

NATURE-BASED & AGRI-TOURISM

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INTRODUCTION

Strathcona County is blessed with a spectacular, unique environmental landscape known as the Beaver Hills Moraine. This area, also known as the Cooking Lake Moraine, is a 1,600 sq km region of abundant wildlife, nature-based recreation opportunities, rich history and authentic and traditional local culture.

The Beaver Hills are a glacial moraine formed over 9,000 years ago. The landscape is extensively treed, consisting of rolling terrain, rich in wetlands and boreal mixed wood forest habitat. These biophysical features contribute to a unique sense of place that is valued by both area residents and visitors.

The Beaver Hills Moraine, while covering half of Strathcona County, also spans four other counties, including Lamont, Beaver, Camrose and Leduc Counties.

The area contains many significant nature-based, heritage, cultural and agri-tourism assets and offerings. The most notable nature-based locations in the region include:

- Elk Island National Park
- Miquelon Lake Provincial Park
- Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Grazing Reserve and Provincial Recreation Area
- Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village
- Strathcona Wilderness Centre
- Ministik Game Bird Sanctuary

In 2000, a consortium of partners from government, industry and environmental non-governmental organizations was formed to champion the sustainable environmental management of the Beaver Hills area. Strathcona County has been a part of this partnership – the Beaver Hills Initiative (BHI) – from the outset. In 2011, the BHI commenced a Tourism Development Opportunity Assessment of the Beaver Hills area to identify opportunities for building the region as a sustainable nature-based tourism destination.

WHAT IS NATURE-BASED & AGRI-TOURISM?

The study conducted by the Beaver Hills Initiative provided a wealth of data and insight into the potential of the different types of sustainable tourism. It identified three distinct, and in some cases overlapping, categories:

- 1. Agri-tourism** provides direct involvement between the tourist or consumer and the agricultural community. There is the opportunity to engage in a direct exchange of values between the tourist and the farm community.
- 2. Nature-Based tourism** is any sustainable tourism activity or experience that is directly related to natural attractions or the natural environment, whether for relaxation, discovery, or adventure. Nature-based tourism involves connection and engagement with natural landscapes for people who are looking for authenticity, immersion and education as well as a sense of distance from settlements.
- 3. Heritage/Culture tourism** involves places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present, including historic, cultural and natural attractions. It is a personal encounter with traditions, history and culture and is based upon the concept that each community has a story to tell.

CURRENT TRENDS

- More frequent getaway trips of shorter duration (e.g. two days) that include outdoor education and interpretation (both natural and cultural).
- Increasing use and ownership of RVs with opportunities for service campgrounds in scenic locations, activities and experiences.
- Increasing interest in re-connecting with family and roots and in getting back to nature with opportunities for genealogical and historic/cultural experiences.
- Interest in agri-tourism of all kinds is growing, with related opportunities for working/guest ranches, vacation farms, country vacations, trail rides, behind the scenes activities, etc.
- Increased interest in adventure travel and extreme sports in natural settings (e.g. mountain biking, triathlon, Birkebeiner ski festival), with related opportunities for a range of support services, accommodations, equipment rentals/sales and lessons.
- Increasing interest in eco-tourism (appreciation of authenticity, green design, and conservation).
- Broader choices in accommodation will be sought, from eco-lodges, to cottage tents or yurts.

WHAT DOES THE 2007 MDP SAY?

The MDP contains a few general policies relating to nature-based and agri-tourism:

- Encourage the development of recreation and tourism areas that are complementary to our natural resources and incorporate the natural environment.
- Support regional tourism initiatives that will enhance Strathcona County as a tourism destination.
- Promote cooperative private, non-government and public sector initiatives to develop recreation and tourism opportunities which will complement local strengths and resources.
- Continue to partner with stakeholders to identify and attract new tourism activity to Strathcona County.

CHALLENGES

- There are issues related to accessing areas, with road to trail connectivity lacking.
- Limited agri-tourism features including working/guest ranches, bed and breakfasts, petting zoos, riding trails, community gardens/programs.

- Limited nature-based tourism features including self-guided interpretive trails, campsites with direct access to trail systems, accommodations, eco-lodges, and support services for 'soft adventure' experiences.
- There is a lack of a year-round cultural activities: only a few events, festivals or tours available from October to May.
- Some cultures, such as First Nations or German cultures, do not yet have a presence or facilities to market their heritage, but the potential is there.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Engage with the public and key stakeholders on sustainable tourism issues and opportunities.
- Update the MDP, the Land Use Bylaw and other municipal policy documents and operational procedures to strengthen tourism policies, programs, funding opportunities and other implementation tools.
- Develop the County's infrastructure in such a way to provide good access to tourism areas, trails, etc.
- Coordinate efforts with other municipalities, tourism operators, agencies, and private sector groups in developing regional tourism strategies, branding, etc.
- Market nature-based tourism and offer special events, festivals, resources and facilities related to agriculture, recreation, history, culture, etc.
- Identify, promote and develop hospitality and/or cultural zones in the County.
- Promote and attract new nature-based tourism ventures.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- What is an appropriate scale for nature based tourism development? What scale and type of accommodations is appropriate? Bed and breakfasts? Hotels?
- What should the County focus on to promote and help develop nature based tourism and agri-tourism? What kinds of infrastructure or services are required? Roads? Facilities? Branding and promotion?
- Are there specific geographic areas within the County that should receive the most attention in encouraging and developing nature based and agri-tourism? Do you like the idea of establishing hospitality zones, or cultural zones in the rural parts of the County?
- How can we support nature based and agri-tourism while protecting agricultural and environmental values?