The Regional Tourism Organizations of Ontario

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Ontario's Regional Tourism Organizations See Success in Building the Provincial Tourism Industry

(May 15, 2014…Toronto)…In 2010, after the publication of the *Discovering Ontario Report,* the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (MTCS) introduced the regional tourism organization model in Ontario in an effort to significantly build provincial competitiveness in the domestic and international markets, and to build stronger collaboration between multiple tourism stakeholders across the province.

Now, after five years since the report was issued and the model established, the MTCS is working with industry-advocate, the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario, to review the status of the report deliverables (i.e. four overall strategies and 20 specific recommendations), including the successes of the 13 regional tourism organizations and the RTO model (recommendation I.2).

An important consideration of this review process is the perspective of the 13 RTOs regarding the inherent challenges that come from establishing a new model, and the successes they've achieved by working collaboratively with each other, with the MTCS, and with multiple stakeholders, including the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership, Destination Marketing/Management Organizations (DMOs), municipal economic development departments, Chambers of Commerce, and individual operators.

Over the past three years, Ontario's RTOs have worked diligently to better understand the rapidly evolving tourism landscape within each region, with the objectives of creating sound operating foundations, of building strategic collaboration, and of making investments in programs in four areas to significantly enhance visitation: marketing, product development, workforce and industry training, and investment attraction (all in the context of region-specific applicability).

To further advance the regional model, Ontario's RTOs worked with the MTCS to establish province-wide *Standards for Success* and *Key Performance Indicators* (KPIs). This significant, precedent-setting, cooperative undertaking of the MTCS and RTOs is timely, as the regional organization model matures from fledgling foundations to the provincial standard for leadership, optimal output, and strategic ROI. With Ontario's tourism economy growing by $4B (from $20 to $24 billion) over the last 2 years, the MTCS's ongoing investment in the sector (including the $40 million annual funding to the RTOs), is already showing positive results.

The first three years after the establishment of the RTOs have laid the important groundwork for the model's success, and each RTO looks forward to further collaboration and innovative program output to continue with the collective mandate to significantly build the tourism industry in Ontario – for all Ontarians.

For a brief summary of region-specific successes in the first years of operation, see below:

RTO12 (Explorers' Edge): Algonquin Park, Almaguin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka & Parry Sound

RTO12 (Algonquin Park, the Almaguin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka and Parry Sound) has seen ongoing success by relying on open and transparent governance, as well as strong process and strategy to produce innovative programs to bring visitors to the region. Governed by a volunteer Board of Directors comprised entirely of small business owners, RTO12 relies on a solid committee structure to ensure additional stakeholders contribute to the overall output of the organization. Some executional highlights from the first three years of operation (2010 – 2013) include:

The creation of innovative, strategic Marketing Campaigns:

The development of a 3-Year Brand Development Strategy (including positioning statement) lead organically to the development of innovative marketing strategies and original campaigns, including the "Winter Turns Up the Fun" and "The New Fall Colour is Blue" executions. All are designed to position the region competitively, and to build new audiences by utilizing optimal digital marketing and SEO tactics. Campaign executions via social media have positioned RTO12 as one of the most popular RTOs on Facebook, with a fan base of 50K followers.

The development of signature, branded "tipping point" Transacting Programs:

In an effort to build shoulder season business, to tip the traveler towards choosing this region over any other, and to put money directly into the individual tourism operator's register, RTO12 developed the innovative Fuel & Fun Package. During certain shoulder season executions, travelers book two nights' minimum at participating accommodations and then receive a $50 gas card and $50 cash vouchers to spend throughout the region. An additional coupon program, Explore the Edge, was developed to build visitors to regional attractions, restaurant and events. It was promoted entirely to the RTO12 Facebook fan base of 50K followers. Both programs achieve significant ROI, and more importantly, drive bookings and purchasing throughout the entire region (high coupon redemption rates).

The establishment of a regional Tourism Indicator Framework (TIF):

With the help of participating tourism businesses, a regional-specific TIF was developed to better understand, in real time, the impact of RTO12's work output on the regional business landscape. The TIF tracks operator HST returns, attraction attendance, precipitation, occupancy rates, rounds of golf, and park permits. The local framework is a first among RTOs, and is intended to inform not only the future work of the RTO, but also to help individual tourism operators and tourism stakeholders to make more informed business decisions.

As RTO12 moves forward, strong governance, process and strategy will continue to be the beacons by which the agency builds its organizational output, to benefit tourism operators and the communities in which they operate, and to help build Ontario's provincial tourism industry.

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For more information contact:
James Murphy
Executive Director
RTO12
Tel: 705.706.1649
Email: james@explorersedge.ca