

Ecotourism Summit: Seal River Lodge



SEAL RIVER WATERSHED
ALLIANCE

August 20-22, 2021
Ecotourism Summit
Participant Report

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What is Ecotourism?

Overview

What is ecotourism? What does this mean?

Ecotourism is defined as a form of tourism involving responsible travel to natural areas, conserving the environment, and improving the well-being of local people.

A part of our work at the Seal River Watershed Alliance (SRWA) has been to do research on this topic and share that information with the communities that give the SRWA direction.

We held an ecotourism summit with 15 people at the Seal River Heritage Lodge (Churchill Wild) in August 2021 to discuss, learn, and share what successful ecotourism could look like in our traditional lands. Representatives from SRWA member Nations met with experts from Tourism Manitoba, Churchill Wild and the Indigenous Leadership Initiative.



Participating Nations and Groups

- **Sayisi Dene First Nation** (Tadoule Lake) Chief Evan Yassie, SRWA Senior Advisor Ernie Bussidor, SRWA Executive Director Stephanie Thorssie, SRWA Youth Board member Sandy Clipping, Youth Dallas Duck, SRWA Administrative Assistant Katherine Thomas
- **Northlands Denesuline First Nation** (Lac Brochet) Proxy to the Chief, Joe Danttouze, Elder advisor Simon Samuel
- **O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation** (South Indian Lake) SRWA Board member Michael Dumas
- **Barren Lands First Nation** (Brochet) Chief Trina Halkett
- **Indigenous Leadership Initiative** Shaunna Morgan Siegers, Sr Advisor, Jordan Melograna Film
- **Churchill Wild** (Seal River Heritage Lodge) Owner Mike Reimer, CEO Adam Pauls, Guide Andy McPherson, Guide Boomer Jerritt
- **Travel Manitoba** CEO Colin Ferguson

Goals of the two-day session

- Reconciliation. To build an understanding between Churchill Wild, and the Nations.
- To provide an opportunity for the leaders to become familiar with ecotourism.
- To provide an opportunity for the leaders and youth to understand what basic certifications are needed to begin a career as an ecotourism guide.
- To provide Churchill Wild and Travel Manitoba an opportunity to learn about the Seal River Watershed Alliance, and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) in general.
- To provide leadership and the SRWA the opportunity to learn how Travel Manitoba could provide support for ecotourism ventures in the future.

This report will outline the key discussions, decisions and statements, and discuss the next steps as the Seal River Watershed Alliance moves forward as a collective voice for the discussion.

The meeting opened with a prayer and Dene drum song. After a short round of introductions, the 4 First Nations and Churchill Wild spent the first evening discussing the history and past of the Sayisi Dene First Nation, and guiding lodges in the North. They participated in a open discussion sharing their views about their mutual desire to work together in a positive way going forward in a way that benefits the communities, and the North as a whole.

The following day, presentations were given by **Andy McPherson, of Churchill Wild** that covered the following items:

- Skilled guides needed by Churchill Wild. This could lead to more employment for Indigenous Youth from surrounding communities.
- Guiding is multi-dimensional, building skills, can be a career to make a living from, great experience. Very fulfilling life.

- Indigenous people have skills, personal stories, and connections to the land that trained guides do not have. This makes Indigenous guides an asset.
- Basic certificates needed for employment as an ecotourist guide include *First Aid, Firearms Safety, Small Vessel Operator Proficiency (SVOP) and a Manitoba boating Pleasure Craft License*
- *Other licences not currently required: Guiding, River Rafting*
- McPherson spoke about resource extraction and guiding. This is the act of hunting and fishing the resources out of the area by way of big game hunting and fishing. This is VERY different than ecotourism guiding.
- He also noted that consistency in the quality of the experiences and tourism products are key to a successful business.

Ecotourism could include these items/experiences plus more:

- Tundra buggies
- Hiking
- Viewing Caribou migrations
- Northern Lights viewing
- Wall tent camping experiences
- Trapline camping
- Dog sledding
- Beluga watching
- Archaeology sites
- Polar Bear viewing
- Bird watchers, bird activity
- Boreal Forest animals viewing
 - Wolves
 - Geese, snow goose, Canadian goose

Stephanie Thorassie Background on the Seal River Watershed Initiative and Alliance

SDFN Stephanie Thorassie, Executive Director of the Seal River Watershed Alliance, provided a presentation to the staff of Churchill Wild and Travel Manitoba Chief Executive Officer Colin Ferguson. This was to update everyone on the project's progress to date and provided some context and background.

Mike Reimer of Churchill Wild presented on successful Ecotourism ventures including the following items:

- Discussed his perspective, as an entrepreneur, reacting to SRWA youth gathering. Food, air charge, and videography means financial support for the area, wildlife, and people.
- Stated his interest in joining the SWRA to protect the land because his product is based on the untouched lands, whereas the SRWA is to protect our way of life now and in the future.
- Stated there is a high number of travellers who are still very interested in experiencing life in the North, e.g., pre-Covid 2021 expected over 1,000 guests in 5-6 month season

- World travellers are keen to see the last wild places on Earth
- Churchill Wild is based on nature viewing. Cultural activities, FN activities.
- Discussed non-wildlife based tourism eg: dog sledding, arctic safari, icefloe edge, traditional camps, etc.
- Lots of growth potential, business has been increasing over the past 15 years.
- What can a strong eco tourism place provide for the SRWA?
- Can create a job opportunity for future generations.
- Quicker you spread tourism, the quicker we can protect the lands.
- Has switched his compound to solar panels as diesel prices are so high. Use is almost non-existent since switching to solar panels.
- Takes a lot of investment to have eco tourists coming from all over the world to harbour guests.
- Partnering in a setting like this could have endless amounts of eco tourism.
- Tourism is one of the best ways to preserve the watershed.

What are some of the top things customers are looking for in lodges?

Mike stated that travellers need luxury: best amenities such as showers, toilets (private bathrooms are a must and lots of filtered water 100 gallons/day/person), good food, best wines, best staff, large common areas. Luxury customers call themselves “eco-tourists” but they have a huge footprint.

Would clientele be interested in cultural experiences?

Mike stated that European countries are very interested in Indigenous culture and practices.

What are some suggested products that the SRWA could share with Churchill Wild guests?

Luxury lodge is there, but get a taste of the unpredicted lands maybe a traditional hunting experience.

Adam suggests showing videos of Indigenous people surviving on the land. Give people a taste of the traditional ways of the land while providing a safety net to the company.

Suggests the northern lights as an idea to market business.

Colin Ferguson *President & CEO Travel Manitoba*

presented on the Provincial Tourism Strategy, its goals and the work that they do for tourism in the North. Travel Manitoba is a Crown Corporation of the Government of Manitoba.

- Goal 1 - Lead Brand & Marketing Positioning
- Goal 2 - Invest in Destination and Experience Development
- Goal 3 - Improve Transportation & Connectivity
- Goal 4 - Foster Collaboration
- Goal 5 - Build Public Support for Tourism

Building an ideal tourism future for Manitoba is founded on identifying and developing sustainable opportunities together, addressing key issues collectively and constructively, and fostering a new spirit of collaboration and innovation. These transformative elements lie at the heart of Manitoba's latest Provincial Tourism Strategy.

There is significant demand for the types of tourism experiences Manitoba can deliver, particularly in the areas of Northern experiences, Indigenous tourism, & Metis culture, and our offerings as a vibrant winter destination, among others. The Churchill region is highly sought after and highly regarded worldwide. The primary markets are Manitoba, US, France, Germany, Australia and the UK. Travel is a \$1.6 billion dollar industry in Manitoba attracting 11 million travelers per year which generates \$694 million in tax revenue. Covid has affected this but there is a plan to build back to \$1.6 billion by 2024 and \$2.5 billion by 2030. Rebuilding is going to be challenged by a lack of flights.

Travellers seek individualized, local engagement that deeply connects them to a destination's history, people and culture and provides transformative, unique experiences. They desire authentic interactions with the community throughout their trip. Happy customers are the best ambassadors.

Manitoba's national and provincial parks must embrace economic opportunities such as expanding operating seasons and allowing sustainable growth of visitor demand generators.

Continue to support Churchill as Manitoba's leading global destination for wilderness and wildlife experiences.

Foster and integrate unique market-ready Indigenous experiences province-wide.

Ecotourism and development: provide opportunities for local employment and community ownership.

Travel MB can help with that once the communities have market ready experience that can be exported as can Keith Henry at the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) or Dave Daly with the Manitoba Indigenous Tourism Association (MITA).

Principles of ecotourism include building environmental and cultural awareness with respect.

Closing

A round table discussion closed off the summit. Everyone had the opportunity to share what they were thankful for. Stephanie thanked everyone for coming to the summit. It was a wonderful, exciting time to come together as an Alliance at such a beautiful place just kilometers away from the mouth of the Seal River.

The gathering ended with a drum ceremony and prayers.

