Rural Ontario Foresight Papers

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The Visitor Economy and Rural Cultural Amenities

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Introduction

Rural communities throughout Ontario are losing or reshaping their traditional economic activities in agriculture, forestry and other primary industries, due to factors such as resource depletion, the shifting of extraction activities to other countries by their corporate owners and the replacement of human labour by machines (Koster and Lemelin 2009). Still other rural places have witnessed the loss of secondary activities, such as manufacturing and food processing. For example, the Resolute Forest Products mill in Iroquois Falls, the Tender Tootsies Footwear facility in Glencoe, the Hershey Chocolate Factory in Smiths Falls, the Bick's Pickles plant in Dunnville, and the Can-Gro Foods cannery in Niagara-on-the-Lake (where products such as Del Monte fruit cocktail were processed) have all closed in the past decade and left widespread job losses in their wake (Fullerton 2013).

As people in these areas seek to diversify their economies, or to reinvent their communities altogether, many are engaging in what is referred to as "place-based development". As Sean Markey has stated, "Place-based development, in contrast to conventional sectoral, programmatic or issue-defined perspectives, is a holistic and targeted intervention that seeks to reveal, utilize and enhance the unique natural, physical, and/or human capacity endowments present within a particular location for the development of the in-situ community and/or its biophysical environment" (Markey 2010, 2). By looking inward and identifying local strengths and amenities, place-based development enables communities to mobilize these assets and turn them into community and economic development opportunities. Throughout rural Ontario, one of the most common types of assets identified as having development potential are cultural amenities, many of which, in turn, are now being used to lure prospective visitors to the community. In fact, tourism development is now widely viewed as one of the most promising and effective tools for rural development across Ontario.

The purpose of this *Foresight Paper* is to discuss the long-term prospects for rural tourism development in Ontario, particularly as it relates to the harnessing of local and regional cultural amenities. However, it does so in a way that recommends rural communities organize their efforts with an eye on growing and strengthening the local "visitor economy" rather than just the local "tourism economy". Such an approach can help stakeholders understand that there are many different types of visitors who can be drawn to a community and that the economic and social benefits of doing so can be numerous. This paper will also point to the various challenges that rural communities may face in such a development process, and will also provide an overview of the most critical components of an effective strategy for growing the local visitor economy.

What is the "Visitor Economy"?

The traditional conceptualization of tourism tends to define tourists as people who travel and stay outside their home community for at least 24 hours and typically for the purpose of a holiday, sight-seeing or recreation. However, the concept of the visitor economy has a much broader focus as it encompasses all of the different motivations people may have for travelling to a particular destination and a more liberal view of how much time they spend there. For example, beyond those reasons listed above, people may visit a particular community or region to attend a festival or event, to visit friends and family, to attend a conference or convention or for work purposes, to receive an education or even to access health services. It is also possible that the journey may involve more than one purpose (such as combining a vacation with a work trip), while the duration

of these visits may also be highly variable. For instance, the 24-hour threshold commonly found in the definition of a tourist leaves out shorter journeys, such as when a visitor has just come for the day from a nearby community. Thus, by broadening the definition beyond common conceptualizations of tourism and tourists, rural stakeholders can identify far more in the way of visitor economy-related development opportunities.

The concept of the visitor economy also recognizes that visitor spending encompasses a broad range of direct and indirect expenditures stemming from a person travelling outside of their home environment. This spending contributes to local investment and supports jobs across a range of industry sectors, some more obvious than others. Most visibly, the visitor economy entails the production of goods and services aimed primarily at serving the needs and wants of visitors; this might include, for example, spending at attractions and for accommodations, as well as payments made to transport providers or tour companies. At the same time, visitors to a community typically spend money at businesses that also serve local residents, such as restaurants, bars, retail and grocery stores, gas stations and laundromats. Beyond these economic impacts, the money spent in ways outlined above have a subsequent trickle-down effect; that is, visitors bring new money into the local economy that is subsequently spent by local business owners and their workers, much of which is spent locally as well. For example, money earned by local tourism businesses will make its way down the supply chain, while tourism workers' earnings are spent on housing, food, transportation and many other items. Thus, growing the visitor economy can lead to significant economic benefits, such as the growth of local businesses, job creation (across a broad range of occupations), and greater tax revenue for local and higher levels of government.

Researchers have also pointed out that a healthy visitor economy can help to maintain an attractive aesthetic and social environment in which people want to live and work. This has the potential to encourage visitors to make a more permanent move to the community at a later date. Also, attracting visitors can boost the viability of local businesses and services — such as retail stores, restaurants and pubs, as well as cultural, sports, and leisure facilities — that might have otherwise faced closure due to trends such as population or economic decline. Other observers have noted that a strong visitor economy can strengthen people's sense of place and civic pride, and that it can improve residents' sense of wellbeing when they are able to participate in local culture and heritage activities. In summary, it might be said that the facilities, services and environments that visitors are looking for also serve to enrich the quality of life for local residents.

While the benefits of doing so are clearly numerous, further motivation for rural communities to develop a strong and vibrant visitor economy can be found in the growing numbers of potential visitors. A number of trends and issues over the past few decades have prompted people, particularly urban and suburban dwellers, to visit rural areas more frequently. This includes: increased leisure time; people's greater concern for their physical and mental well-being; a desire to find alternatives to more standardized mass tourism destinations; and what might be described as a desire to "escape" from the ills of urban and suburban life, such as noise, impersonality, crime, traffic congestion, a homogeneous built environment and a lack of daily contact with nature. It has also been found that many people wanting to visit rural areas have high levels of education, demonstrate a growing interest in cultural heritage and are especially looking for new activities and experiences (Long and Lane, 2000).

The characteristics of rural areas are often seen to provide much of what these people are looking for. In many cases they also possess a positive image of rural lifestyles, communities and landscapes that is referred to as the "rural idyll" — a sense of place that sees rural areas to be "orderly, harmonious, healthy, secure, peaceful" (Hopkins, 1999). As Little and Austin have written:

> Rural life is associated with an uncomplicated, innocent, more genuine society in
> which traditional values persist and lives are more real. Pastimes, friendships, family

relations and even employment are seen as somehow more honest and authentic, unencumbered with the false and insincere trappings of city life or with their associated dubious values. (Little and Austin 1996, 102)

Making the Most of the Visitor Economy: Resources to be Harnessed

The clear and growing demand for such experiences has led many rural communities to market themselves and their various cultural amenities to potential visitors, and this is certainly with good reason. As noted by the European Association for Information on Local Development:

In terms of culture, there are few rural regions which are under privileged. Full of history, traditions, forged by the work of generations of men and women, they usually possess a rich heritage or a strong cultural identity (AEIDL 1994, cited in Roberts & Hall 2001, 159).

While this quote referred specifically to the European case, the list of cultural amenities and events to be found in Ontario's rural communities and valued by visitors is nonetheless quite extensive. Among other things, it can include: heritage buildings, museums and monuments; historical sites, structures and landmarks, such as forts, battlefields, or archaeological and religious sites; old and active farms, mine sites, sawmills and other economic imprints on the natural landscape; traditional food and drink; craft products and artifacts; arts and culture festivals; and historical re-enactments. Across Ontario, examples abound — ranging from Native pictographs in Lake of the Woods, the Great Spirit Circle Tour on Manitoulin Island and the important historical role of the French River in the north, through to the Rideau Canal (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) in the east and the German-speaking Mennonites of St. Jacobs in the south. As Richards (1996, 280) has noted, "Heritage consumption, utilising as it does the accumulated real cultural capital of particular locations, effectively unlocks the value of past production stored in important buildings and key locations."

Visiting these places and taking part in these events offer visitors a window to that area's history and heritage, its cultural customs, beliefs and traditions, and its residents' past and present ways-of-life. In turn, this provides the visitors with opportunities for everything from education and entertainment to relaxation and cultural enrichment. At the same time, visitors may also partake in activities extending beyond the cultural dimensions of rural community life, such as sporting activities, skiing and boating or more passive activities, such as spending a day on the beach. This has the potential of extending their stay in the area, along with all of the economic benefits this brings.

Making the Most of the Visitor Economy: Prerequisites for Success

The many benefits that can stem from a prosperous visitor economy have led many rural communities to jump on this bandwagon. However, a growing volume of research has shown that attracting visitors is not without its challenges and can also bring about any number of negative economic, social and environmental consequences if the process of attracting and hosting these guests is not properly managed (Mair, 2006). In fact, many criticisms have been levelled at traditional tourism development and planning initiatives because it often unfolds without communities properly understanding what tourism is or how it can and should be managed. For example, Marcouiller (1997, 341, cited in Mair 2006) has lamented the "non-integrative" and "overly myopic" nature of most tourism planning in rural areas, especially its inevitable concentration on marketing and promotion. He further argues that the domination of economic growth concerns tend to influence the goals of tourism development and planning while often ignoring or glossing over other important issues or concerns.

The range of possible negative impacts is quite broad. For instance, growing visitor numbers can lead to problems such as: overcrowding at the attractions and throughout the community; parking and traffic congestion; an increasing budgetary burden stemming from heightened demand for municipal services, such as water, sewage, waste disposal, fire protection and policing; the inflation of land and housing prices; air, water and noise pollution and other environmental impacts, such as the erosion of pathways, interruption or destruction of wildlife habitats, and the construction of new developments where fragile ecosystems are in place. All of these, in turn, can also lead to conflict among different groups in the community and between visitors and local residents.

Returning to Marcouiller's observation noted above, many communities also engage in tourism development activities solely through the creation of marketing materials, such as the development of a website or the publication of glossy brochures and visitor's guides. They often do not consider the impact of the visitor economy on other local economic sectors or on the community more generally, do not include other stakeholders in their activities and do not provide front-line personnel with formal training in tourism and hospitality. In effect, they do not *plan* the growth of their visitor economy, but instead tend to "wing it", despite the possible repercussions.

So, how then, can rural communities build their visitor economies effectively while also avoiding the problems identified above? As a starting point, while every rural community has at least some potential for tourism development, the successful achievement of this potential depends on a wide range of factors, including:

- the community's location and level of accessibility by different modes;
- the number and type of cultural amenities to be found in the community;
- the availability of supporting infrastructure in the community;
- the extent to which local stakeholders are actively engaged in managing the visitor economy;
- how well the community is prepared to prevent, or at least deal with, any negative consequences that may emerge;
- how well trained local workers are;
- how receptive local residents are to visitors; and
- the extent to which the community is marketed to prospective visitors, along with the themes employed in doing so.

All of these are important considerations that should go into an integrated and long-term planning process that involves the broad swath of community stakeholders. This can result in well-considered planning and development policies that protect the resources that visitors are coming to see and use, an effective marketing strategy, and a high level of community buy-in that will ensure visitors are both welcomed and well cared for. A more detailed discussion of these points is provided in the ensuing paragraphs.

Integrated Planning

Despite its growing importance within broader rural economies, growing tourism and other forms of visitation should not be considered a panacea to reverse economic and population decline. For one, the visitor economy may be a very seasonal one, at least initially, particularly if a community only has a limited range of attractions that only operate for a portion of the year. An additional challenge is that many of these related jobs are low-paying in nature. Added to this is the fact that activities associated with the visitor economy often take place on lands and in parts of the community where other economic activities are taking place at the same time, such as farming or logging, which can then result in land-use conflicts and other disputes between different user groups. In cases like these, some highly contentious trade-offs may have to be made.

All of this points to the need for a long-term and integrated approach to planning for the local visitor economy. Ideally, this planning should result in the preparation and/or revision of several key documents that can then serve as a guide for future decision making. First, local stakeholders should discuss the community's economic development climate and opportunities in a way that does not focus solely on tourism, but instead considers a broader range of development prospects for the public and private sectors to pursue (Schmallegger and Carson, 2010). This should bring with it some constructive dialogue about potential conflicts between activities and how these might be avoided, and should also consider activities that the community considers to be "off limits" as development options — for example, due to their potential infringement on other activities or their probability of having consequences considered unfavourable by the community. A widely endorsed and community-based economic development plan or strategy would be the ideal outcome of such a process.

Once the community has decided on its economic development priorities, and on the visitor economy's place among these, a second step would be the creation of a master plan or strategy for expanding the visitor economy. As noted earlier in this paper, the variety of people and groups directly or indirectly connected to the visitor economy is very wide; it is important to include as many of these stakeholders as possible in this planning process. Convening participants through events such as community workshops and focus groups, or by conducting a community survey, can help to gather valuable input that enables stakeholders to share and address concerns related to the visitor economy and its future growth, to identify opportunities and gaps in the visitor economy, to develop short-, medium-, and long-term priorities, to identify a consistent brand or theme for the community to use in marketing, to identify training needs, and to identify entrepreneurial and business start-up opportunities that maximize direct and indirect local linkages — and thus, economic benefits for the community. An important component of this process is to examine the extent to which visitors appear to be bringing in their own goods, such as groceries, or using their own accommodations, such as campers or RVs; the more that these goods and services can be provided by local businesses, the better.

A third necessary step in this planning process is to review the community's land-use planning regulations, which are normally expressed in its official plan and zoning by-law. It is of vital importance that the community consider how it wishes to regulate the physical development of the community as the visitor economy grows and how provincial planning policies may also factor into this process. This can provide a way of ensuring that land-use conflicts that might be created by a growing visitor economy are mitigated or avoided altogether, and can also help protect residents from the negative externalities that come with more visitors, such as parking and traffic congestion problems. Also, some tourism development has been hindered in the past by zoning by-laws that do not include tourism-related activities on the list of permitted uses under various land-use zoning designations, so it is crucial that these policies enable such development where it has been deemed acceptable. Conversely, because an official plan and zoning by-law are legally binding documents while economic development plans or strategies are not, the former documents also provide another means of controlling unwanted development. Activities related to the visitor economy that may damage or degrade local assets or the local quality of life can also be regulated by explicitly prohibiting them in official plan policies or by omitting them in the lists of allowable uses in zoning by-laws.

Each of the documents identified above — the community-based economic development plan, the strategy for building the visitor economy, the official plan and the zoning by-law — takes a great deal of time to put together and to revise as conditions change. Their development and subsequent revision should also be led by an individual or organization that is proficient in doing so, but this expertise is often not locally available. Hiring outside experts, such as consulting firms, to lead the planning process can also be quite expensive and beyond a municipality's budget. For these

reasons, there is an important role for the provincial and federal governments to play in assisting rural Ontario municipalities and regions to grow their visitor economies. The advisory services provided by officials in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, among others, can assist local stakeholders (such as municipal government officials and volunteer committee members) in developing workable plans that also abide by provincial government policies and regulations. For example, a series of strategic planning meetings held as part of the development of a *Community-Based Strategic Plan* for the Township of South Algonquin in 2016 were led by a facilitator from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' Sturgeon Falls office, while a representative from that same Ministry's Brighton office led two public meetings in the Township of Horton in 2017, as the municipality worked towards creating a community-based economic development plan.

Provincial and federal government funding is also invaluable to the planning processes discussed above. Creating even the smallest of documents has at least some costs attached, and cost-sharing-based funding initiatives like the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' Rural Economic Development Program, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport's Tourism Development Fund, FedNor's Northern Ontario Development Program, and FedDev Ontario's Eastern Ontario Development Fund can provide municipalities and non-profit organizations with the financial capital they need to carry out such projects.

Another option for communities looking for outside planning expertise is to collaborate with a college or university (Douglas, 2003; Fullerton, 2015). In some cases, there is the opportunity to engage one of these institutions' faculty members as a project team member; in many cases, this provides the faculty member with the ability to conduct rural economic development- or planning-related research at the same time as he/she is helping the community to achieve its more visitor economy-related goals. Such was the case for the Township of South Algonquin, which worked closely with a faculty member from Brock University's Department of Geography and several undergraduate students from 2007 to 2012 to write the Township's first-ever official plan (Fullerton, 2015). Through the partnership, the students learned valuable land-use planning skills and also earned experience in the organization and carrying out of public meetings, workshops, surveys and focus groups, while the Township was able to create an official plan for a fraction of what it would have cost if an outside consulting firm had been hired. This partnership continues to this day, with the faculty member and students having since assisted in the development of the South Algonquin's community-based strategic plan and now preparing to work closely with the Township staff and council, and a variety of other community members, in the pursuit of several visitor economy-related objectives found therein, such as the development of an ecomuseum and the creation of a social media-based tourism marketing strategy.

Stakeholder Collaboration

It has been noted that negative citizen attitudes toward tourism development have led to the industry being "underdeveloped, underfunded and undervalued" as a component of local economic development in many communities (Metansinine, Koster, and Lemelin, 2009, cited in Bennett and Lemelin, 2010). This often stems from feelings that the local citizenry have a lack of say in major decisions that affect life in their communities. It is for this reason that there have been growing calls for a "community-based tourism" approach, which essentially involves a bottom-up approach to tourism planning and development that meaningfully incorporates local individuals in the planning process in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration. This, in turn, can ensure that the visitor economy is planned and managed in ways that reflect the shared aspirations and values of all their stakeholders. While it is highly unlikely that all stakeholders will agree completely on a preferred course of action or even on the making of any individual decision, the objective of the community-based tourism approach is to achieve *consensus* among stakeholders, meaning that the decisions made represent actions that everyone can *at least live with*, if not fully support. Perhaps

most importantly, this process has the benefit of generating greater community support and buy-in from local stakeholders, thus increasing the likeliness of their having positive interactions with visitors to the community.

The task of developing a truly bottom-up and multi-stakeholder approach can sometimes be easier said than done. For one, it entails the creation of partnerships and networking among groups that may not have historically had much reason to communicate with one another or who may otherwise see themselves as competitors (such as local restaurant operators or accommodation providers). Another potential barrier can be local politicians' or some other traditionally dominant organization's (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce or the local Destination Marketing Organization) resistance to sharing power. Even residents may hold diametrically opposing views regarding the development of the visitor economy; for example, long-time residents may resist such growth for fear of the community changing too much while newcomers may be pro-development. Finally, many rural visitor economies are made up primarily of small, family-run businesses where the owners lack the time to take part in the planning process, particularly during the peak visitor season(s). Despite these challenges, it is widely agreed that widespread community collaboration and cooperation are critical to a successful rural visitor economy. Those leading the various planning processes identified above must keep these constraints in mind and devise a variety of methods for these multiple interests to be represented.

The need for networking, partnerships and other forms of collaboration extends even further for those rural places that may have a limited number of cultural or other assets upon which to build their visitor economy (Jóhannesson, Skaptadóttir, and Benediktsson, 2003.). In cases such as these the available resources may not have enough appeal on their own to draw visitors to the community. A logical solution here is to bundle several similar, or compatible, attractions together for marketing purposes through a multi-community or regional partnership (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Huang, Beeco, Hallo, and Norman, 2016). These bundles or clusters might involve a common theme and take the form of, for example, a scenic route, a wine route or an "arts tour".

Ontario examples of this approach include: the Apple Route, which runs between Port Hope and Trenton; the Hasting County's Arts Route, which connects artisans, galleries and theatres from Belleville in the south to Maynooth in the north; and the "The Historic Opeongo Line", a scenic drive promoted by the Ottawa Valley Tourism Association that closely follows the route of the historic Ottawa and Opeongo Road from Castleford to Algonquin Park, along which European settlers established towns and farmsteads starting in the 1850s. A potential benefit of clusters such as these is that visitors will make the trek to the area in order to visit multiple attractions, whereas they would likely not have done so to visit only one or two, particularly if they are located in more peripheral rural settings that require a longer travel time to get there. It was with this idea in mind that five municipalities in the Niagara Region (Welland, Pelham, Wainfleet, Port Colborne and Fort Erie) banded together in 2013 to create the Niagara's South Coast Tourism Association (Brouder and Fullerton, 2015).

Landscape Management

Even where travelling through it has not served as their primary motivation for visiting, the physical setting against which the visitor economy is situated has been shown to play a vital role in shaping the visitor's experience of a rural place or region. This setting, comprised of both the natural landscape and the cultural landscape imprinted upon it, is referred to by some researchers as the "experience-scape" and is not always given adequate consideration in the planning and ongoing maintenance of visitor economies. Yet studies have shown that many elements of this experience-scape — including everything from farm fields, fences and barns to heritage buildings, bodies of water, and even rural dwellers out and about living their day-to-day lives — make a direct contribution to the visitor's enjoyment of, and satisfaction with, a particular place.

It has also been shown that this goes beyond the visual experience of rural landscapes and includes the smells, sounds and tastes that come with being there, particularly for urban and suburban dwellers. As Jeff Hopkins from the University of Western Ontario put it, "There is little in the countryside that cannot be obtained, experienced and consumed, at least to some degree, in nearby cities, be it antiquing, boutiquing, dining, golfing, swimming or sunbathing" (Hopkins, 1999, 77). However, he goes on to point out that the experience of doing these things *in rural settings* is what makes them preferable to the more close-by urban alternatives. This also goes back to this paper's earlier reference to the "rural idyll", whereby travelling through rural landscapes has the psychological benefit of helping people to relax and escape from the tensions, noise and stress of daily urban and suburban life.

A good example of this is provided in the context of wine tourism. Barbara Carmichael's (2005) research in the Niagara wine region found that the rural landscape through which they travelled made up one of the most important parts of the wine tourist's experience. Similarly, a winery employee interviewed as part of Denyelle Huelleman's study of agritourism in the Niagara Region noted that a popular move on the part of their winery was to put picnic tables and Muskoka chairs in between the grapevines in order to give their visitors an attractive place to sit and have a glass of wine. As the interviewee noted:

> "They don't want a tour; they don't want to taste; they want to have a glass of wine. They're enjoying the vineyards, the view, the countryside, and the Escarpment...we take for granted how many people live in the city. So we've allowed them this beautiful place to sit... (Huelleman, 2016, 51-52).

The importance of the rural landscape to the visitor's experience points once again to the need for effective planning controls to conserve rural built and natural environments. The popularity of Niagara-on-the-Lake and St. Jacobs as heritage shopping villages is a further testament to this point. In cases such as these, the many heritage buildings in which the shops are located provide a backdrop reminiscent of the rural idyll. In Niagara-on-the-Lake the physical development of its heritage tourist district is tightly controlled; however, research by Clare Mitchell and Kathryn Randall (2014) found that controls are fewer and weaker in St. Jacobs, thus leading to the demolition of older buildings and the construction of new ones that do not fit nicely with the town's heritage theme. These points also show the depth of the rural visitor economy in terms of the linkages between businesses in these communities. Even groups like architects, developers and construction companies, as well as owners of businesses that sell the most mundane day-to-day things *in a rural setting,* are stakeholders within the visitor economy.

Marketing and Customer Service

Attracting tourists and satisfying their expectations are two other important components of the rural visitor economy. Accordingly, so, too, are marketing and customer service. However, as the number of rural communities trying to attract visitors grows, it has become much more difficult for these places to differentiate themselves from one another. As Killion (2001, 166) has noted, rural areas need to build a visitor economy that can "attract visitors out of urban settings" and, at the same time, "steer them away from competing rural destinations."

At least two ensuing problem have emerged. First, some places lack any related marketing experience and thus try to emulate what other communities before them have done and, second, many places are characterized by individual marketing efforts that lack a more cohesive community- or region-wide theme. For example, the Niagara region was cited in a 2009 provincial government report as a place where the existence of multiple destination marketing organizations

resulted in a duplication of tourism promotion efforts and, subsequently, a lack of a clear "Niagara" brand beyond Niagara Falls (Ontario Tourism Competitiveness Study, 2009).

The marketing-related tasks for rural communities to carry out are numerous. Buck has argued that:

> tourism is an industry based on imagery: its overriding concern is to construct, through multiple representations of paradise, an imagery that entices the outsider to place him or herself into the defined space. (Buck, 1993, p. 14)

Ultimately, rural communities (on their own or with regional partners) must engage in what are referred to as "place promotion" and "place positioning". Place promotion is defined as "the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographical localities or areas to a target audience…" (Gold and Ward, 1994, p. 2), while place positioning takes this one step further by shaping this place image *in relation to competing places* (Short and Kim, 1993). By engaging in these processes, rural destinations can assemble a marketing image that sums up for potential visitors the essence of the area, in terms of its physical and cultural environments.

Getting to this point requires a great deal of research if it is to be done well, and should include the participation of two groups: the various visitor economy stakeholders and the visitors themselves. This will enable *informed* marketing to be carried out by, first, determining how local residents wish for their community to be promoted and, secondly, by building an understanding of what has made the community or region an attractive place to visit (or not) from the perspective of the visitors. This information can then lead to a higher likelihood of community buy-in for the marketing theme(s), can identify the key selling features of the community and may also lead to ideas for potential improvements to local attractions, infrastructure and services. As implied above, the marketing strategy that is decided upon must also be unique to those used in other competing places and should also provide accurate representations of the community or region.

Finally, an often overlooked component of a strong visitor economy is excellent customer service. This means having businesses with standards of presentation, service and customer care, clean and well-maintained facilities, and the availability of accurate information about local amenities and services. Appropriate training should also be given to workers who come in direct contact with visitors, perhaps in collaboration with a nearby community college or other educational partner.

An excellent provincial government initiative that can assist rural communities in assessing how well visitors are received and served is the First Impressions Community Exchange program administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Through this program, volunteers from one community make an unannounced visit to a partnered exchange community in order to assess, for example, the appearance of the community, the attractions and amenities available, and customer service. The volunteers then assemble a report and share it with the community they visited so that they can understand how first-time visitors have perceived their community and, subsequently, work towards making improvements in any areas deemed to have been deficient.

Yet another cost-effective means of enhancing local customer service is to develop an "ambassador" program that trains local residents about the local visitor economy (including local attractions) so that these ambassadors are better prepared to answer formal or casual enquiries from visitors, even in cases as simple as when visitors ask for directions. One such example is the "Welcome to Niagara" program that trains people to become "Niagara Ambassadors". This program, administered by the Tourism Partnership of Niagara and developed in partnership with the Ontario Tourism Education Corporation, involves participants taking a free, 60-minute online course that helps to build their awareness of various events and attractions that take place throughout the year

across the Niagara Region. Similar programs are offered by several other Regional Tourism Organizations across Ontario, and also within individual municipalities (such as the Municipality of Leamington and Huron County).

Conclusion

This *Foresight Paper* has offered a perspective on the prospects for future growth of the visitor economy in Ontario's rural communities and regions. While the culture-based visitor economy represents an excellent opportunity for economic development and diversification in many rural parts of the province, it should not be seen as a panacea for their development woes. Instead, the visitor economy must be carefully planned and managed in tandem with other economic activities and in ways that ensure its long-term viability, sustainability and acceptance by the community. This will require an integrated and community-based approach to planning, with a particular emphasis on preserving the "rural" landscape, along with well thought-out and effective marketing that provides potential visitors with an accurate impression of what to expect should they come.

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NORTHERN PERSPECTIVES
The Visitor Economy and Rural Cultural Amenities

Charles Cirtwill & Emma Helfand-Green[1]

Tourism has long been a key component of northern Ontario's economy. A report commissioned by FedNor labeled tourism a 'key economic driver' after finding that in 2007, visitors to the region spent $1.4 billion, generated $924 million in economic activity and supported 16,000 jobs (Industry Canada 2009). Furthermore, in 2011, the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines Growth Plan for Northern Ontario listed tourism as one of eleven emerging and priority industries for the region. Even the soon-to-be-released Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy has identified the importance of tourism to the region and cited that in 2012 there were over 9000 tourism-related businesses in northern Ontario, which contributed more than $930 million to the region's GDP (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines & Ministry of Transportation 2016).

All of the reports mentioned above use the traditional and more limited definition of 'tourism.' Fullerton's recommendation for rural communities to adopt a broader definition of the "visitor economy" is important as it may better allow communities to consider the wide range of "visitor economy-related opportunities" that exist in northern Ontario. In the north, for example, individuals may visit communities to access services such as health or education, for work purposes (especially in what is known as fly-in, fly-out communities) or for longer term camping and cottaging excursions. As well, many visitors to northern Ontario communities may not fall into the traditional definition of tourism, as they do not pass the 24-hour visit threshold (for example, a family driving across the Trans-Canada highway and stopping in a community for a rest). Therefore, adopting the broader definition by Fullerton can allow communities to focus on a wider range of visitor-related situations and assess the more significant development opportunities that accompany this range of visitors.

Northern Ontario provides many unique amenities and opportunities that may be less common in southern rural areas, namely outdoor activities such as camping, fishing, hunting and boating that could help build the visitor economies. More specifically, the northern part of the province is home to a range of First Nations communities that are unique in their Indigenous cultural amenities. For example, the Great Spirit Circle Trail on Manitoulin Island is a collection of attractions and activities that attracts approximately 4700 visitors per year (Indigenous Tourism Ontario n.d) that was established through a partnership of eight First Nations who live on the island. This is an example of a successful 'bundle' or 'cluster' described by Fullerton.

In addition to the opportunities in Indigenous related tourism, another potential area for growth in the northern Ontario's visitor industry is Franco-visitors. The close proximity to Quebec and Manitoba, with their francophone populations, is a boon for northern Ontario. Northern Ontario has historic ties with Franco-culture dating back to New France, with sites that reflect that heritage, such as Voyageur Provincial Park and the Centre franco-ontarien de folklore. The north also contains an expanding Franco-Ontarian community. The 2011 census found that 20.8% of northeastern Ontario and 1.2% of the northwest population was Francophone. The significance of the Francophone population is evident in Sudbury as a new Place des Art, a multi-use francophone community centre for arts, is nearing development. The northwest has multi-cultural sites such as Fort William Historic Park, which not only celebrate Francophone heritage, but also commemorate and celebrate the

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Métis people. Expanding opportunities for franco-visitors, who may be drawn to these culturally relevant amenities, as well as to bilingual services, may be of significant benefit for the district.

However, the geography of Ontario's north can make it harder to attract visitors, especially those from the GTA. Northern Ontario covers over 800,000 square kilometres, which is larger than the size of France. Although airports do exists in the main urban centres, access to rural northern communities is more challenging. Many visitors have concerns related to driving in the north, due to the prevalence of wildlife collisions and the possibility of inclement weather situations (Ministry of Transportation 2016). Furthermore, a lack of consistent and appropriate signage along northern Ontario's highways, and the absence of year-round roadside amenities act as a barrier to expanding the visitor economy (Cirtwill 2016; Beals 2016). Thus, improvement of transportation systems across northern Ontario, especially to rural communities outside of the major cities, is critical to the expansion of the visiting economy in the northern part of the province.

Overall, Fullerton discusses the importance of collaboration among all community members to embrace a "visitor economy." This is especially important at a regional level as visitors to the north may visit multiple communities as they travel along the major highways. Thus, regional clusters or bundles are a good opportunity for the region. Without an 'integrated and community based' approach to planning, the buy-in necessary for success may be difficult to achieve. Many organizations do exist to promote and support the visitor economy in northern Ontario, but opportunities remain to harness the unique characteristics of the north including Indigenous and Franco-Ontarien cultural amenities, outdoor opportunities and natural beauty.

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