

Heritage River Tourism Planning

Final Report: April 28, 2023

Submitted to: O2 Planning and Design Inc.

Submitted by: Expedition Management Consulting Ltd.

Introduction

This report provides an analysis of tourism products, strengths and gaps, visitor markets, and tourism opportunities for all reaches of the North Saskatchewan River within the heritage river study area. It also identifies actions to support tourism in the study area overall, as well as in individual reaches. Recommended actions are based on research, analysis, and stakeholder engagement.

Executive Summary

The North Saskatchewan River flows for more than 800km across the heritage river study area. For the purposes of the study, it is divided into eight river reaches. The character of the river, adjacent lands, nearby communities, and tourism potential varies significantly from reach to reach. The wildest and most adventure-oriented reaches are in the west, closest to the river's headwaters and along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The reaches in the east are home to more pastoral and cultural landscapes and attractions. The central reaches, those in and around Edmonton, are the most developed and offer a mix of urban and rural visitor experiences.

The rich natural and cultural history of the river ties these reaches together and provides the foundation for a compelling story and unique destinations on and off the water. The story of the river, adjacent lands, and the people connected to it can be told along each reach, leveraging local assets, benefitting local communities, and helping visitors and locals alike understand the significance of the river. The river has always been a key travel route, first for Indigenous people through their traditional territories, then for fur trade and settler exploration, and later for recreation and industry. Tourism along the North Saskatchewan can carry forward this long established role of river as gateway, and usher in a new role of river as a destination.

Tourism Readiness

To understand the potential and readiness for tourism along the river throughout the study area, we consulted with stakeholders and undertook research for each reach. Engagement opportunities included an online survey, digital workshops, and one-on-one interviews. Research included the review of books and other publications, maps, and online resources such as reports, presentations and websites.

Through this engagement and research, we identified existing tourism assets, opportunities, challenges and strengths, and determined that tourism readiness varies significantly across the eight reaches. Some are well positioned to grow visitation and others will require more concerted efforts to develop their visitor economies. Those that are more ready include reaches: 1 Banff National Park to Abraham

Lake/Bighorn Dam, 2 Nordegg Bridge to Rocky Mountain House, 5 Genesee to Edmonton, and 6 Edmonton to Pakan. Those that are less ready, relatively speaking, are reaches: 3 Rocky Mountain House to Drayton Valley, 4 Drayton Valley to Genesee, 7 Pakan to Elk Point, and 8 Elk Point to the Alberta/Saskatchewan Border. Appendix B provides an overview of the Tourism Readiness of the study area overall, and the Tourism Analysis of River Reaches section of the report provides commentary on the readiness of each reach, along with recommended actions to support tourism development.

Product Strengths and Gaps

Across the entire study area there are many product strengths. These include outdoor adventure and recreation assets, cultural attractions and historic sites, paddling experiences, natural attractions, as well as gateway and hub communities. Gaps overall include winter and shoulder season experiences, accommodations, riverside support amenities, festivals and events, culinary attractions and offerings, and visitor information.

Target Markets

Considering existing strengths and potential assets, available visitor data and what inspires different travelers, Authentic Experiencers and Cultural Explorers are the two recommended primary target markets for the study area. Both of these markets are interested in being immersed in local culture and history, and seek out deep engagement with the destinations they visit. As such, these visitors are drawn to heritage sites, museums, nature reserves, outdoor attractions, and cultural events and festivals. Rustic and homey accommodations, such as campsites, homestays, B&Bs, and hostels, suite them well.

Because each river reach is unique, local operators and stakeholders will need to look more closely at their own target markets to ensure they are maximizing the potential for their regions.

Authentic Experiencers

Travel Values

Learning Travel – like to learn everything about a place, time, or culture.

Nature – enjoy vast natural settings and wonders.

Cultural Immersion – prefer integrating into the local culture.

Personal Development – seek self-improvement through understanding others.

Demographics

Male: 54%

Female: 46%

Education: Higher than average

Employment: Full Time – more likely than average to be retired

Household Income: Average

Age: 18-34 = 16%

35-54 = 31%

55+ = 53%

Cultural Explorers

Travel Values

Companion Experiences – prefer travelling with like-minded people.

Living History/Culture – enjoy ancient history and modern culture.

Learning Travel – like to learn everything about a place, time, or culture.

Constant Exploration – always plan for the next outing.

Demographics

Male: 43%

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Education: Higher than average

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Household Income: Average

Age: 18-34 = 28%

35-54 = 43%

55+ = 30%

Product Development Opportunities

Based on existing product strengths, our analysis of visitors and potential target markets, as well as our analysis of assets and opportunities in each river reach, we have identified five key product development opportunities for the study area as a whole. These include water-based tourism, outdoor adventure tourism, nature based tourism, cultural tourism, and Indigenous tourism. Many of these overlap in the study area, which is rich in natural, recreational, and cultural assets. This overlap provides meaningful opportunities for the development of tourism products that leverage multiple assets to provide unique, authentic, and unforgettable experiences to visitors.

Action Items

We have identified 26 actions to help realize the tourism potential of the study area overall. These actions are categorized into three themes: product development, destination marketing, and destination development. Together with the actions proposed for individual reaches, these 26 recommendations will help guide activities to advance tourism along the North Saskatchewan River over the next 10 years.

The following action items have been identified as the top short-term priorities to advance tourism development along the North Saskatchewan River.

1. Establish a North Saskatchewan River Tourism Development Task Force.
2. Inventory all formal and informal river access points along the river and identify priority improvements at key locations to support visitor and operator access.
3. Complete a tourism product development plan that would assist stakeholders in the further development of market ready tourism experiences.
4. Develop signature/epic multi-day North Saskatchewan River Heritage tours that originate in reach 1 and end in reach 8, stopping at key natural, cultural, and recreational attractions, unique accommodations, and local points of interest along the way.
5. Focus product development efforts on the core product areas of water-based tourism, outdoor adventure tourism, nature-based tourism, cultural tourism, and Indigenous tourism.
6. Strengthen community and industry capacity for tourism in those reaches where tourism is less developed.
7. Tell the story of the river from Banff National Park to the Saskatchewan border and make it available for visitors to access through both hard copy and digital information resources.
8. Create a comprehensive online guide to public access sites along the river, including distances between sites, links to critical data about river flow and conditions, and information about sights and attractions along the way.
9. Develop river trip planning resources that go beyond informal access points and random camping by including recommended itineraries, transportation options, gear rental and tour operators, safety considerations, food service and roofed accommodation options, and points of interest on and off the water.
10. Ensure sustainability of the river and adjacent lands is incorporated into tourism planning efforts.

Destination Analysis

Product Strengths and Growth Areas

As a result of the tourism asset analysis process and engagement process, we have identified strengths and gaps in the tourism product offering in the study area as a whole. Please see the Tourism Analysis of River Reaches section for reach-specific analyses.

Tourism Product Strengths

Outdoor adventure and recreation assets: There are many existing recreation assets in the study area. These include infrastructure such as river access points and trails, staging areas and campgrounds, as well as tourism operators. Existing operators provide a wide range of products and services for outdoor adventures, including guided paddling tours, canyoning and hiking excursions, horseback rides, shuttles, fishing tours, and outdoor educational experiences. These assets set the stage for new products and experiences for visitors, including those that can connect land, nature and water-based opportunities through outdoor adventure.

Cultural attractions and historic sites: Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site, Fort Edmonton Park, the Alberta Legislature (site of the original Fort Edmonton), Métis Crossing, the Victoria Settlement, and Fort George and Buckingham House are prominent heritage sites along the river. On their own they offer opportunities for structured storytelling, visitor products and experiences specific to the reaches in which they are located. Together they offer the foundation of cultural and natural history storytelling and experiences across reaches and along the entire length of the NSR in Alberta.

Paddling experiences: The river provides opportunities for a variety of paddling activities and experiences, from learn-to-paddle courses to multi-day paddle trips to guided tours. The North Saskatchewan's varied character from reach to reach (faster moving with more rapids in some and slower moving with calmer water in others) and the existence of nearby lakes in many areas can be leveraged to cater to a diversity of visitor experience levels and needs. There are at least seven existing paddling related tour operators, rental, and shuttle providers in the study area.

Natural attractions: The river and adjacent lands are flush with natural assets, including clean water, protected areas, unique and varied landscapes, amazing views, star-filled skies, fish and wildlife. For some visitors these will be the main attraction, while for others they will enhance their experiences on or near the river.

Gateway and hub communities: There are several hamlets, villages, towns, and cities that are located adjacent to or nearby the river. Many have the potential to leverage and build on their unique assets and characteristics to become tourism nodes and destinations in their own right.

Tourism Product Gaps

Winter and shoulder season experiences: The river itself can only accommodate on-water activities safely for part of the year and most historic sites are only open seasonally through summer months. Tourists need added reasons to visit in fall, winter, and spring. Potential shoulder season and winter products and activities will vary by reach but overall could include stargazing and northern lights viewing, cross country skiing and snowshoeing, snowmobiling, and annual festivals and events.

Accommodations: Accommodation options are limited across almost all reaches. While campgrounds are available in all reaches, many are not close to the river, may not meet demand, and they cater to only one segment of potential overnight visitors. Expansion of options would help attract visitors looking for fixed roof accommodation and higher end experiences, such as unique vacation rentals, glamping-style structures, and upscale rural retreats and hotels.

Riverside support amenities: Most existing river access points are informal and do not include amenities and facilities that support day-use visitation and visitor comfort such as washrooms, garbage receptacles, parking, signage and visitor information, and services such as food and accommodation. These types of amenities are largely clustered in the urban areas in and around the Capital Region.

Festivals and events: There are limited festivals and events in the study area that leverage and celebrate the river, involve the water, or occur in close proximity to it. New events could help to attract more visitors to each reach and extend the traditional summer tourism season.

Culinary attractions and offerings: Options for experiencing local restaurants, food, and beverages are limited across most reaches. Visitors who do not want to self-cater and who want to experience local flavours and support local operators would be hard-pressed to find restaurants and breweries at which to do so.

Visitor information: There is a lack of visitor information about tourism assets and support amenities along the river as a whole. No single organization has the mandate to share the story of the river and its attractions, or to coordinate product development, offerings, and marketing.

Visitor Analysis

The Alberta government publishes visitor statistics for the province and its tourism regions. The study area crosses five of these 13 areas. Province-wide and nation-wide data is shared here to provide insight into visitor numbers, spending and preferences.

Travel to Alberta

The majority (82.7%) of visitors to Alberta come from within Alberta.¹ Of 34.6 million annual total person visits in 2019, 28.6 million were from residents of the province, 3.6 million were from other Canadian

provinces, 1.2 million were from the United States and 1.2 million were from overseas. After the US, the top international markets included the UK, China, Germany, Australia, and Japan.

Visitors spent \$10.1 billion in Alberta in 2019, \$7.8 billion of which came from domestic tourists. Overseas visitors spent the most per visit, while domestic/in-province visitors spent the least. Average spend per trip for overseas visitors was \$1,119 and \$242 for Albertans. According to research by Travel Alberta, compared to lower spenders, high value travellers (i.e. those spending the most on trips) are “more likely to travel during off-peak times of the year, spend more on high-end experiences and explore more areas of the province.”²

As for length of stay in 2019, in-province visitors had the shortest overnight stays, while overseas visitors stayed the longest (2.2 versus 13.4 person nights). Visiting friends and relatives’ and pleasure were among the main purposes of overnight trips for all visitors. For those visitors travelling from within the province, 42% did so to visit friends and relatives, 40% travelled for pleasure, 11% for business and 8% for other reasons.³

For in-province residents, overnight visits in 2019 were distributed unevenly throughout the year, with most trips taken between July and September (34%) and the fewest trips taken in January through March (19%). Trips in April through June accounted for 25% of overnight visits and October through December 22%. As for where they stayed, more than half of all visitors from Alberta bunked at the homes of friends and relatives (54%), 11% stayed at campgrounds/RV parks/backcountry camping, and 31% stayed in hotels/resorts/other commercial roofed properties. The top five activities for Albertans visiting Alberta in 2019 were: visiting friends and family, dining out, shopping, sightseeing, and visiting national, provincial, or other nature parks.⁴

Key Trends in Travel Preferences for Domestic and International Travellers

COVID-19 has impacted travel domestically and internationally for several years. Recovery to pre-COVID travel spending levels in Alberta is expected in 2024.⁵ The following provides a snapshot of preferences of domestic Canadian travellers in 2021 and insight into what they might be looking for in the coming years:

- Canadian residents have a strong affinity for nature-based tourist activities.
- Domestic trips are getting shorter, with Canadian residents shifting away from planning longer trips (4+ nights) and moving towards shorter domestic trips (3 nights or less).
- Interest has increased for wildlife viewing, northern lights viewing, and fall colours.
- Natural attractions are the top trip anchor followed by northern lights and historic sites.
- Supported travel options are not as popular as they previously were with domestic tourists. More independent trip styles are gaining popularity.
- The preferred type of accommodation for a trip within Canada is mid-priced hotels, followed by staying with friends and relatives and vacation rentals.⁶

The following provides a snapshot of the preferences of international travellers from Travel Alberta's target markets through 2024, including the US, UK, Germany, and Japan:

- Seeing the northern lights is now the top activity for many international travellers to base a trip around.
- Trying local food and drink and nature based activities are still popular though interest in them has dropped compared to previous years.
- Late spring and peak summer months are among the most popular travel times for those considering a trip to Canada, and some travellers are also interested in early fall trips.⁷

Target Markets for the North Saskatchewan River

Taking into account visitor data, what inspires different types of travellers, and considering the existing and potential tourism assets in the study area, the following markets are the primary recommended focus for tourism along the river. It is worthwhile noting that because each reach is unique, local operators and stakeholders will need to look more closely at their own target market to ensure they are maximizing the potential for their regions.

Authentic Experiencers. These travellers are typically looking for authentic, tangible engagement with the destinations they visit and are especially interested in understanding the history and culture of these places. Their travel values include:

- Learning Travel – like to learn everything about a place, time, or culture
- Nature – enjoy vast natural settings and wonders
- Cultural Immersion – prefer integrating into the local culture
- Personal Development – seek self-improvement through understanding others

Authentic Experiencers Demographics

Male: 54%
Female: 46%
Education: Higher than average
Employment: Full Time – more likely than average to be retired
Household Income: Average
Age: 18-34 = 16%
 35-54 = 31%
 55+ = 53%

Authentic Experiencers are most likely to be seen at nature reserves, museums, hiking trails, and world heritage sites. They enjoy campsites and homestays for accommodation.⁸

Cultural Explorers. These travellers enjoy frequent weekend escapes, prefer unstructured travel, and love immersing themselves in nature, local culture, and history. Their travel values include:

- Companion Experiences – prefer traveling with like-minded people
- Living History/Culture – enjoy ancient history and modern culture
- Learning Travel – seek to learn everything about a place, time, or culture
- Constant Exploration – always plan for the next outing

Cultural Explorer Demographics

Male: 43%
Female: 57%
Education: Higher than average
Employment: Full Time – less likely than average to be retired
Household Income: Average
Age: 18-34 = 28%
 35-54 = 43%
 55+ = 30%

Cultural Explorers are most likely to be seen at heritage sites, museums, cultural events, and festivals. They prefer staying at B&Bs and hostels.⁹

Two potential secondary markets are Curious Adventurers and Hotspot Hunters. These groups have been identified by Travel Alberta as “High Value Travellers”, meaning they are the visitors “likely to spend more per visit, yield the highest return on investment and make the greatest contribution to the province’s economic growth.”¹⁰ Curious Adventurers like to explore new places and learn about a destination through authentic culture, landscapes, and people they meet. Hotspot Hunters are looking for top attractions, one of a kind experiences and connections with local experts.

Industry Engagement

A number of engagement activities were provided to stakeholders through February and early March 2023. The purpose of these activities was to gather information regarding tourism assets, visitor market opportunities, tourism development readiness, and growth areas for tourism along the North Saskatchewan River. Stakeholders from across all eight river reaches were invited to participate. An online survey was open for three weeks and was completed by twenty people. We also held three digital workshops which included a presentation about the project and facilitated activities to gather input; these were attended by nine participants total. In addition, we interviewed 13 stakeholders one-on-one. See Appendix A for a summary of what we heard through these activities, as well as opportunities and challenges identified through engagement.

Tourism Product Development Opportunities

The following high level product development opportunities were identified through the process. Tourism promoting organizations, operators and experience providers can use these to develop reach-specific ideas, encourage collaboration in the development of tourism in specific areas, and to coordinate and develop experiences that span multiple reaches or the entire length of the river in Alberta. Note that many of these product categories can overlap in the study area, which is rich in natural, recreational, and cultural assets. This overlap provides meaningful opportunities for the development of tourism products that leverage multiple assets to provide unique, authentic, and unforgettable experiences to visitors.

Water-based Tourism

At its simplest, water-based tourism is tourism that provides visitors with opportunities to interact with a water body. It includes boating of all forms, related activities such as fishing and sightseeing tours, as well as shoreside activities such as wildlife viewing and swimming. Water levels in the North Saskatchewan River fluctuate significantly seasonally and during weather events. As a result, jet boating and related activities, paddling (canoeing, kayaking, stand up paddle boarding, rafting) and fishing are those most suited to the study area overall. The suitability for these activities depends on river conditions, which vary reach to reach and season to season. Generally speaking, in the western reaches, the river runs faster and is more suited to advanced and intermediate paddlers and boaters, and in the eastern reaches it is calmer and suited to more beginner river users. For the most part, water based activities, including fishing, are

possible from late spring to fall. The river is quite clean, and is home to many species of fish, including burbot, goldeye, lake sturgeon, mountain whitefish, northern pike, sauger, sucker, and walleye.¹¹ Fishing on the river is said to be underrated, with the lack of crowds contributing to its appeal.^{12,13,14}

Market Insights

- Kayaking, canoeing and stand-up paddle boarding have grown significantly in popularity over the last few years.¹⁵ Retailers like REI and Mountain Equipment Company saw significant growth in sales of equipment for these activities during the pandemic, and participation in these sports is expected to continue.^{16,17}
- There are many new paddle board tour operators in Alberta, most of which are located near Calgary, suggesting there may be opportunity for new operators elsewhere in the province. One Cochrane-based operator (CANRVRSUP) offers an ‘introduction to river stand up paddle boarding’ tour from Rocky Mountain House on the North Saskatchewan River.¹⁸
- Canoeing/kayaking ranked as the second top new activity that people would like to try in the 2017 Alberta Recreation Study.¹⁹
- The number of active anglers in Alberta grew from 179,461 in 2005 to 282,880 in 2015.²⁰ Overall fishing/angling was worth \$600 million in Alberta in 2020.²¹
- Anglers contributed a total of \$7.9 billion to various local economies in Canadian provinces and territories in 2015. The majority of active anglers in Canada in 2015 were residents fishing within their home province or territory.²²
- In the 2017 Alberta Recreation survey 26.2% of Alberta households and 19.2% of individuals identified as having participated in fishing in the last 12 months.²³
- Many jurisdictions in the United States and internationally are developing blueways to enhance and connect water based tourism and outdoor recreation.²⁴ Blueways are water trails that connect non-motorized water users to tourist attractions, land-based trails, unique locations and experiences, and that provide water access points and related amenities.²⁵

Outdoor Adventure Tourism

Outdoor adventure tourism can be defined as activities that present participants with risk and challenge. These can include ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ adventures, with the former involving more potential danger and requiring more experience and better fitness of participants, and the latter involving less potential danger and less experience.²⁶ Hiking, camping, rock climbing, ice climbing, mountain biking, skiing, rafting, canoeing, canyoning, ATVing and snowmobiling are examples of outdoor adventure activities that already happen in the study area, especially in the western reaches. The mountainous geography and existing recreational infrastructure in reaches 1 and 2 lend themselves well to these types of activities, though there are also opportunities in other reaches, in particular for experiences that are trail based and those that connect water and land based activities. Parks and public land are a crucial ingredient for outdoor adventure activities.²⁷

Market Insights

- The most popular winter activities in Alberta include walking or hiking on trails, walking for pleasure and exercise, resort-based skiing or snowboarding, bicycling, cross country skiing, snowshoeing and ice skating.²⁸
- A majority of Albertans (67%) have a preference for non-motorized outdoor recreation.²⁹
- Snowmobiling and ATV use are substantially more popular in rural areas, towns, and villages than they are in Edmonton and Calgary.³⁰
- It is estimated that Alberta residents and visitors from other parts of Canada and other countries made 15.4 million visits to Alberta Crown Land in 2017 for outdoor recreation purposes. Albertans accounted for 83.7% of total visits.³¹
- Research in the U.S. indicates that investments in infrastructure to support outdoor recreation supports local economies, and that on average the economies of rural places, small cities and large metros that depend on outdoor recreation outperform their peers. The winter and summer trail system in Methow Valley Washington, for example, supports \$6 in salaries for local workers for every \$1 spent to develop and operate the trails.³²
- As the population ages, demand for soft adventure activities, such as wildlife viewing and walking is expected to grow.³³

Nature-based Tourism

Nature-based tourism is tourism that is based on the natural attractions of an area.³⁴ The North Saskatchewan River and surrounding lands are rich in such attractions, and offer opportunities for birdwatching, wildlife viewing, scenic tours, stargazing, northern lights watching, nature photography and immersive experiences that help visitors learn about the environment and natural history. Attractions vary by reach as the river passes through many unique ecosystems and landscapes. Nature-based tourism can provide local incentives for the conservation of landscapes and habitats along the entire length of the river, and can be a tool to share the unique natural history of each reach.³⁵ Nature-based tourism assets can support many types of activities, both guided and self-directed. They can also support visitation through all seasons of the year, which is especially important in the study area where water-based activities are limited to no more than six months each year.

Market Insights

- Visiting a national, provincial, or other nature park was among the top five activities for Albertans visiting Alberta in 2019.³⁶
- Canadian residents have a strong affinity for nature-based tourist activities and natural attractions are their top trip anchor.³⁷
- Interest among domestic tourists has increased for wildlife viewing, northern light viewing, and fall colours viewing.³⁸
- Seeing the northern lights is now the top activity for many international travellers to base a trip around.³⁹
- Nature-based tourism is a priority area of focus for tourism development in Alberta.⁴⁰

Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism sees visitors immersed in local heritage and culture. It leaves people educated and inspired and connects them with the places they visit. It occurs when participation in a cultural or heritage activity is a significant factor for travelling.^{41,42} Cultural tourism has emerged as a growing trend in the last 10 years and is expected to dominate over the next 20.⁴³ Cultural tourism assets are varied and can include: historic sites and interpretive centres, art galleries and exhibitions, museums, cultural centres, historic forts, historic driving routes and walking trails, as well as cultural and heritage themed tours, events, festivals, and services such as accommodation and food.⁴⁴ The study area is well positioned to attract more cultural tourism. Many assets already exist in the study area, can be further leveraged, and intentionally connected to enhance visitor experience and immersion in local heritage and culture.

Market Insights

- Cultural experiences are a key driver for young Canadians, with those ages 18-34 rating culture in their top 3 reasons for visiting a destination.⁴⁵
- A 2013 study on demand for rural vacation experiences in Alberta indicated that culture and heritage related experiences would be an ideal activity on a same day or overnight trip.⁴⁶
- Improvements in cultural tourism that can encourage visitation in rural areas include better advertising, higher quality attractions and more unique events and festivals.⁴⁷
- According to the 2017 Alberta Recreation Study, 57.4% of Alberta households had taken part in a visit to a historic site or museum in the previous year.⁴⁸
- There is growing consumer research supporting the idea of “responsible travel” which predicts travellers will want to lighten their footprint on destinations by supporting local economies, engaging with local cultures, reducing carbon emissions, and enabling environmental conservation.⁴⁹

Indigenous Tourism

This sector has strong potential for growth in Alberta. Across Canada it is expected to recover more quickly than the rest of the tourism sector due to observable increases in domestic and international consumer demand for Indigenous tourism products and services.⁵⁰ The entire NSR heritage river study area overlaps with the traditional territories of many First Nations and Métis communities, and there are many reserves and settlements in close proximity to the river. There are existing Indigenous tourism operators in the study area, offering everything from geological tours of the river valley in Edmonton to accommodations and cultural retreats in more rural reaches. Across the study area there are many opportunities for Indigenous communities and individuals to provide tourism products and experiences to visitors. Destination Canada’s research indicates that the Explorer Quotient types of visitors that are looking for an Indigenous tourism experience are Cultural Explorers and Authentic Experiencers.⁵¹

Market Insights

- Indigenous tourism in Canada saw unprecedented growth from 2014 to 2019.⁵²
- Indigenous tourism in Alberta was worth an estimated \$166.2 million in GDP prior to COVID-19 and supported close to 3,000 jobs and 125 Indigenous tourism businesses.⁵³

- The top five overseas markets for Indigenous Tourism in Alberta are the United Kingdom, China, Japan, Australia, and Germany.⁵⁴
- Activities and experiences of interest to domestic visitors include traditional cooking, stargazing, guided hiking tours, arts and crafts, powwows, and horseback riding.⁵⁵
- International markets are similarly interested in authentic and immersive experiences with Indigenous people, experiences that include nature and learning, and experiences that involve 'discoveries' and 'adventures'.⁵⁶

River Wide Action Plan

The action plan is divided into three sub-sections, which include:

1. Product Development
2. Destination Marketing
3. Destination Development

Action items have been developed for each sub-section that will help advance tourism in the study area over the next 10 years.

Sectoral Leads

Sectoral leads have been suggested for each action item (e.g. private sector, public/government sector, and voluntary sector). Where appropriate, sectors are encouraged to seek partnerships with stakeholder groups, irrespective of sector, to leverage available resources.

Quick Wins



A blue star indicates that an action item is a “Quick Win.” Quick wins are actions that can be implemented in the near term, have a high probability of success, and are relatively simple to complete.

1. Product Development

	Action Items	Sectoral Lead
1	Complete a tourism product development plan that would assist stakeholders in the further development of market ready tourism experiences.	Public
2	Inventory all formal and informal river access points along the river and identify priority improvements at key locations to support visitor and operator access.	Public
3	Develop signature/epic multi-day North Saskatchewan River Heritage tours that originate in reach 1 and end in reach 8, stopping at key natural, cultural, and recreational attractions, unique accommodations, and local points of interest along the way.	Private
4	Develop and market paddle trails on and near the river.	Private
5	Develop trails near access sites to provide additional opportunities for visitors to explore nearby areas and communities.	Public/ Voluntary
★ 6	Focus product development efforts on the core product areas of water-based tourism, outdoor adventure tourism, nature-based tourism, cultural tourism, and Indigenous tourism.	Private/ Public
★ 7	Encourage new and existing tourism and outdoor education operators to provide ‘learn to recreate’ products specific to the river to attract new visitors with less experience in outdoor recreational activities.	Private

Action Items		Sectoral Lead
8	Identify products and assets that would support more year-round visitation in each reach. This might include fall colour river tours and/or regular small to medium scale destination-wide events.	Private/ Voluntary
★ 9	Encourage product development that leverages and tells the story of the river from multiple perspectives and that encourages responsible visitation.	Private/ Voluntary
★ 10	Support products and experiences that are nature based and that educate visitors about the ecology of the river and adjacent lands.	All

2. Destination Marketing

Action Items		Sectoral Lead
1	Tell the story of the river from Banff National Park to the Saskatchewan border and make it available for visitors to access through both hard copy and digital information resources. Anchor attractions should be highlighted in each reach.	All
★ 2	Make conservation and the health of the river a key part of the river's story in marketing materials.	All
3	Create a comprehensive online guide to public access sites along the river, including distances between sites, links to critical data about river flow and conditions, and information about sights and attractions along the way.	Public/ Voluntary
4	Coordinate across jurisdictions to establish consistent and well-developed signage along the river related to river access points to improve wayfinding and provide some degree of uniformity.	Public/ Voluntary
★ 5	Develop river trip planning resources that go beyond informal access points and random camping by including recommended itineraries, transportation options, gear rental and tour operators, safety considerations, food service and roofed accommodation options, and points of interest on and off the water.	Private/ Voluntary
6	Leverage technology such as apps and virtual reality experiences to improve access to information about the river and to better immerse visitors in the history of the river and its historic attractions and sites.	All
★ 7	Include information about responsible visitation and sustainable tourism in marketing materials.	All

3. Destination Development

Action Items		Sectoral Lead
1	Establish a North Saskatchewan River Tourism Development Task Force. Consider starting with a Task Force that has representatives from reaches 1, 2 and 3. Once	

Action Items	Sectoral Lead
<p>this becomes successful consider adding additional Task Forces in those reaches who wish to collaborate. The purpose of the Task Force will be to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Take the lead role in implementing the action plan. B. Secure partnerships and leverage funds. C. Encourage investment in tourism development initiatives along the North Saskatchewan River. D. Be a forum for collaboration and communication on the promotion and development of tourism initiatives. 	
<p>2 Strengthen community and industry capacity for tourism in those reaches where tourism is less developed. This may include the facilitation of training opportunities in tourism marketing and product development, provision of information resources, organizing collaborative opportunities for tourism operators, and supporting grant applications to access tourism development funding.</p>	Public/ Voluntary
<p>3 Strengthen visitor services capacity across all reaches, encouraging more modern, coordinated, and flexible visitor information services to better meet the needs of visitors.</p>	All
<p>4 Support Indigenous tourism operators to open and grow businesses along each reach in ways that are directed by and appropriate to First Nations and Métis peoples and communities, and that help them to share their own knowledge and stories in their own words.</p>	Public/ Voluntary
<p>5 Leverage data from regional tourism organizations and novel data sources like fitness tracking apps, social media, and web browser data to estimate how much people are visiting and recreating in different reaches in order to help communities and operators capitalize on demand.</p>	All
<p>6 Work with existing attractions to identify ways and requirements for them to operate year-round or to extend their seasons beyond the standard summer May to September timeframe.</p>	All
<p>7 Leverage technology to improve access to information about the river and to expand accommodation options in rural areas.</p>	All
<p>8 ★ Leverage Travel Alberta Tourism Development Zone projects to align tourism opportunities along the river and identify shared priorities across different reaches.</p>	Public
<p>9 ★ Ensure sustainability of the river and adjacent lands is incorporated into tourism planning efforts.</p>	All

Top 10 Action Items

The following action items have been identified as the top short-term priorities to advance tourism development along the North Saskatchewan River.

1. Establish a North Saskatchewan River Tourism Development Task Force.
2. Inventory all formal and informal river access points along the river and identify priority improvements at key locations to support visitor and operator access.
3. Complete a tourism product development plan that would assist stakeholders in the further development of market ready tourism experiences.
4. Develop signature/epic multi-day North Saskatchewan River Heritage tours that originate in reach 1 and end in reach 8, stopping at key natural, cultural, and recreational attractions, unique accommodations, and local points of interest along the way.
5. Focus product development efforts on the core product areas of water-based tourism, outdoor adventure tourism, nature-based tourism, cultural tourism, and Indigenous tourism.
6. Strengthen community and industry capacity for tourism in those reaches where tourism is less developed.
7. Tell the story of the river from Banff National Park to the Saskatchewan border and make it available for visitors to access through both hard copy and digital information resources.
8. Create a comprehensive online guide to public access sites along the river, including distances between sites, links to critical data about river flow and conditions, and information about sights and attractions along the way.
9. Develop river trip planning resources that go beyond informal access points and random camping by including recommended itineraries, transportation options, gear rental and tour operators, safety considerations, food service and roofed accommodation options, and points of interest on and off the water.
10. Ensure sustainability of the river and adjacent lands is incorporated into tourism planning efforts.

Organizing for Tourism Development

Destinations along the North Saskatchewan River stand to benefit by cooperating to attract visitors to the river. Although these destinations may compete at the local level for visitors in some instances, the first hurdle to overcome is attracting visitors to the river in the first place. Therefore, there is opportunity to leverage the reach and resources of multiple partners through the establishment of a North Saskatchewan River Tourism Development Task Force that would more strongly promote and develop the river as a destination.

Jurisdictions across Alberta have implemented a variety of models and collaboration frameworks to grow tourism. It is important to recognize that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. Models and frameworks need to be tailored to the particular needs and interests of the stakeholders involved. With that in mind, tourism stakeholders could consider the following options for organizing themselves for tourism development along the North Saskatchewan River.

Option 1: All River Reaches

This option would entail organizing tourism stakeholders into a group that oversees and promotes development of tourism along the full length of the river in Alberta. A key strength of this approach is the opportunity to develop a river-wide brand that could be promoted to visitors. This would encourage consistent messaging that can be readily leveraged for collaborative marketing.

A potential drawback of this approach is the challenge of organizing and engaging many partners spread out over a large geographic area. Additionally, differences in product offerings along the river can be difficult to clearly represent and promote to visitors.

The Cowboy Trail

The Cowboy Trail is an example of multiple partners spread out over a large geographic area coming together to establish a consistent tourism brand. The Cowboy Trail is a 700km stretch of highway in Alberta that promotes western vacations and adventures.

Option 2: Segmentation by River Reaches and/or Product Offerings

A second option would be to organize tourism stakeholders based on their location along the river and/or the characteristics of their product offerings. For example, river reaches 1 to 3 have a similar product offering that is focused on adventure tourism and connection to nature. River reaches 4 to 6 could be grouped together to focus on travelers who want outdoor experiences close to urban amenities, and reaches 7 to 8 could be grouped together to focus on their cultural offerings and more relaxing river experiences. Stakeholders in these reach groupings could form a collaboration framework that would see them work together to develop similar experience offerings and target the same visitor markets.

The Foothills Tourism Association

Foothills Tourism is an example of a tourism organization that is focused on promoting visitation and tourism development of a particular region in Alberta (i.e. the foothills area southwest of Calgary).

It is worth noting that there is often opportunity to formalize collaboration frameworks underneath existing organizations. As an example, Explore Nordegg is an active Destination Marketing/Management Organization (DMO) whose product offering is strongly tied to the river. This organization could spearhead and/or provide support to a river tourism task force made up of local stakeholders in its area of operations. Given the strong degree of alignment that there would be between these two groups, there is opportunity for them to mutually support each other, increase capacity, and achieve greater things than they might have been able to do on their own.

Option 3: Individual Destinations

A third option would be for business and stakeholders in individual destinations or communities to organize themselves to develop tourism along their portions of the river. Existing DMOs would be well positioned to take on a leading role or to support the efforts of groups/individuals looking to develop tourism along the river.

If stakeholders choose to organize themselves this way, there would still be opportunities to collaborate with neighbouring destinations/communities and other jurisdictions along the river. This would most likely occur on a project-by-project basis where there is strong alignment between the goals and objectives of the partners involved.

Tourism Analysis of River Reaches

The following provides an analysis of tourism readiness, assets, opportunities, challenges, and potential action items for each study area river reach.

Reach 1 - Banff National Park to Abraham Lake/Bighorn Dam

This reach is the most wild and already attracts domestic and international visitors for water, land and nature based activities and adventures year-round. Its relative remoteness, location along the eastern slopes and less developed nature, are key draws. Here the river runs primarily through awe-inspiring protected areas, and pools in Abraham Lake before being released downstream from the Bighorn Dam. This stretch of the river, closest to the North Saskatchewan's headwaters, is appropriate for more advanced and intermediate paddlers, contains some rapids, and has options for single or two day trips between Banff National Park and Preacher's Point campground, just before the lake. The lake itself is not as suitable for water-based adventures in most seasons given dangerous winds, but attracts many to its edges in warmer months and onto the ice to explore its bubbles in the winter. With many established assets and operators, and its connection to Banff National Park and proximity to Jasper National Park, this reach is among the most attractive for tourism in the study area.

Key Assets

- Many existing outdoor recreation assets and activities are on and near the river including rafting, kayaking, camping, hiking, climbing, skating, canyoning, horseback riding, and a via ferrata route.
- Several established tour operators including HeLa Ventures, Rockies Heli Canada, Western Canyoning Adventure, Nordegg Adventures, and Girth Hitch Guiding which offer a diversity of tours and activities including rafting and river trips, kayak and canoe rentals and shuttles, Abraham Lake ice walks, canyon tours, nature photo tours, guided hikes, ice climbs, scenic flights, snowshoeing, and via ferrata tours.
- Several formal and rustic campsites are in the area. There are informal campsites along Abraham Lake, as well as two rustic resort style developments offering lodge and cabin rentals and camping for RVs.
- Several organizations exist to support and promote tourism in the reach including Explore Nordegg and David Thompson Country.
- Limited light pollution in the area makes it an ideal place for stargazing and northern lights viewing.

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Banff National Park
- Abraham Lake
- North Saskatchewan Headwaters

Action Items

- Develop more river access points for non-motorized boating to improve ease of access, allow for more river trip options, and improve river user safety.
- Encourage more diverse accommodation options nearby to attract more diverse visitors and further expand off-peak season visitation.
- Expand stargazing and northern lights viewing opportunities and information.
- Consider developing more formal amenities in the backcountry areas accessed from Highway 11, to provide more land and nature-based options for visitors including hut to hut experiences north of Abraham Lake. Formalize trail information and maintaining existing trails.
- The area is covered by Travel Alberta's new David Thompson tourism region and a regional tourism plan was being developed at the time of writing this report. Leverage this to identify new access points, infrastructure investments, streamlined processes for operators, and strategies to ensure the long term sustainability of tourism in the region, including mitigating impacts on its unique environment.
- Leverage the unique ecology and landscapes in the area, and its proximity to the river's headwaters, to share its natural history and to educate visitors about the importance of the ecological health of the river and adjacent lands.

Reach 2 - Nordegg Bridge to Rocky Mountain House

This stretch of the river is among the more tourism ready of all reaches in the study. It is characterized by stretches of undeveloped crown land along the river, two anchor historic communities at each end (Nordegg and Rocky Mountain House) which are home to tourism operators that serve reaches 1 and 2, numerous land and water based recreational and tourism assets, and two key historic attractions that highlight industrial and fur trade heritage of the area. Three to four day paddling trips are possible and the river here is said to be suitable for intermediate paddlers and also for day trips.⁵⁷ The level of the river fluctuates significantly due to the Bighorn Dam. The Brierlies rapids near Rocky Mountain House are the most consistent whitewater available to paddlers from Edmonton.⁵⁸

Key Assets

- River access points and multiple trailheads and staging areas for hiking, equestrian and OHV users, including a multi-use trail currently in development between Rocky Mountain House and Nordegg.⁵⁹
- Several provincial parks, recreation and protected areas that offer land and nature-based tourism opportunities (e.g. Saunders Provincial Recreation Area, Crimson Lake Provincial Park, and Horburg Provincial Recreation Area).
- Several operators offer guided canoe and raft trips on the river and shuttles between river access points.
- Numerous tour operators focus on specific types of water and land-based adventures such as equestrian rides, fishing tours, guided hikes and paddle excursions, as well as outdoor education. Examples of these operators include Skadi Wilderness Adventures, McKenzies Trails West, and Smitty's Outdoor Adventures. Some operators in this reach operate year-round.

- Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site and Brazeau Collieries Mine National Heritage Site provide anchor attractions at each end of the reach. The Brierlies rapids can be accessed directly from the Rocky Mountain House site.
- Several organizations exist to promote tourism including Explore Nordegg and David Thompson Country. The reach also overlaps with the boundaries of the Central Alberta Tourism Alliance.

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Brierlies rapids
- Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site
- Brazeau Collieries Mine National Heritage Site
- Provincial Parks and Recreation Areas (identified above)

Action Items

- Leverage the status of the David Thomson region as a priority Tourism Development Zone to set priorities and identify streamlined processes to develop new assets on crown land.
- Continue to build the Rocky to Nordegg trail and develop tourism assets (such as campgrounds and river access points), products and experiences (such as tours and itineraries) that connect land and water-based activities.
- Attract and support new food and other tourism supporting businesses (gear, accommodation, local transportation services) to Nordegg and Rocky Mountain House to provide more amenities and more retail vibrancy for tourism.
- Expand visitor access to outdoor educational opportunities to take advantage of existing facilities and teach tourists about the ecology of the river and water safety.
- Expand programming at existing cultural attractions and make further links to the river.

Reach 3: Rocky Mountain House to Drayton Valley

This reach offers a different wilderness experience than those further west, running largely through boreal forest outside of the eastern slopes. Low grade rapids and islands with sandy beaches make it ideal for quiet multi-day paddling excursions.⁶⁰ As in reach 2, fluctuating river levels due to the operation of the Big Horn Dam, spring thaw and weather events make it challenging to develop infrastructure close to the river. Limited road access to the river between the towns of Rocky Mountain House and Drayton Valley also limit public access points to the water, and make this reach more suited to guided fishing tours and river adjacent exploration. Compared to reaches 1 and 2, tourism in this reach is less well developed beyond Rocky Mountain House and the area is less tourism ready.

Key Assets

- The river runs through largely undeveloped forested areas, including islands that can be used for camping.

- Blue Rapids Provincial Recreation Area runs along the river south of Drayton Valley and offers ATV trails. It is under the management of Eagle Point Blue Rapids Parks Council. There are OHV trails on the west side of the river as well.
- There are local paddling clubs (such as Rocky Canoe Club) with good knowledge of the river and that provide programming through summer, starting at local lakes and progressing to the river.
- Accommodation options include a few campgrounds near Rocky Mountain House (e.g. River View Campground, Crimson Lake Campground, Twin Lakes) and standard hotels and motels in Rocky Mountain House and Drayton Valley, along with a few B&Bs.
- Crimson Lake Provincial Park is west of the river and will be a trailhead for the multi-use trail from Rocky to Nordegg.
- Existing tourist information includes a year-round visitor centre operating in the Rocky Mountain House Museum and a locally developed app called Discover David Thompson Trails.
- The North Saskatchewan River Park in Rocky Mountain House is right next to the river and can accommodate RV camping, rodeos, and events.
- A small airport in Rocky Mountain House can accommodate private and commercial aircraft year round and the terminal may be rebuilt in the future.⁶¹
- Rocky Mountain House is where the Cowboy Trail meets David Thompson Country, strategically positioning the town at the crossroads of two key tourist routes/regions.

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Cowboy Trail
- Provincial Parks and Recreation Areas (identified above)

Action Items

- Encourage new fishing outfitters to operate along this reach.
- Leverage the North Saskatchewan River Park in Rocky Mountain House for events that will draw more tourists to the area. Consider a paddling or other water-related event or festival that starts or ends nearby.
- Encourage more accommodation and placemaking in the town of Rocky Mountain House to encourage visitors to spend more time and overnight in the area, whether they are exploring David Thompson Country or the Cowboy Trail.
- Promote managed OHV trails to domestic tourists and support guided tours and experiences within the Blue Rapids Provincial Recreation Area.
- Consider creating a system of managed OHV trails outside of Blue Rapids Provincial Recreation Area to link communities, points of interest and river access points.

Reach 4: Drayton Valley to Genesee

This reach is more suited to novice paddlers than upper reaches, and can accommodate half day to five day trips from Drayton Valley to the east in a semi-wilderness setting.⁶² Tourism is less developed along the river here than in areas to the west and east, and the reach is not as tourism ready as others. There

are few accommodation options and attractions beyond paddling the river and some trail-based activities in Eagle Point Provincial Park. Outside this park, the reach lends itself to water based activities such as fishing, padding, boating, and camping. Its proximity to the Capital Region is a strength, giving it a large potential domestic visitor base.

Key Assets

- Eagle Point Provincial Park is riverfront and offers year round land-based recreation (hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, biking) and river access.
- Summer season camping is available at Wiley West campground, just outside of Drayton Valley, including a range of camping style accommodation (rents, RVs, cabins) and programming (food events, camper activities).
- Wilderness camping is available on river banks and islands in this reach.
- There are river access points including boat launches for motorized and non-motorized watercrafts at Wiley West Campground.
- Basic hotel style accommodation is available in Drayton Valley.
- Drayton Valley Hospitality & Tourism Authority offers tourism information, as does Brazeau County.
- An existing Edmonton-based operator provides canoe rental and shuttle services to/from Drayton Valley.⁶³

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Wiley West Campground
- Eagle Point Provincial Park

Action Items

- Promote fishing tours and public access to the river for angling.
- Encourage new and unique accommodation options in Drayton Valley and in rural areas near the river, as well the development of trail connections between these points and the river.
- Support the creation of scenic river tours and guided paddling tours between Drayton and Edmonton.

Reach 5: Genesee to Edmonton

This reach is the most urban, passing through several communities bordering the river in the Capital Region. As a result, there are abundant river and river-adjacent tourism and outdoor recreational activities, and many tourism support amenities. The paddle from Genesee or Devon to Edmonton is popular for locals, and this stretch is well suited to beginners. There are also abundant off-river activities, both recreational and cultural, that combined with other assets including access to an international airport, to make this reach the most tourism ready of all eight reaches in the study area.

Key Assets

- Several formal boat and hand launches and river access points can be found along this reach, especially throughout Edmonton's river valley park system.
- Developed recreation assets are available year round in river valley adjacent lands and parks - including hiking, walking, biking, and snowshoeing trails, cross country ski trails, downhill ski areas, skating rinks, golf courses, and campgrounds. Fishing is possible from the shore at many locations and a new provincial park may be created at Big Island, a 68-hectare parcel of provincial crown land along the river in southwest Edmonton.
- Existing local operators offer fishing tours, canoe/kayak shuttles, gear rental for paddling and exploring river valley adjacent lands, and glamping accommodations. Examples include Urban River Adventures, Rural Rivers, River Valley Adventure Co, Canoe Heads, and Accessible Waters.
- Several local paddling organizations and clubs offer lessons and club trips for members.
- There is a well-established destination management marketing organization in Edmonton (Explore Edmonton), diverse food and accommodation offerings, and existing cultural and Indigenous tourist attractions and operators such as Fort Edmonton Park, Talking Rock Tours, and Get Hooked Fishing.
- There are several festivals and events tied to the river and river valley including the Edmonton Dragon Boat Festival, Edmonton Folk Fest, Heritage Festival, and Silver Skate.

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Paddle route from Genesee/Devon to Edmonton.
- Big Island
- Fort Edmonton Park
- River-related festivals and events (identified above)

Action Items

- Leverage existing marketing assets and online maps and apps (such as the Commonwealth Walkway App and Explore Edmonton website) to direct visitors to river valley related viewpoints, businesses, and activities.
- Create more fulsome destinations and attract river users to shore hop by locating more tourist supporting services (such as food, accommodation, entertainment, gear rental, and boat storage) in the river valley near water access points.
- Develop guided and self-guided tours that showcase walking and biking routes along riverside trails, and that link local businesses and destinations.
- Create tourism products and itineraries that feature the river and leverage local cultural and heritage offerings. These might include foraging excursions by boat and foot in the river valley, followed by dinner at a nearby restaurant featuring local ingredients, or historic river tours that stop at key sights along the reach and that connect regional destinations.

- Work to leverage Edmonton’s successful event hosting experience by positioning the river prominently in event promotions. Also seek to develop river-based experiences pre and post event for event competitors and spectators.

Reach 6: Edmonton to Pakan

This reach is characterized by pastoral landscapes, dark skies, and established cultural and historic attractions. It is less travelled by paddlers but offers beginner friendly opportunities to explore the water, along with many opportunities for anglers.⁶⁴ Less information about using the river is available east of Edmonton, including trip itineraries, access points, and typical flow characteristics. Despite this, relatively easy access to main provincial highways and the Edmonton International Airport, the existence of established destinations, and several local agencies that work to promote tourism, make this reach among the most tourism ready.

Key Assets

- Multiple well established historic and cultural attractions and landscapes, including Fort Heritage Precinct (open year round), Victoria District National Historic Site, Victoria Trail, and Métis Crossing (open year round).
- Several provincial natural areas are near the river including Redwater, Astotin, and Northwest Bruderheim, providing opportunities for hunting, snowmobiling and OHV use.
- Existing riverside parks, walking, biking, and cross country ski trails in adjacent communities, including Fort Saskatchewan and Strathcona County, and plans for new trails, parks and bridges that connect the north and south sides of the river.
- Camping opportunities can be found near the river, including at Métis Crossing and Victoria Trail campground and RV park. Métis Crossing also offers lodge and tipi accommodation, and more standard hotel and motel options are concentrated in the western stretch of this reach in nearby communities. Pine Creek Retreat is located next to the river and offers ‘Métis inspired shelter experiences’.⁶⁵
- Several fishing tour companies operate in the area and sturgeon are said to be common in some areas of the reach.
- Elk Island National Park and Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve are further south of the river, offer additional year-round outdoor recreational opportunities and are dark sky preserves.

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Historic and cultural attractions, especially Métis Crossing (identified above)
- Elk Island National Park
- Beaver Hills Biosphere Reserve
- Provincial natural areas (identified above)

Action Items

- Develop additional riverside trails to provide off-river assets and allow those without boats to enjoy and engage with the river.
- Encourage development of more diverse accommodation options near the river - including glamping, vacation rentals and B&Bs - to provide more opportunity for visitors to extend day trips into overnight stays.
- Leverage Métis Crossing as a primary attraction and venue for river related signature festivals and events, and a destination for learn to kayak/canoe and river safety courses.
- Develop self-guided tours that highlight the cultural attractions and history of the area, and that link to services and accommodation options such as those available at Métis Crossing.
- Encourage operators in the Capital Region to provide transportation to and guided tours of Métis Crossing and the surrounding area, including the Victoria Settlement and other cultural destinations in the region.
- Develop dark sky and northern lights tourism experiences on or near the river valley.

Reach 7: Pakan to Elk Point

This reach is characterized by a quiet river that passes through parkland areas, farmland, and lesser known heritage sites. As with reach 6, there are few formal access points and limited information readily available about using the river here, though Pakan to Myrnam is referenced as a known canoeing route in some materials, and bridges across the river offer informal launches at either side.⁶⁶ Most lands along the river are privately owned. While this reach has potential for increased visitation, especially when coupled with reach 8, tourism assets, products and experiences related and/or adjacent to the river are not yet well developed.

Key Assets

- Trails for ATVs and snowmobiles can be found on the south side of the river near Duvernay at Cougar Patch, and a local snowmobile association is said to have cabins available for year round use. Nearby Brosseau is a gravitational point for snowmobilers in the winter.
- Points of interest are scattered along and within the river, including a park, viewing platform and small campsite at Elk Point Bridge, and the historic Fort de L'Isle/Fort Island near Myrnam which contains the remains of three different fur trading forts.
- The 300km long Iron Horse Trail is not riverside but is a key asset for the region, with the town of Elk Point being a staging point for the trail.
- A new tour operator, River Ranch Adventures is about to open for its first season. They plan to offer horse trail rides along the banks of the river and floats back downstream.
- Several organizations exist to promote tourism and economic development in this reach, including Go East of Edmonton, Travel Lakeland, Alberta HUB, St Paul Elk Point Economic Development Alliance. At the time of writing the latter was working on a Tourism Opportunity Identification and Destination Development Strategy.
- The reach overlaps with numerous thematic tourism routes that have been developed by the Northern Alberta Bilingual Tourism Network.⁶⁷

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Iron Horse Trail
- Fort de L'Isle/Fort Island
- Cougar Patch trails

Action Items

- Link points of interest and attractions across reaches 6, 7 and 8 to leverage special aspects and common elements of each.
- Build on existing ATV and snowmobile trails, groups, and amenities to attract domestic visitors seeking motorized recreation options and to expand the tourism season into winter with snowmobiling. Consider also connecting the Iron Horse Trail to river side motorized recreational trails.
- Work with the Conseil de développement économique de l'Alberta to better connect the river into francophone tourism routes.
- Incorporate the river into current and future regional tourism planning, including Tourism Development Zone work by Travel Alberta and tourism planning by the St Paul Elk Point Economic Development Alliance.
- Create purposeful connections by road and river from Métis Crossing to the west and Fort George and Buckingham House to the east.

Reach 8: Elk Point to Alberta-Saskatchewan Border

The greatest potential of this reach lies in cultural, heritage and Indigenous tourism. There are historic sites along and near the river, numerous nearby First Nation and Métis communities, and hamlets that already serve as staging points for the Iron Horse Trail. As with reach 7 there is relatively little information available about the river and getting into it here, though old ferry crossings and existing bridges are said to serve as informal access points. While the reach isn't necessarily tourism ready, existing attractions and assets, including tourism organizations serving the area, mean that it has the potential to be with strategic investments and regional collaboration.

Key Assets

- Cultural attractions include Fort George and Buckingham House Provincial Historic Site (open seasonally) at the river's edge and Frog Lake National Historic Site northeast of the river.
- The multi-use Iron Horse Trail from Heinsburg to Lindbergh almost parallels the river, has no road crossings and many great views.
- The hamlet of Heinsburg houses a historic water tower and rail station, has access to the river, and is a staging area for the Iron Horse Trail.
- In the hamlet of Lindbergh there are lands next to the river with amazing views and where the historic Carlton Trail and Iron Horse Trail intersect. Though the local salt plant is closed and will be demolished it is also a unique part of the area's history.

- There are fishing outfitters that operate here (Diamondback Charters and Lunkers) and sturgeon can be found in this reach.
- Whitney Lakes Provincial Park is just north of the river and Water Spirit Spa (an existing Indigenous tourism operator) is also nearby.

Story Map Attractions

The following attractions could be considered for inclusion in tourism-related story maps of the area.

- Fort George and Buckingham House Provincial Historic Site
- Frog Lake National Historic Site
- Iron Horse Trail
- Whitney Lakes Provincial Park

Action Items

- Develop Heinsburg as a local tourism service hub, with new amenities such as accommodation and food services.
- Establish connections from the Iron Horse Trail to key river access points and attractions along the river to provide additional reasons to visit and additional stopping points for visitors.
- Create itineraries/routes through the region that tie various riverside attractions to sites of interest further 'inland'.
- Create a multi-modal tour loop that uses Elk Point and Heinsburg as key staging points to connect visitors to Fort George and Buckingham House via the river and overland.
- Work with and support Indigenous tourism operators in trip itineraries that include fur trade and colonial era sites (Fort George and Buckingham House and Heinsburg) to tell a complete story for the reach and immerse visitors in its history.
- Create products and itineraries that connect heritage routes and destinations in the area, such as the Carlton Trail and Fort George Buckingham House, to help visitors explore the region's assets and history.
- Attract more winter use of the Iron Horse Trail by developing amenities such as accommodation and food services.

Appendices

Appendix A: Industry Engagement

Methodology

An engagement process was implemented to gather information regarding tourism assets, visitor market opportunities, tourism development readiness, and growth areas for tourism along the North Saskatchewan River. The process began in early February and ran into early March, 2023. 256 Stakeholders from across all eight river reaches were invited to participate. Engagement activities included the following:

- Online survey (22 responses)
- 3 Digital input workshops (9 participants)
- One-on-one interviews (13 participants)

The following organizations participated in the process:

1. Accessible Waters
2. Alberta HUB
3. Beaver Hills Biosphere
4. Brazeau County
5. Ceyana Canoe Club
6. Clearwater County
7. County of Vermilion
8. CottonTail Corner
9. Edmonton and Area Land Trust
10. Edmonton Outdoor Club
11. Explore Nordegg
12. Get Hooked
13. GO East of Edmonton
14. Headway School
15. HeLa Ventures Ltd.
16. Historic Edmonton
17. Nordegg Adventures
18. Northwest Voyageurs Canoe Club
19. Parkland County
20. River Valley Alliance
21. Riverland Recreational Trail Society
22. River Ranch Adventures
23. Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site
24. Saint Paul County
25. Smoky Lake Region
26. Strathcona County
27. Sturgeon County

28. Town of Devon
29. Travel Alberta
30. Travel Lakeland
31. United Albertan Paddling Society
32. Victoria Settlement Provincial Historic Site

Opportunities Identified by Stakeholders

- The river and adjacent lands do and can accommodate a wide variety of recreational users and activities, including but not limited to fishing, paddling, hiking, biking, camping, horse riding, snowmobiling and ATVing.
- There are many existing tourism assets to leverage along the river. These include culture and heritage attractions such as Metis Crossing and Fort George Buckingham House, tour operators that provide guided hiking and paddling excursions, as well as existing trail and park infrastructure. Other assets include existing destination management organizations and partnerships such as Travel Lakeland, Explore Edmonton, Explore Nordegg, and David Thompson Country, to name only a few.
- Planned and ongoing investments along different reaches should improve amenities and assets for tourism. These include the River Valley Alliance's plans to complete the last 23km of trails linking Devon to Fort Saskatchewan, Clearwater County's Rocky to Nordegg Trail, and the STEP Region Tourism Opportunity Identification and Destination Development Strategy.
- There are opportunities for a variety of tourism offerings including water-based (e.g. boating, paddling, fishing), trail-based (e.g. walking, cycling, snowshoeing), cultural experiences, and Indigenous tourism. There are also opportunities to connect assets and destinations along the river, for example, Rocky Mountain House National Historic site and Fort Edmonton Park.
- Demand exists for more recreational use in/near the river, and for investment in more types of accommodation to supply existing visitors and attract new ones, including camping, glamping, unique resorts, and higher end retreats.

Challenges Identified by Stakeholders

- Environmental sustainability was described by participants as an important consideration for tourism development along the river. Increased tourism and visitation must be balanced with the ecological integrity of the river and surrounding lands.
- There are too few formal access points for launching boats/watercraft, and land costs and the steepness of the valley can make it challenging to develop these.
- There are not enough services and maintenance activities at existing access points, such as washrooms/outhouses, waste removal, parking, and cell phone coverage.
- Many areas are remote and new development is difficult because there is limited or no existing formal infrastructure such as sewer, water, and power.
- There are few transportation options for visitors beyond private vehicles and some areas require all-terrain vehicles to access.
- The river can be dangerous, and users need to be aware of how to use it safely.

- There are too few tourism supporting businesses within the river reaches such as restaurants/food providers, accommodation, and transportation services.
- Funding from and collaboration with and between governments can be difficult to obtain.
- Insurance costs, permitting and other regulatory requirements from multiple agencies are a burden to people developing or operating tourism facilities and businesses.
- Information about how to visit and access the river is limited and outdated, and there is a lack of promotion of existing destinations, amenities and regions.

Appendix B: Tourism Readiness Assessment - All Reaches

The following provides an overview of Tourism Readiness for the entire study area. Overall, the area is somewhat tourism ready, meaning that while it has significant potential, has many strengths and several core tourism assets in place, there are gaps in tourism products, services and amenities that will require more concerted efforts to address. In addition, there is significant variation in readiness between reaches. See the Tourism Analysis of River Reaches section of this report for commentary on the readiness of each reach.

Criteria / Indicator	Key Findings
SWOT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Each reach has assets to build on, including existing and planned river access points, planned and established trails and attractions, tourism businesses (guiding, rentals, accommodations), and organizations supporting tourism. ● Some reaches have more developed assets than others. ● There are barriers to tourism growth in each reach, which can be overcome with coordinated plans, efforts, and investments. ● The health and ecology of the river can be showcased and leveraged to support visitation and sustainability.
Tourism Service Delivery Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tourism service delivery varies significantly between reaches. Some have limited support services while others are well developed.
Tourism Asset Inventory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengths across reaches include existing outdoor adventure and recreation assets (e.g. river access points and trails), cultural sites and attractions, paddling experiences and opportunities, natural attractions, gateway, and hub communities. ● Shared limitations include seasonality of attractions and tour operators, accommodation options, riverside support amenities, festivals and events, culinary attractions and offerings, and visitor information.
Stakeholder Engagement Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stakeholders identified many assets, opportunities, and challenges for tourism along the river. These are described in Appendix A Industry Engagement.
Market Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There are domestic and international visitor markets that are seeking experiences that the eight reaches can offer. Different reaches can cater to different markets. ● Western reaches can be accessed within a half day's drive of Edmonton and Calgary, both of which have international airports. Eastern reaches can be accessed within a few hours' drive of Edmonton.
Competitive Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is competition from established nature-based and culture and heritage destinations within the province, such as Kananaskis, the

	<p>Cowboy Trail, the Badlands, Jasper, and Banff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Western reaches have a growing reputation for less crowded wilderness experiences compared to the national parks.● The river provides a platform to tell a unique and authentic story about natural and cultural history, to craft related tourism products and experiences, and to connect individual stories and destinations along its length.
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Appendix C: References

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