

An integrated visitor experience opportunities concept for Fundy National Park and partners

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With visitation decreasing in national parks and protected areas across North America, efforts are being made through social science to better understand these trends and to identify ways in which to match travelers with the kind of experiences they seek. Given the global economic picture, travelers spend more and more time in deciding and look for increased value and new and improved products before making vacation expenditures – success in the future in the extremely competitive world tourism market means being innovative today.

This, coupled with Parks Canada's commitment to provide the quality opportunities for meaningful connection with the essence of Canada's nature, culture history and people, was the impetus for a new approach. Building on the Bay of Fundy's recent recognition as one of the world's top twenty-eight natural wonders, Fundy National Park, the conservation core of the UNESCO designated Fundy Biosphere Reserve, developed an integrated Visitor Experience Opportunities Concept (VEOC) for the upper Bay of Fundy region in conjunction with its three key provincial partner sites; Hopewell Rocks, Cape Enrage, and Fundy Trail Parkway. The timing of this initiative was felt to be optimal due to the fact the province of New Brunswick, the overarching partner in this endeavor, was one of the two Canadian provinces in addition to Parks Canada who had recently purchased the rights to use the CTC's EQ tool and use it as a basis upon which to base their tourism investment decisions.

The VEOC is effectively a collection of ideas, dreams and initiatives, some immediately and easily implementable others implementable in the future when resources and new technologies permit. The process included a series of two-day workshops using social science and segmentation tools, in particular, the Canadian Tourism Commission's Explorer Quotient (EQ) to identify traveler traits and preferences with the goal to diversify experiential tourism opportunities for the nine specific traveler types. The basic principle of EQ is that the guests' social values and lifestyles have the most weight with respect to their travel and activity choices. It explored both innovative ideas and enhancements to existing offers and served as the basis for strategic investments with respect to opportunities for enhanced visitor experience. Thinking about the future made it easier to believe that the impossible will be possible. One of the main principles of the process was to concentrate on the "what" and the "why" and not to get lost in the details of the "how". The "who" question was addressed through guest segmentation using the EQ types.

Each of the four sites was dealt with through its own workshop with the discussions systematically addressing

one explorer type at a time through the following questions: why would this EQ Type of guest explore this area; where are existing or potential experience opportunities for this EQ type; how can we enhance existing places, access, programs, services; how can we provide innovative support for experience opportunities; how can we improve together? Participants were selected for their diverse backgrounds and ranged from local business owners, provincial tourism officials, Aboriginal partners, restaurateurs etc. They were initially each asked to recollect their best personal travel experiences. While the experiences and destinations all differed the value placed on their connection to place and to their hosts was highly and commonly valued. Through facilitated discussion, the participants looked at the guests' desired activities and destinations from a host's perspective and explored themes that they felt would be most attractive, exploring one EQ type at a time. The premise was to move the identification of potential new or enhanced opportunities from mass thinking based upon traditional demographic information and empirical knowledge of guest services towards a mind-set of responding to the social values and travel traits of individuals.

The resulting document identified a wide range of enhancements and innovations for each of the individual partner sites as well and a number recommended of joint initiatives through which visitor experience opportunities could be augmented.

