova Scotia Emergency Management Office, the Sydney Municipality, the Sydney Chief of Police, and Nova Scotia Power.

Cruise ships tend to have an older demographic than the general population. As a result, **medical emergencies** are not uncommon. Heart attacks, strokes and broken bones cannot be treated on board the cruise ship and so the visitor must be transported by ambulance or helicopter to the appropriate hospital. The Port of Sydney has a helipad located at their second berth for emergencies. Occasionally, a cruise ship that was not scheduled to call at Sydney will need to dock to drop their patient off to receive appropriate medical attention. In the case of a medical emergency, the ship notifies the ship agent who notifies the port. The ship agent would either call an ambulance or would transport the patient to the hospital themself. Ships are on a tight timeline and cannot delay for an injured passenger. Injured passengers who cannot return to the ship before departure time must either fly home or fly to the next port that the ship will stop at to try to rejoin their cruise.

The port of Sydney also must prepare for **threats or potential attacks**. Ports, like other travel hubs, are potential targets for large-scale violence. Additionally, most of the fuel and oil that is on Cape Breton Island comes through the Port of Sydney. As a result, the Port of Sydney is a secure area, and they are always prepared for any type of threat or attack to the port. All employes are trained to be aware of their surrounding and to report suspicious activities. Moreover, they employ a group of security that is specifically trained for ports. If a threat has been reported, they offer a MARSEC (Maritime Security) level of security response. If an incident occurs, the port will involve the Cape Breton Regional Police if needed. If the threat is to a ship, they evacuate everyone from the ship and proceed from there. When a fuel ship is docked, the port employs a specifically trained safety team that conducts periodic sweeps of the area all day, every day until the fuel ship leaves.

A final category of emergency that is much more difficult to create plans for are **unpredictable events** such as a global pandemic or other unexpected disruptions to normal travel patterns. By

their vary nature, these types of events cannot be predicted or directly prepared for. Responses must be crafted on an individual basis. As a result, the best way to prepare for these types of emergencies is to keep aware of local and global events that could impact the travel and cruise ship industries and establish and maintain clear communication among the leadership team regarding potential disruptions and potential responses. Additionally, diversification of sources of income can help provide a financial cushion during unexpected disruptions to the cruise ship economy.

PREPARATION STRATEGIES

To prepare for emergencies, the Port of Sydney collaborates with various organizations and stakeholders. They maintain strong partnerships with other ports, such as Port Charlottetown, Port of Halifax, Port of St. John, and Port of Corner Brook. Sharing experiences, strategies, and lessons learned among these ports enhances their collective preparedness and response capabilities. The Port of Sydney team also works closely with Transport Canada, the Government of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Measures Office, the municipality, the Sydney Chief of Police, and Nova Scotia Power. These organizations provide updates on weather conditions, regulations, and emergency measures. The port's team assess different scenarios and determines the appropriate response for each emergency. Emergency responses can be divided into three categories, pre-emergency preparations, during emergency actions, and post emergency review and strategy updates.

Pre-emergency Preparations

To be prepared for potential emergencies, every morning the port's leadership team has a meeting where they discuss and assess the potential risks for that day's events and the steps being taken to mitigate those risks. Communication is a cornerstone of the port's crisis management strategy.

Training is another important part of risk management. All port employees are taught the importance of contacting supervisors and communicating any irregularities in their environment. "We say, if you see something, say something," says Ms. Ash. "And that's kind of our slogan here. So, we train everyone that's on site. Please report anything. Even if it seems like not a big deal to you, it could be to us." Additionally, the port's Security Officer Peter Hill conducts certified training sessions with the port security personnel to prepare them for worst-case scenarios.

During Emergency Actions

During incidents, the training helps improve individual responses by the security personnel. However, Ms. Ash points out that even with proper training, "They can go into shock, or they freeze, or they don't know what to do." For that reason, it is important to have a variety of people and not one single person who has completed the appropriate training and has demonstrated the necessary skills for high-stress and high-risk situations.

Another source of support during incidents is communication between the ports. If an unexpected situation is happening at one port, the port's management will reach out to other ports to see if they have experienced a similar situation, what their response was, and what their suggestions are for addressing the issue.

Post Emergency Review

After an event has occurred, an incident report is filled out. This happens for any unexpected event that causes property damage, personal injury, or a hazard at the port. There is then a review with the oversight team which discusses the incident and the outcomes and develops new and adjusted policies for future incidents. Ms. Ash explains, "If there was something that happens on the incident report, we kind of come together as a group again with the general manager and operations manager, CEO and myself, and we kind of explore what happened, how we can prevent it in the future."

CONCLUSION

The Port of Sydney faces various challenges and risks that require effective crisis management strategies. By preparing for different types of emergencies, fostering collaborative partnerships, and exploring alternative strategies, the port can enhance its ability to manage crises and minimize their impact. Careful planning and open communication help ensure the safety of passengers, employees, and the community.

ALTERNATIVE DECISIONS

1. Diversification of Revenue Sources: One of the port's main challenges is its heavy reliance on cruise ships for revenue. To mitigate this risk, the port could explore diversification strategies by attracting other types of vessels, such as cargo ships or ferry services. This could help create a more balanced revenue stream and reduce vulnerability during cruise ship disruptions or global crises.

2. Enhanced Communication and Coordination: Improving communication and coordination with local businesses, tour operators, and other stakeholders is essential. During emergencies, it is crucial to keep the entire community informed about the status of operations, potential impacts, and recovery plans. Regular updates through multiple channels can help manage expectations and maintain trust among all stakeholders.

3. Investing in Infrastructure: Addressing operational challenges, such as the shortage of buses and transportation services, requires long-term infrastructure investments. The port could collaborate with local transportation providers and explore options for expanding or improving transportation infrastructure to accommodate the increasing number of cruise ship passengers effectively.

4. Comprehensive Training and Simulations: To overcome the challenge of unpredictable human responses during emergencies, comprehensive training programs and simulations should be conducted regularly. This will help prepare employees and security personnel to respond effectively and ensure a coordinated and timely crisis response. Training should cover various emergency scenarios, including natural disasters, medical emergencies, security threats, and other potential crises.

5. Performance Metrics and Evaluation: Implementing performance metrics and evaluation processes will enable the port to assess the effectiveness of their crisis management strategies. This could involve tracking key performance indicators related to response time, passenger satisfaction, business continuity, and stakeholder feedback. Regular evaluation will provide insights for continuous improvement and inform decision-making for future crises.

INSTRUCTOR GUIDE: STUDY CASE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. Many crisis situations are difficult to predict. If you were the general manager of the Port of Sydney, what steps would you take to prepare the employees and the facility for unexpected crisis situations?

2. How would you create an agile and responsive crisis response culture within the Port of Sydney?

3. What crisis related training would you recommend be part of standard onboarding for all Port of Sydney employees? Explain your answers.

4. How might changing customer demographics at the Port of Sydney impact crisis management strategies?
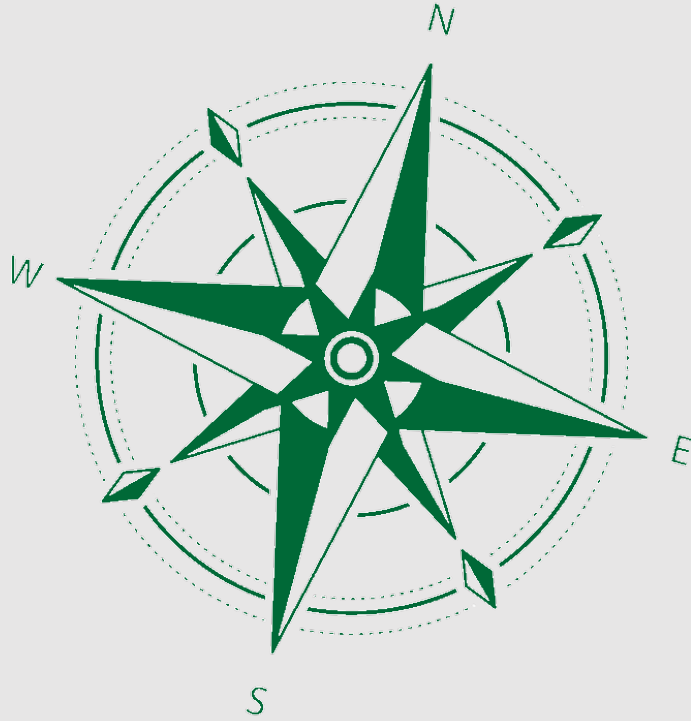
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