

Module 4

Tourism Products & Experiences: A Rural Approach

Welcome to winter in the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto!

A winter getaway here involves a wonderful mix of unique seasonal adventures; like snowshoeing, skating, skiing, as well the serenity that comes from warming yourself by a crackling fire.

In this video, we will discuss how tourism product development in a rural destination can differ somewhat from urban centres. First, what do we mean by “tourism product”?

For our purposes, we’ll define tourism product as:

...goods or services that are purchased or experienced by vacationers as part of their stay in a destination.

This can include travel packages as well, which combine the traditional “stay, eat, do” elements of tourism into a bigger offering.

What makes rural tourism product distinct from what you might find in cities? Mainly – it’s that the natural landscape is a huge part of what attracts visitors and motivates them to come.

In our case, we position this region as “the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto.” As mentioned in the second module – this is partly to relay to potential customers that a vacation here is most definitely rural in nature.

So, if you’re looking for high-rise hotels or neon-sign-lit theatre districts or connected subway systems, just by hearing our destination positioning, you know that you are not likely to find those things here.

Tourism product in this rural region mostly involves ways for travellers to interact and experience the natural landscape around them.

This can involve direct interactions with nature, including guided forest hikes or wilderness tours to watch for moose; scenic cruises on lakes and rivers; a round of golf on fairways carved out of the Canadian Shield; bonfires under a carpet of stars; or just lazing on a dock in summer with a good book in hand.

Indirect interactions include experiences that incorporate elements of the landscape, such as visiting the studio of an artist inspired by the natural landscapes around them; enjoying the taste of native ingredients that are added to dishes created by local chefs; attending an outdoor concert or theatre performance that features wooded areas for audience seating; or

participating in a sporting event such as a triathlon, which incorporates region-specific topographical challenges to appeal to competitors.

Rural tourism product is also important for building shoulder season visitation, which is integral to developing a more sustainable year-round tourism industry.

Like many rural areas of Ontario, our region developed primarily as a summer and fall vacation destination. But the strategy to build and promote winter tourism product has resulted in our region now being known as a cold season destination as well.

A great example of winter-specific product that resulted in increased visitation and spend across our region was the creation of the Ice Trail at Arrowhead Provincial Park. Built in 2012 in the interior of one of Ontario's public parks, this is a stunning 1.3km skating loop through a snow-frosted forest in beautiful Muskoka.

Skaters are mesmerized by the opportunity to glide through an expansive outdoor space instead of on a traditional indoor rink.

The Ice Trail at Arrowhead was the first of its kind in Ontario, and its immediate success meant the creation of more and more ice trails across our region and the province as well.

Its development resulted in increased occupancy in winter at accommodations throughout the area, which in turn lead to the ability of some tourism businesses to retain workers year-round.

And if the Ice Trail was an experiential product on its own, its ability to attract visitation meant a corresponding development of indirect product offerings, such as "après-Ice Trail" menu items promoted and served at nearby restaurants.

One of the destination development objectives for us at Explorers' Edge is to attract what are known as "higher yield visitors".

Rather than trying to build the sustainability of the industry by attracting mass visitation, instead we target travellers who are likely to stay longer and spend more while they are here.

One of the ways we do this is by creating multi-day itineraries with bundled packages of similar products or experiences, many of which highlight the natural landscape.

So, for instance: a group taking a guided nature tour in Algonquin Park one weekend and staying in a resort just outside the park might then make their way over to Parry Sound and take a guided tour of the Georgian Bay Biosphere the following week and indulge in a glamping experience.

The idea is to get travellers to explore more, and to move them throughout the region for more dispersed revenue generation.

One important thing to keep in mind when we are talking about nature-based product development: any rural destination that has the natural landscape as its main offering must also be vigilant about ensuring the continuing health of that landscape

Over-tourism, for instance, can cause ecological damage to the rocks, trees and lakes that are so essential to our socio and economic well being, and which make the great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto so special.

So, in order to ensure the sustainability of an industry that benefits from the natural environment, we have a role to play educating visitors about best practices for interacting with the rural landscape, and by helping tourism operators to do so as well.

For a rural destination like ours, where the landscapes around us are so integral to competitive product development; and where we need to protect that landscape to ensure economic viability; I guess you could say 'sustainable business is in our Nature.'

QUESTIONS MODULE 4

1. What is a main purpose of branding our region as "the Great Canadian Wilderness Just North of Toronto"?
 - a. To make sure travellers know they have to visit Toronto first
 - b. To make sure travellers know we are a rural destination
 - c. To help us compete against other provinces

2. What are you likely to find in an urban destination?
 - a. More public transportation options, such as busses or subways
 - b. More memorable photography or selfie opportunities
 - c. More outdoor entertainment spaces in a lush forest setting

3. What is the primary distinguisher of rural tourism product?
 - a. It is only developed for summer season travellers
 - b. It features direct or indirect interaction with the natural landscape
 - c. It must include a dining option

4. What is considered a 'higher yield visitor'
 - a. A visitor who purchases a package and itinerary
 - b. A visitor who stays longer and spends more
 - c. A visitor who has visited in all four seasons

5. What do destination development organizers in rural areas need to be vigilant about?
 - a. Ensuring that visitors to the region do not cause harm to local environment

- b. Ensuring that the natural landscape is treated respectfully by visitors and tourism operators
- c. Ensuring that visitors enjoying interacting with the natural landscape in a way that ensures its sustainability for years to come
- d. All of the above