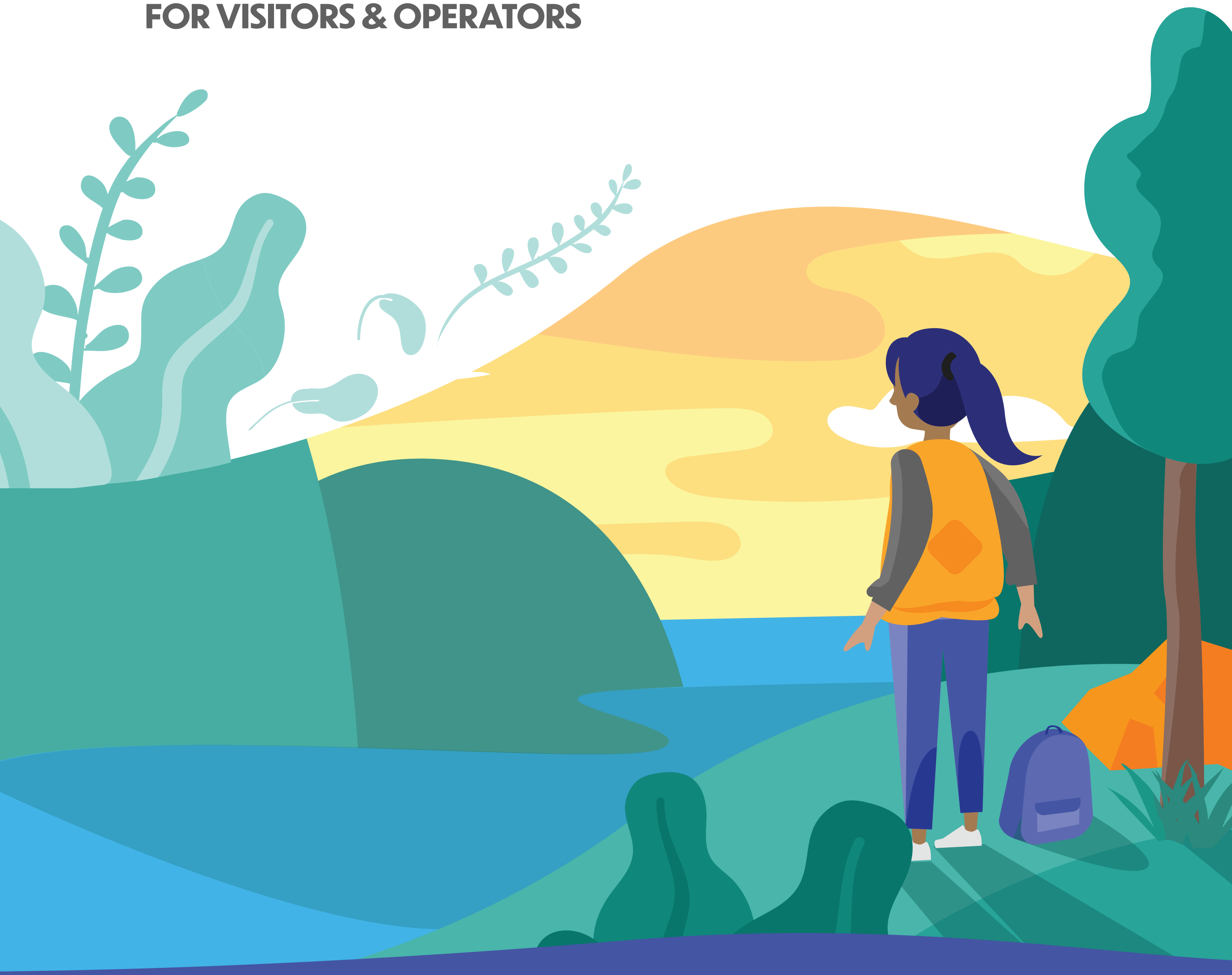
Tourism in Northern Ontario

2021 SURVEY RESULTS FOR VISITORS & OPERATORS



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Northern Ontario Research, Development, Ideas and Knowledge

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Tourism in Northern Ontario:

2021 Survey Results for Visitors & Operators

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1.0
Introduction

> NORDIK Institute and Algoma University undertook the Northern Ontario Tourism Development and Recovery Strategy in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic study to understand how tourism-based economies have grown under both normal circumstances and unanticipated crises (such as the COVID-19 Pandemic) and identify the strengths and barriers to growth of the tourism industry.

Two surveys were conducted -- one focused on the experiences of visitors to the region and the other focused on the experiences of tourism-related enterprises -- from the beginning of April to May 30, 2021, and focused on the preceding 12 months' of respondents' experience.

In total there were 335 responses to the visitors survey (334 in English and 1 in French) and 85 responses to the operators survey (80 in English and 5 in French). Both surveys were promoted through "snowball" email forwarding, particularly with the support of industry organizations, including Destination Northern Ontario, Algoma Country, Tourism Sault Ste. Marie, Indigenous Tourism Ontario, and la Société Économique de l'Ontario. Additionally, due to the ease of targeting ads, the visitors survey was promoted using Facebook ads which contributes to the higher response rate, however given the more narrow focus of the operators survey, drawing on email distribution networks was judged to be more appropriate and likely to recruit more participants than ads that could not have been tailored only to target entrepreneurs.

It is important to note that this survey closed before the summer tourism season, and thus anomalous changes to the 2021 season tied to the pandemic and varying lockdown restrictions are not captured in this report.

2.0

Research Findings

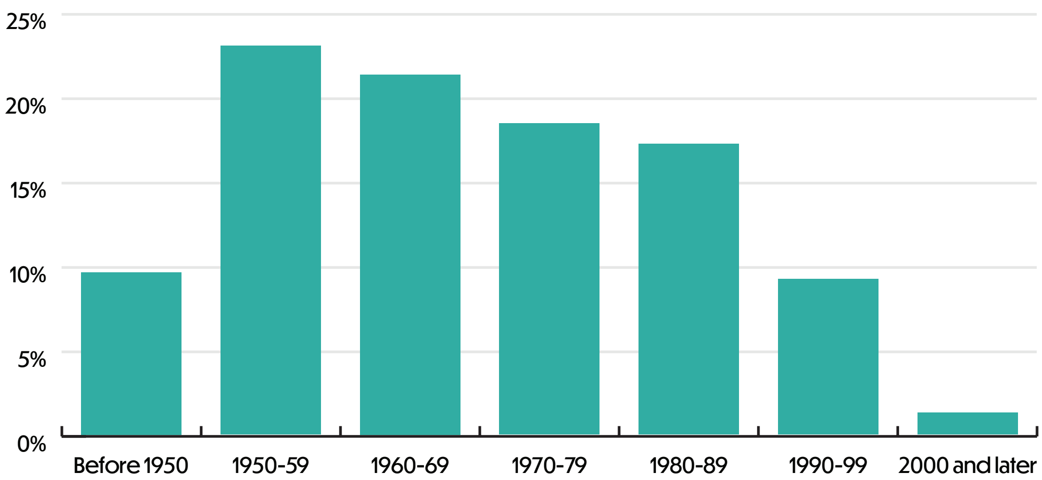
2.1 Northern Ontario Tourists During the Pandemic

The impacts of lockdowns imposed to curb the tide of COVID-19 infections created not only a myriad of challenges for tourism operators, but also many new dynamics within the population of tourists in Northern Ontario throughout the height of the pandemic. Of the 150 respondents who answered the question "Have you visited the destination before?" 125 (83.3%) were repeat visitors, while 25 (16.7%) were new visitors to the region. How the perspectives, motivations and experiences of these two groups vary will be the subject of further discussion throughout this report to highlight what has worked well in retaining frequent visitors as well as what can be learned from the experience of visitors less familiar with the region who may be able to shed light into how best to tap into new markets. Given the COVID related restrictions, however, these new visitors are nearly all from Ontario. The relatively small number of respondents who were first time visitors should also provoke caution in extrapolating conclusions from these results.

2.1.1 AGE DISTRIBUTION OF VISITORS

Our survey data shows that approximately 80 percent of visitors are within the age range of 32 to 71 which is expected. Visitor respondents, who self-selected based on the criteria of having traveled to the region after April 2019, tend to be older. This is not entirely unexpected as older adults generally have more leisure time and financial stability, making them naturally a disproportionate share of the tourism consumer market. However, even with the expectation that this demographic would be overrepresented, there is a considerable 50% drop between those born in the 1980s (aged 32-41) and those in the 1990s (aged 22-31). Though some age stratification is to be expected, this may present a challenge for Northern Ontario if younger people do not see it as an attractive travel destination in the future. A detailed breakdown is apparent in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Northern Ontario visitors by birth year

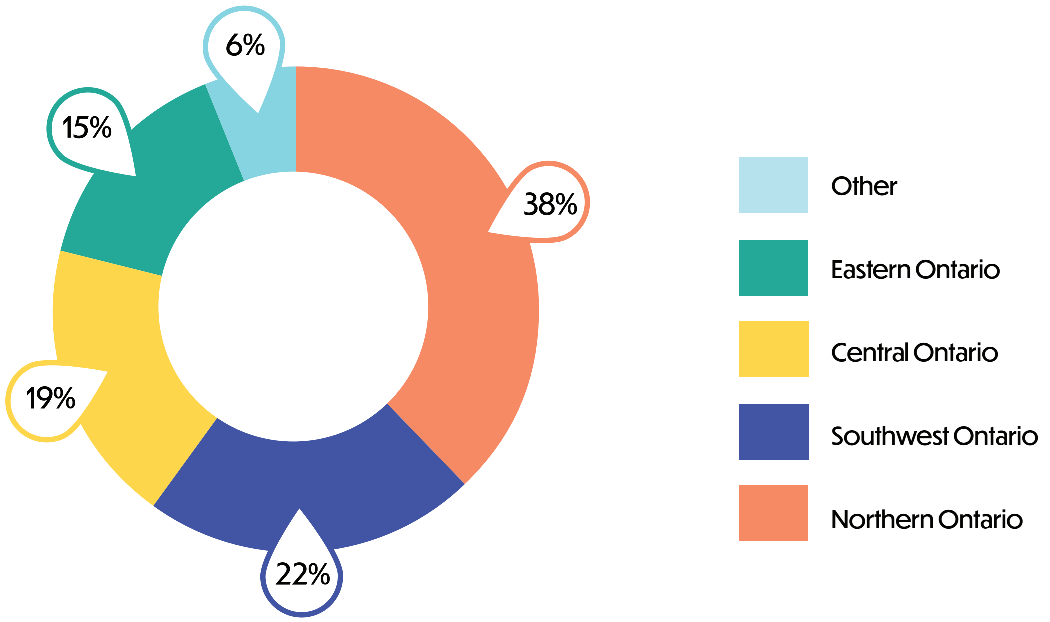


2.1.2 HOME REGIONS OF VISITORS

By far the most respondents to the survey came from Northern Ontario, representing 91 of 237 respondents (38.4%) who answered the question of their home region. This is not surprising given lockdowns and limitations on international travel throughout 2020, however it may also indicate that many within the region have an affinity for what it has to offer, even during periods of vacation and leisure where one may seek to escape their everyday experiences. Among new visitors, the majority came from southern Ontario (14 or 56% of new visitors) followed by Northerners who stayed in the region but had not previously toured or spent their holidays in the North (10 or 40%). One other new visitor traveled to the region from Québec.

The number of visitors from Eastern and Southwestern Ontario is relatively proportional to each region's respective population. 15.7% of survey respondents from Ontario reported they live in Eastern Ontario, and this region represents approximately 13% of Ontario's total population. Southwestern Ontario accounted for 23.8% of survey respondents from the province, while this region represents about 26% of Ontario's total population.

Figure 2: Visitor origins

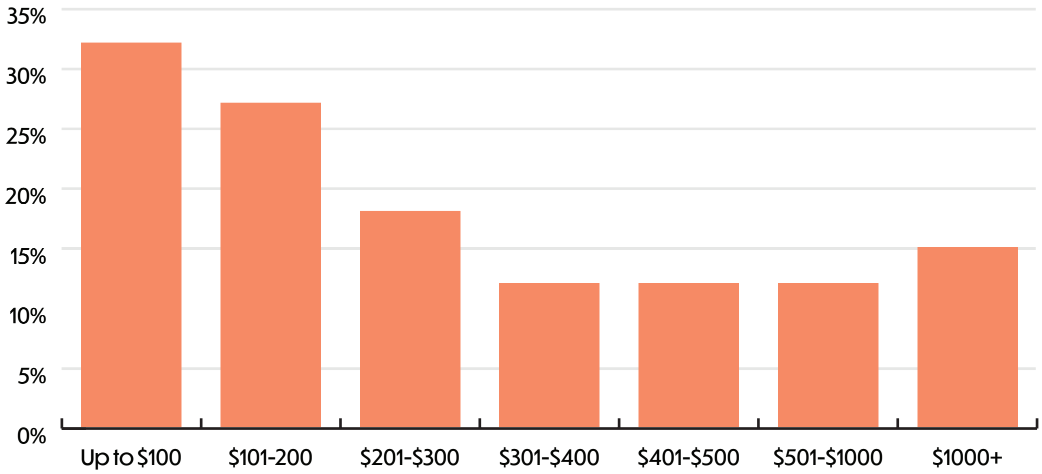


The number of visitors from Central Ontario, including the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, however, was disproportionately low. Only 19.7% of respondents reported they live in Central Ontario, compared to it representing 51% of Ontario's total population.

Only 14 of 237 responses (5.91%) came from outside of the province, which is to be expected given travel restrictions during this period. Of these, 7 (3.1%) were from the United States, 4 (1.8%) from British Columbia, and 3 (1.3%) from Québec.

Interestingly, visitors from Central Ontario on average spent less at their destination than those from other regions. On average, visitors from Central Ontario spent $447, while visitors from Eastern Ontario spent $575 and visitors from Southwestern Ontario spent $687. The distribution of the average amount spent per visiting adult at their destination is outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Amounts spent per adult visitor in Northern Ontario



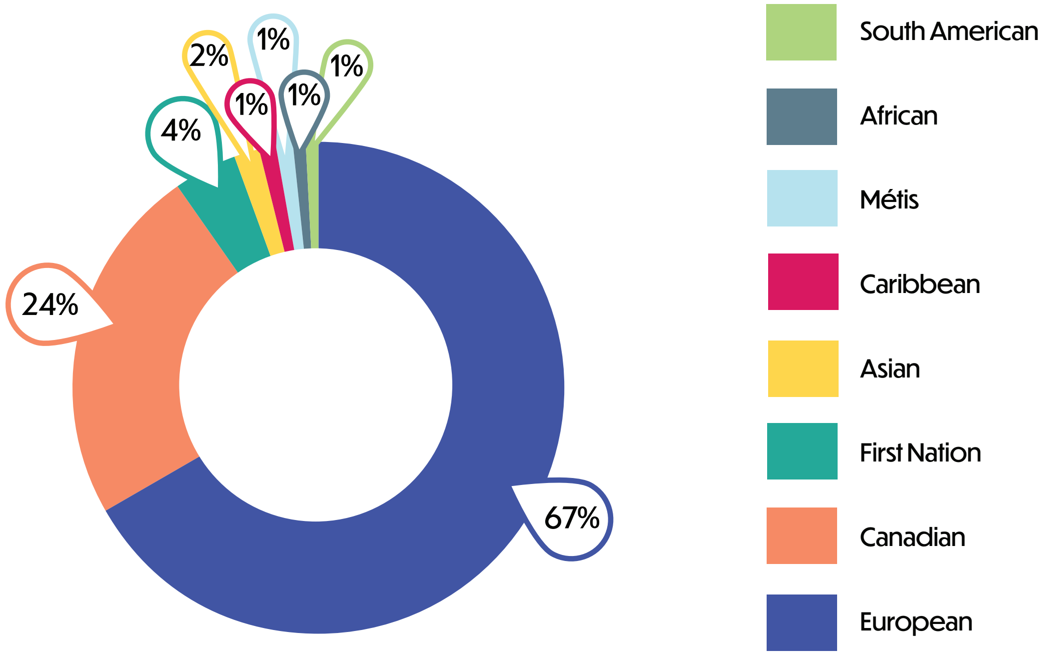
2.1.3 CULTURAL & LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF VISITORS

One reason for the low proportion of visitors from Central Ontario may be Northern Ontario's challenge of attracting visitors of non-European origin. 67% of respondents reported their ethnicity as European, and another 24% reported their ethnicity as Canadian. Central Ontario, specifically the GTA is ethnically diverse, and is also home to many newcomers. For example, according to the 2016 Canadian census, 40% of the GTA reported having Asian ethnic origins (Statistics Canada, 2017). Only 2% (4 individuals) of survey respondents reported their ethnicity as Asian.

Among the respondents, 16.81% (38 of 234) who answered the question identified their party included Francophone participants, and within this group 4 (10.5% of the 16.8%) also included people of Indigenous ancestry. While French was the primary language of only 2.93% respondents' parties, an additional 4.6% reported both English and French as the primary language of their travel parties.

Approximately one in ten travel parties 9.73% (22 of 234) included people of Indigenous ancestry and one travel party indicated an Indigenous language (Cree) as their primary language of communication.

Figure 4: Visitors cultural background



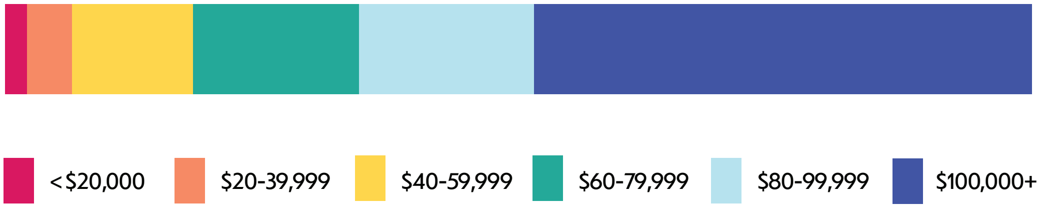
Only 5 of 239 parties (2.09%) reported their primary language was neither English nor French, however no pattern was evident, with other languages including Cree, Tagalog, Spanish, Korean, and Belarusian.

Notably, travel parties that included either Francophone or Indigenous peoples tended to have more cross over with other groups, while those that included neither tended to be more homogeneous. Of the 174 parties that included people who were neither Indigenous nor Francophone, only 3 (1.72%) also included Francophone and 1 (0.57%) included a person of Indigenous ancestry. This indicates that there is potentially little cross-over between non-Indigenous Anglophone visitor markets and Indigenous and/or Francophone markets.

2.1.4 VISITOR INCOME AND EDUCATION

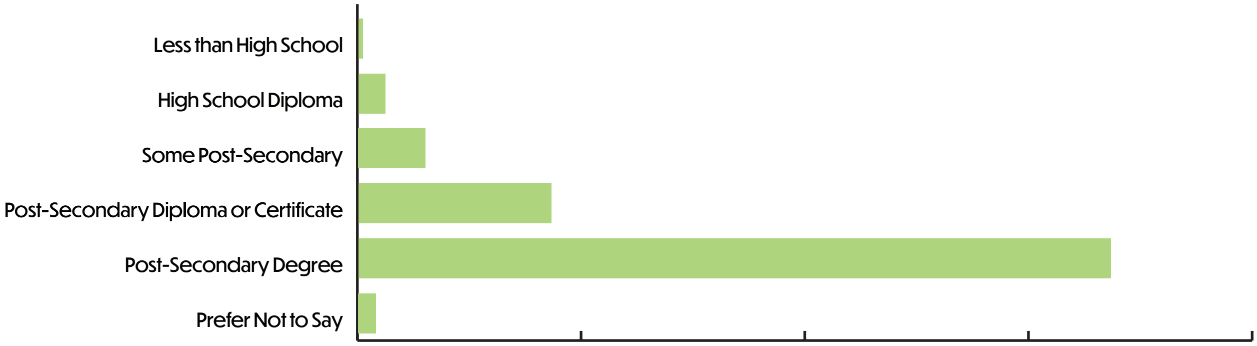
Visitors to Northern Ontario are relatively wealthy and well educated. 48% of survey respondents reported an annual household income above $100,000. The range of $80-99,000 accounted for 17.03% of respondents, followed by $60-79,000 at 16.16%, $40-59,000 at 11.79%, $20-39,999 at 4.37% and less than $20,000 at 2.18%. Notably, new visitors to the region reported comparatively lower incomes on average, with only 32% reporting income above $100,000 per annum and higher concentrations in the $40,000-$59,999 (24%) and $80,000-$99,999 (28%) range.

Figure 5: Household annual income



Further, 71% reported they had a post-secondary degree, and another 18.14% reported holding a post-secondary diploma or certificate. A full picture is apparent in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Highest educational attainment in visiting party



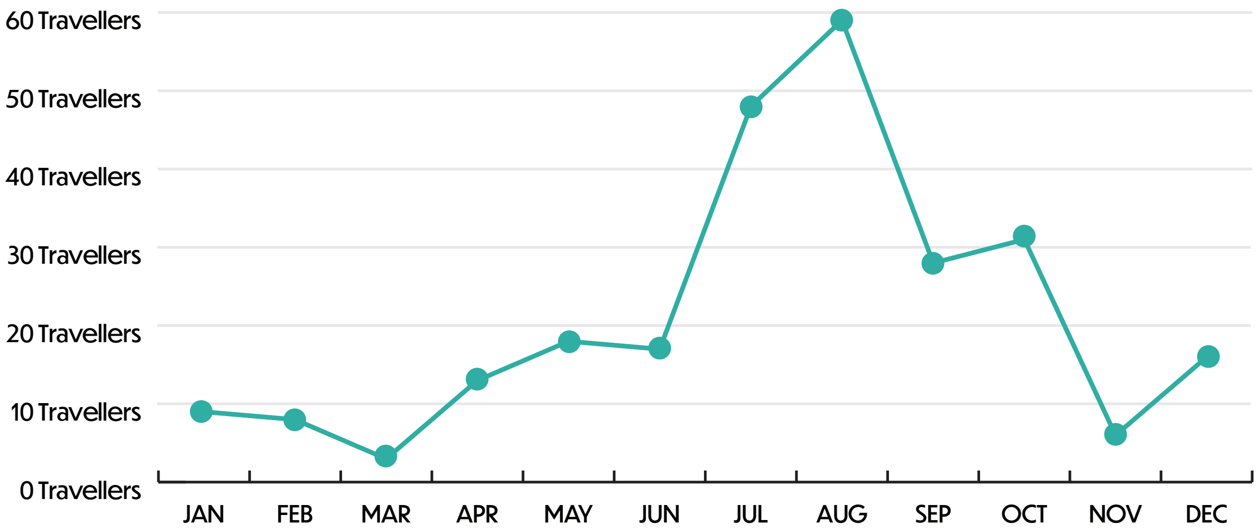
2.2 Visitor Experiences

2.2.1 VISITOR DESTINATIONS AND ATTRACTIONS

The region of Algoma was the most popular destination in Northern Ontario for survey respondents, which may be attributable to the greater circulation of the survey amongst Algoma tourism industry partners. The next largest proportion (65 of 308 responses, or 21%) traveled to Greater Sudbury or the Sudbury District, followed by Nipissing (38 of 308 or 12.34%), Cochrane (24 or 7.79%), Kenora and Thunder Bay (21 or 6.82% each), Temiskaming (18 or 5.84%), Parry Sound (10 or 3.25%) and Rainey River (2 or 0.65%). The survey did not capture visitors to the Manitoulin District, however this likely represents a gap in the pool of respondents given the significance of tourism to the district's economy.

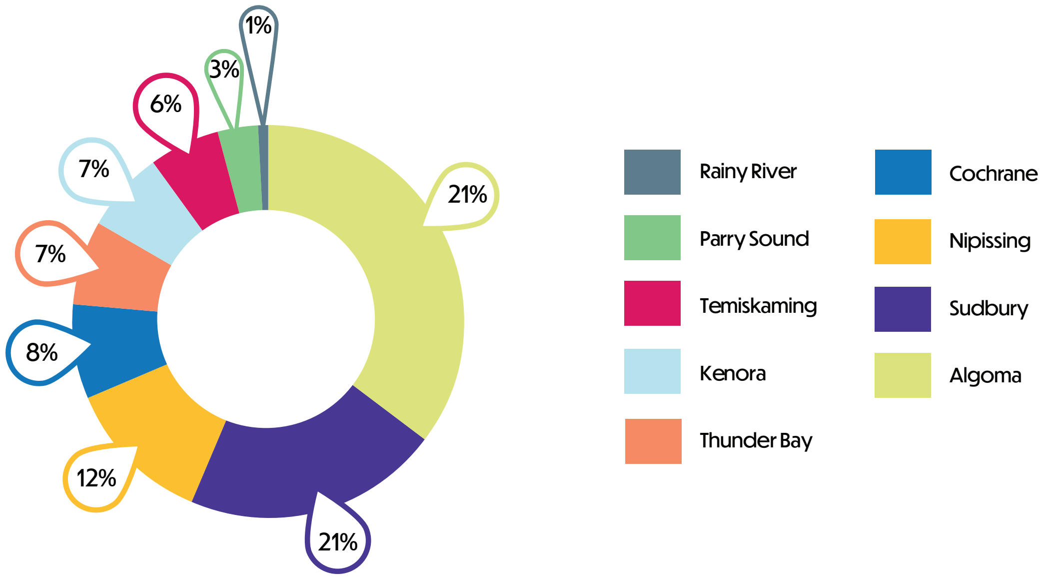
Most travel to Northern Ontario took place in the summer and early fall. In July and August there is a substantial increase in tourism followed by a decline. There is comparatively little travel to Northern Ontario in the shoulder seasons, particularly in the months of March and November, with the uptick in December potentially linked to family and friends related travel during the winter holiday season.

Figure 8: Northern Ontario travel by month



A strength of the tourism industry in Northern Ontario is that visitors have relatively long stays. According to the Survey, 67% of visitors spend four or more nights in Northern Ontario. Further, very few only visit Northern Ontario on a day trip, which is not surprising given travel distances across the region or from major population centres in neighbouring Provinces or southern Ontario. According to destination Northern Ontario, overnight visitors spend 2.5 times as much per trip as those who visit for a day (Destination Northern Ontario, 2019, p. 23).

Figure 7: Respondent destinations by district

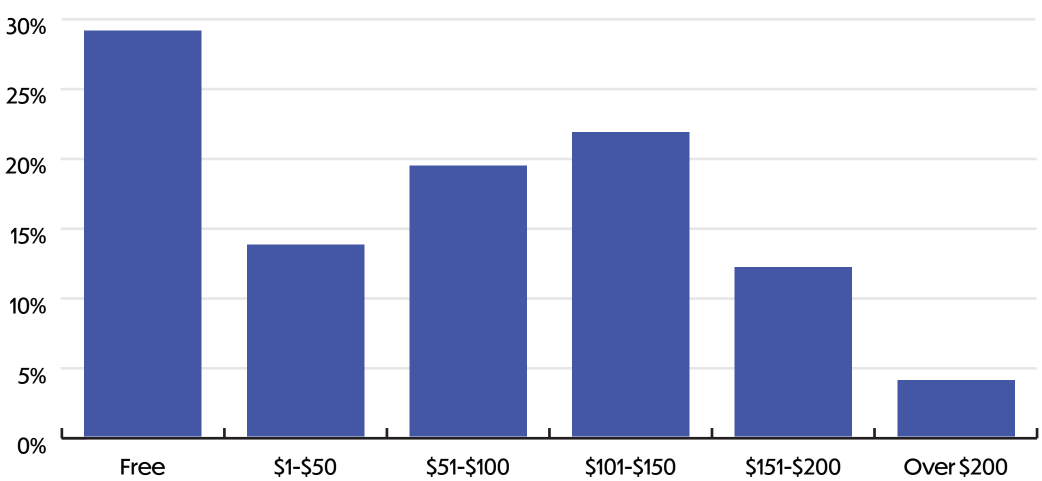


Asked about what attracted them to Northern Ontario, a substantial majority of visitors (66.4% or 99 of 149 respondents) selected "Location, natural environment, or scenery." In this instance, "location" may also be interpreted in relation to personal proximity. This response was relatively consistent between new and repeat visitors, with new visitors selecting the same factor at a rate of 64% (16 of 25) compared to 66.9% (83 of 124) of repeat visitors. The next most influential factor was "proximity to friends and relatives," which impacted 38.9% of respondents, but was a greater factor for repeat visitors than new ones (44.4% compared to 12%). "Activities" that visitors could take part in motivated 29.5% (44 of 149), though this was also more highly subscribed by repeat visitors (31.5% compared to 20% of new visitors). Given restrictions on gatherings and multi-person activities that occurred frequently throughout the pandemic, it is reasonable to assume new visitors would be somewhat aware that many activities would not be accessible. Similarly, one factor that played a larger motivating factor among new visitors were the travel restrictions to other destinations, which influenced 44% of new visitors (11 of 25) compared to 21% of repeat visitors (26 of 124). Note that respondents could select more than one factor influencing their decision.

Although most visitors spend multiple nights in Northern Ontario, the positive economic impact of this may be slightly negated by the type of accommodations visitors stay in. A plurality of visitors (41%)stay in free accommodations including private camps, trailers, and with friends or relatives. Interestingly, except for those that spend over 21 nights, free accommodations are not correlated to longer stays. Up to 21 nights, around 33% of visitors stay in free accommodations, while 55% of those that stay longer than 21 nights stay in free accommodations.

Apart from free accommodations, 18% of visitors stayed in a hotel, 16% at a campground or RV park, 16% in a lodge or cabin, 8% at a motel/Inn, and 6% at an Airbnb rental. For those that stay in paid accommodations the average price per night is $134. On average, the most expensive accommodations are lodge/cabin rentals, with a price of $176/night. This is followed by Airbnb rentals, $154/night, hotels at $135/night; motel/Inns at $124/night; and campground/RV parks at $62/night.

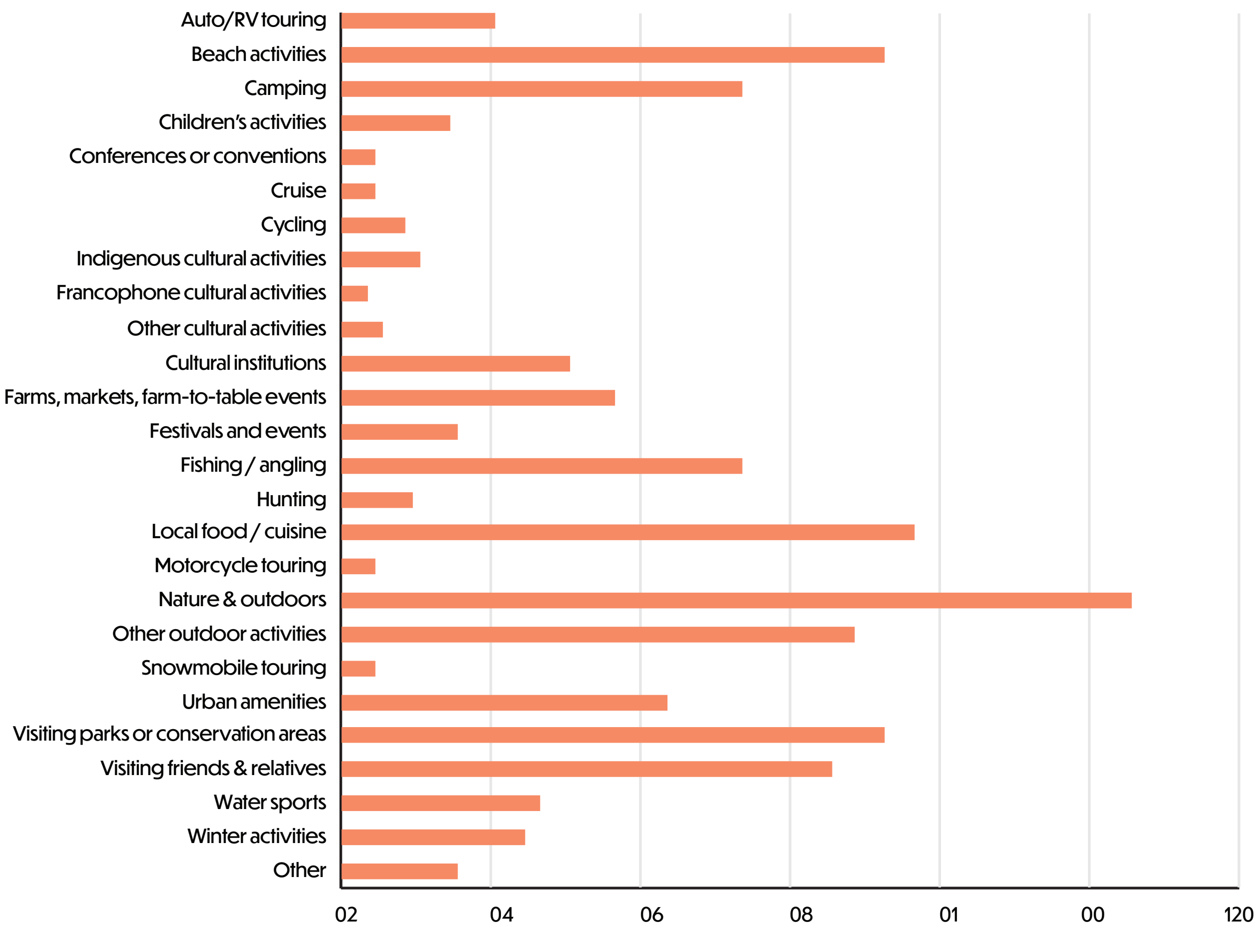
Figure 9: Nightly Price of Accomodation



Not surprising given the accommodations data, visiting friends and family was among the leading causes for visitors to come to Northern Ontario (35%). However, more than half (53%) reported leisure as their primary purpose for visiting, with 8% recording business travel, and a small proportion of respondents (4%) indicating they traveled for medical purposes.

Activities related to outdoor recreation are well known to be significant for Northern Ontario Tourism. Fully 70% of question respondents indicated they took part in "nature & outdoors" activities, 48% indicated they took part in "beach activities," and "visiting national or provincial parks, wildlife refuges, or conservation areas" and 45.3% indicated they took part in "other outdoor activities," including hiking, climbing, zip lining , etc. Similarly high response rates were recorded for "fishing/angling" (35.3%) and "camping" (35.3%). A full breakdown of reported activities can be seen in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Activities reported by visitors



Experiencing local food or cuisine was the second most common activity reported by participants (50.7%), underscoring the importance of the food service industry to tourism more generally throughout the region. Other activities that rated highly included "visiting friends and relatives" (43.3%), "urban amenities" including shopping, dining, observing architecture, etc. (28.67%), "farms, farmer's markets, or farm-to-table events" (24%) and "cultural institutions (e.g., museums, galleries, cultural centres, etc.)" (20%).

There is a notable seasonal variation to the reported activities, which must be taken into account in any interpretation of the results. Respondents had primarily traveled during the summer and both the timing of the survey and tighter travel restrictions throughout the winter limited the number of respondents who would have traveled in the winter season.

New visitors were slightly more likely to take part in cycling (16%) than habitual return visitors (9.6%), but less likely to take part in activities such as fishing or angling (24% compared to 37.6%) and experiencing local food or cuisine (36% compared to 53.6%). While restaurants and many local food centred events may have been closed or less accessible due to the pandemic, anecdotal responses to the survey also suggest that both local cuisine and fishing locations are the types of information that visitors tend to take time to acquire and assess over several visits. Not surprisingly, new visitors were also significantly less likely to visit friends and family than repeat visitors (16% compared to nearly 50%). Beyond these variations, there were not significant differences in the activities taken up by new and repeat visitors.

2.2.2 IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON VISITORS

As expected, the coronavirus pandemic played a significant role in visitor travel decisions, with 78.1% (89 of 114 respondents) indicating that they changed their previous travel plans due to the pandemic, while another 7.9% (9 of 114) indicated that it was a factor, but not the only factor. This was particularly true for new visitors, among whom only one respondent indicated it did not have a direct impact on travel decisions. Among new visitors, 89.5% (17 of 19) noted that they changed their plans due to the pandemic, and one additional respondent indicated that it was one among several factors.

Asked how the pandemic impacted travel plans, more than three quarters (76.4% or 81 of 106 respondents) selected "Travel restriction," including border closures, government restrictions on travel to particular destinations, or other changes. A substantial majority (61.3% or 65 of 106) also indicated health concerns or fear of exposure to the virus. A third (32.1% or 34 of 106) were also directly impacted by travel cancellations, including canceled flights or accommodations closing unexpectedly. Notably, new visitors were significantly more likely to report being impacted by cancellations, with 47.4% (9 of 19) indicating they were impacted by cancellations compared to 27.1% (23 of 85) of repeat visitors. A notable proportion of 22.6% (24 of 106) also indicated they were impacted by constraints or restrictions on their traveling companions. Overall just under 10% of all respondents (10 of 106) indicated that they were impacted by new financial constraints and the loss or rescheduling of vacation time, while 8 (7.6%) indicated a loss of employment.

The most common change with respect to travel plans was with respect to concerns for cleanliness. Fully 39.8% (45 of 113) indicated that their concern for cleanliness was impacted, which was higher for new visitors (47.4% or 9 of 19). A third of respondents (33.6% or 38 of 113) indicated that they were planning to travel elsewhere in Canada but instead traveled within Northern Ontario, while a similar proportion (31% or 35 of 113) indicated they were previously planning to travel internationally. Similarly, 31.9% (36 of 113) indicated that the distance they were willing to travel decreased. New visitors were more likely to have changed their travel plans, with 47.4% changing their destination from elsewhere in Canada and 42.1% (8 of 19) changing their destination from an international destination.

A notable proportion of the respondents (27.4% or 31 of 113) indicated that they wanted to travel to Northern Ontario, but were not able to do so because of the pandemic. Given lower response rates from the United States, from which a significant proportion of Northern Ontario travellers originate, it should not be inferred from this that the region gained more visitors than it lost. Indeed, in the same question visitors were presented with contrasting options, recognizing that the effects of the pandemic would increase the likelihood of locals staying in the region while decreasing the likelihood of outsiders coming in. The overall effects are clearly negative. For example, 15% (17 of 113) indicated that the length of their stay had decreased, compared to 5.3% (6 of 113) for whom it increased. Only 15 of 113 respondents (13.3%) indicated that nothing had changed about their travel plans since the onset of the pandemic.

The pandemic also limited the range of activities that visitors could pursue, with 55.8% (63 of 111) indicating some activities were not available due to COVID, while only 14.2% (16 of 111) indicated it had no effect. The remainder selected “Not applicable” or “I don’t know.”

2.2.3 TRANSPORTATION TO AND WITHIN THE REGION

The vast majority of respondents traveled to and within the region using their own (94%) or a rental vehicle (4.7%). These numbers are likely much higher than normal years, given both restrictions on shared transportation modes (such as commercial airlines and cruises) and personal care taken by visitors throughout the pandemic to avoid contracting or spreading the virus.

Nonetheless, there was considerable interest in improving infrastructure and increasing transportation options to and within the region. Many survey respondents raised issues related to transportation infrastructure and its impacts on their choice and experience of travel destination. Fifty-five survey respondents (16% of total, 36.4% of question respondents) answered that they would be more likely to access a train-in destination in Northern Ontario while twenty-two (6.5% of total, 14.6% of question respondents) answered that they would be more likely to access a fly-in destination. Eighty respondents answered they would not be more likely to visit Northern Ontario with access to either option (23.9% of total, 53% of question respondents). New visitors were also somewhat more likely than repeat visitors to express interest in more train (40%) and air travel (20%) options to the region. One respondent noted “Flying to the Sault is critical to me since I don’t own a car. [I] don’t need a car in Toronto.” Another noted, “Northern Ontario desperately needs to be reconnected to the rest of Canada by trains!”

Road conditions, construction, and greater connectivity or alternative means to travel to destinations were also frequently cited when respondents were asked what could have improved their experience in the North. Fifty-eight (38.4%) question respondents selected “road conditions / construction” while forty-three (28.5%) selected “greater connectivity / Alternative means for traveling to my destination.” There were not significant variations between new and return visitors in the rates of selecting these two areas for improvement.

Two respondents also expressed the need for more rest stops or washrooms on travel routes, while some also noted access to roads on Crown land that are habitually closed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. The latter point is a lingering tension between some local residents who want greater access to these locations and resort operators who wish to preserve the isolation and pristine “untouched” character common to many of the lakes and lands on which the resorts are located.

2.2.4 PRICING NORTHERN ONTARIO TRAVEL

The vast majority of respondents to questions about how they preferred prices to be listed indicated a preference for price listings in Canadian dollars (96%), compared to only five of 150 (3.3%) who preferred listings in both US and Canadian collars, and a solitary respondent who preferred prices in US dollars. Given the survey was targeted to those who were able to visit Northern Ontario in the last year, U.S. residents who visit the region regularly are significantly underrepresented. New visitors were entirely Canadian residents and indicated a categorical preference (100%) for price listings in Canadian dollars.

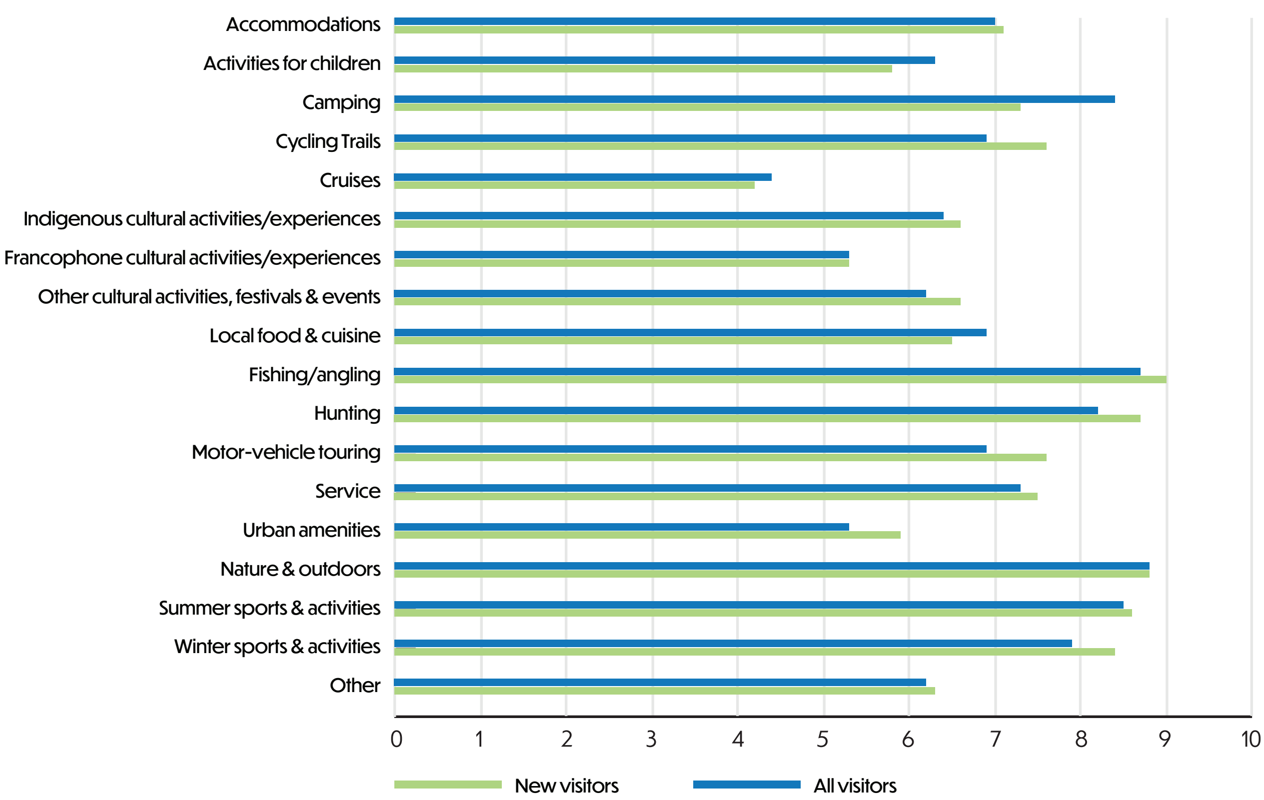
Respondents were also quite satisfied with the price of their travel to Northern Ontario, providing an average 8 out of 10 score, where 10 indicated strong agreement and 1 indicated strong disagreement with the statement "this destination offered good value for money." New visitors had a slightly lower average (7.6) compared to repeat visitors (8.1), but still reflected considerable satisfaction.

2.2.5 QUALITY OF NORTHERN ONTARIO TOURISM EXPERIENCES

Visitors to the region were also asked to report on their perception of the quality of a variety of aspects of the tourist experience in Northern Ontario, ranging from service and accommodations to the types of activities that were available.

Figure 11 provides a summary of the average scores, where 10 is the maximum indicating very high quality, while 1 is the minimum, indicating very low quality.

Figure 11: Average quality rations for visitor experiences



The region is well known for its outdoor experiences, and not surprisingly, related features scored highly on visitor quality perception, even where visitors had no direct personal experience (for example, 149 respondents assessed the region's hunting at an average quality of 8.2 out of 10, yet only 9 survey participants indicated taking part in any hunting activities). Overall, "Nature & Outdoors" achieved the highest rating of any feature, with an average score of 8.8. This was followed by "Fishing or Angling" with 8.7, "Summer Sports & Activities" with 8.5, "Camping" with 8.4, and "Winter Sports & Activities" with 7.9. Clearly the region enjoys considerable association with quality experiences of wilderness and the outdoors.

Generally speaking there were also positive associations with customer service (average score: 7.3) and accommodations (average score: 7), while local food and cuisine, motor-vehicle touring, and cycling trails and routes (each average score: 6.9) were well within a similar range.

The only feature to rate below 5 was cruises (average score: 4.4), however it's important to remember the scores are based on perception rather than experience. Where nearly every respondent would have had some kind of experience of customer service and a majority would have stayed in commercial accommodations (rather than with friends or family), few would have taken part in a local cruise, and the cruise industry at large experienced considerably negative press at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, while cultural activities, festivals and events achieved a modest average quality score of 6.2, and Indigenous specific activities, festivals and events inched higher at 6.4, Francophone cultural activities or experiences scored a disappointing 5.3. Yet while 152 people responded to each of the ratings, only 18 survey participants in total reported French among the primary languages of their travel party. Still, of the 29 self-reported Francophones who answered the question, the average rating remained at 5.3, and of the 12 who reported French among the languages of their travel group, the score declined further to 5.1. Similarly there was a modest score (average: 6.3) for activities for children, and a lower score (average: 5.3) for urban amenities.

Average scores between new and repeat visitors were relatively consistent, with the largest difference being a 1.3 variance between the average score repeat visitors gave to the quality of camping amenities (8.6) versus that given by new visitors (7.3). Repeat visitors were also more likely to give higher scores for fishing or angling (8.8 compared to 8) and activities for children (6.5 compared to 5.8), while new visitors offered higher scores for motor-vehicle touring (7.6 compared to 6.7) and cycling trails and routes (7.6 compared to 6.8), as well as urban amenities (5.9 compared to 5.3). While these differences are modest, they may shed some light into changes that have occurred with various segments of the tourism landscape compared to entrenched perceptions, such as recent investments that have been made in cycling infrastructure or touring routes, such as the Group of Seven tour route.

When prompted to rate other components of the tourism experience in the region, there was no clear pattern among what respondents wished to rate.

Visitors were also asked to rate their perceptions of a number of experiential qualities. On similar scales, with 10 representing the highest level of agreement or positive experience, and zero representing the greatest disagreement or negative experience, respondents evaluated how welcoming and safe Northern communities were, the degree to which their expectations were met, and whether they would visit again or recommend the destination to another.

The region received generally high marks for being welcoming, with an average score of 7.9, and both new and repeat visitors both scoring on average within 0.1 points of this score. A similar average score of 7.8 was achieved for how safe visitors felt, with the same range of variation between new and repeat visitors.

The question of whether the experience met visitors' expectations yielded a higher average score of 8.5, indicating quite strong satisfaction. There was slightly more variation between new and returning visitors, however, with new visitors averaging a score of 8 while repeat visitors rating higher at an average 8.6. This is to be expected on a question related to expectations, as return visitors have previous experience on which to set expectations. If anything is remarkable in the results for this question, it is actually how close (and high) these average scores are.

This satisfaction was also reflected in responses to future travel plans. Respondents provided an average score of 9.5 on a scale of 1-10, where 10 indicated strong agreement with the statement "I plan to visit again." Similarly, this average held relatively consistent with new visitors, whose average score was 9.1 compared to 9.6 for returning travellers. A slightly lower, though still notably high average score was achieved in relation to the statement "I would recommend Northern Ontario as a travel destination," with an overall average of 9. New visitors were somewhat more equivocal, with an average score of 8.4 compared to repeat visitors averaging 9.1. Still, when asked explicitly if their experience in Northern Ontario in the past year made them more or less likely to travel to the region in the future, 43.9% (50 of 114 respondents) overall and 42.1% (8 of 19) of new visitors indicated their experience made them more likely to choose a Northern Ontario destination in the future, while 36.8% (42 of 114) overall and 42.1% of new visitors expressed it had no change in likelihood. Only one respondent, a previous visitor to the region, expressed their experience made them less likely to return. Twenty-one participants overall (18.4%) selected "Not applicable."

2.2.6 IMPROVING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

When asked what additional activities they wished to take part in but were not available, nearly half (47.2%) of the 106 people who answered the question expressed they had no unmet desires for activities in which to take part in the region. The next largest proportion (38.7%) indicated that the "missing" activities they wished to pursue were only inaccessible due to COVID. Of those who had unique suggestions, there was little in the way of a clear pattern, apart from 3-4 suggestions having to do with water-based activities, including parasailing or pontoon boat rentals, SeaDoo rentals, boat tours, and creating a fishing manual highlighting prime locations rated by popularity. Other novel suggestions included train or trolley services, outdoor music, ATV rentals, and opening more access roads on Crown land.

Participants were also asked explicitly if they were interested in learning more about or taking part in Indigenous cultural experiences or events. Of the 151 respondents, 45% indicated "yes," 27.8% "maybe" and only 21.2% indicated "no" suggesting fairly significant interest in Indigenous tourism, even where it may not be an explicit purpose for the initial travel.

Asked about what could have improved their experience in Northern Ontario, apart from transportation and connectivity issues which are addressed in section 2.2.3, a significant number of respondents (34.4%) indicated a desire to have more things open or longer seasons. As these options were listed together, this may have reflected pandemic related closures rather than considerations around the seasonality of certain tourism operations. All other options were selected by less than 20% of overall respondents. New visitors, however, were more likely to rate certain options higher compared to repeat visitors, which may reflect a number of possibilities ranging from a "fresh perspective" on the region to simply not having been able to access certain options during their stay due to pandemic related closures. New visitors were more likely to cite a desire for better quality of restaurants or dining experiences (20.8%) compared to repeat visitors (10.4%), as well as greater variety of restaurant or dining experiences (20.8% compared to 17.6%) and greater variety of tourism products (20.8% compared to 15.2%). Repeat visitors, by contrast, were more likely to cite the need for more online information (20% compared to 8.3%) and both great quality and variety of local experiences (13.6% compared to 8.3%). "Other" was another fairly common selection, chosen by 17.9% (27 of 151) of respondents. Among the comments left, transportation issues were a recurring theme, with notes such as "Roads suck" and "more rest stops and picnic areas along the way."

More evident, however, was an emerging tension between protecting the natural beauty and isolation of the region, versus increasing awareness of Northern Ontario as a destination. One respondent noted: "I would have liked the assurance that the next time I go to Northern Ontario, the natural areas, scenic vistas will be protected. I have this ongoing feeling that Northern Ontario will be unsustainably like southern Ontario has." Another commented: "Less people at the same time. The traffic is increasing and wrecking the experience at many natural locations. Litter and noise destroy the charm that used to be here." Conversely others highlighted the need for additional infrastructure to accommodate more visitors, with comments including "More cabin rental options along Superior shores," "More campgrounds," and "More scenic lookouts, better access to natural attractions, better signage, better advertising in Ontario."

Indeed, a number of others highlighted marketing opportunities that they felt would increase awareness of Northern Ontario as a travel destination, with others noting "I think there could be better advertising to the public in the south," "more uniform info collection instead of just searching for websites," and "more and effective promotion." One respondent expressed frustration with existing provincial marketing, noting:

> ***"When Ontario advertises Ontario, all they show is the GTA or Southern Ontario. If they show the North, all they show are TREES. There are so many things and places to visit in the North. Like polar bears in Cochrane, ON, the birth place of the man who wrote the Hardy Boy books in Haileybury or the fact there is a Lake monster there. The change in the water shed along Highway 11. Even casino in places like SSM or the fact Canada's midway point is along Highway 17 and you can see salmon spawning in the river along Highway 17. The people in Toronto have to advertise Ontario as a whole and not just Toronto!"***

When asked directly what could improve the visitor experience in Northern Ontario, new visitors provided a variety of opinions. Some comments emphasized greater accessibility, with one respondent noting "Longer season in campgrounds and RV parks" and another indicating "More washroom facilities. More Provincial Parks." Similar responses included "Improve the quality of furniture in cabins. Our mattresses were old with lumps and valleys..." and "more events." One content visitor noted:

> ***"Nothing about our experience in Northern Ontario could have been improved upon ... the only way were [sic] limited is that campgrounds were quite busy and we had to plan our trip around when we could camp where. So maybe more camping infrastructure, particularly along the east coast of Superior.***

Another offered advice for how to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the industry. They noted:

> ***"Advise visitors what they CAN do, rather than just what they can't/should not. For the example: get tested before leaving, pack all your food ahead of time to avoid risk of spread in other communities, encourage outdoor activities where physical distancing is possible (camping)."***

There were no clear unifying themes, otherwise. Other comments included:

- *"Regional artist visits and day-long workshops, orientation."*
- *"Make the northern population more aware of other cultural practices. Campaign about wilderness safety to visitors."*
- *"The biggest thing is that there are [sic] nothing other than nature that attracts someone. For people who aren't nature people Sudbury has Science North and Dynamic Earth. One day trip, then what? So many things are meh. I think that if tour plans for different towns were made it could be useful. Make a quiz to get details of them, then make a potential time frame and estimated budget. Sometimes hoping [sic] place to place to place for an hour activity gets expensive."*

A number of return visitors expressed that nothing could be improved. Recurring themes included transportation concerns, including developing additional rest areas, train access, and way-finding strategies. Better marketing and online presence were also common items of advice, and some expressed a desire for more Airbnb options. Just as with new visitors, however, there was a great deal of variety among responses.

3.0 Northern Ontario Tourism Operators During the Pandemic

3.1 Profile of Tourism Enterprise Respondents

3.1.1 REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION

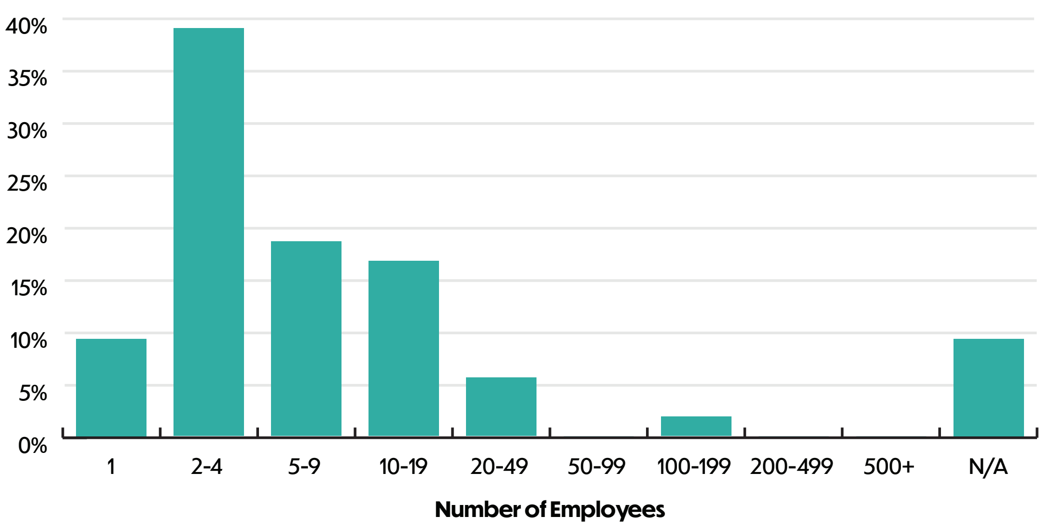
Respondents to the survey of operators and associated enterprises in the tourism industry for Northern Ontario were primarily located in the Algoma District, reflecting the early focus of the survey on the district and stronger partnerships between the researchers and industry within the region. Nearly half (47.2% or 25 of 53 respondents) of the enterprises were located in Algoma, followed by Sudbury (13.2% or 7 of 53), Timiskaming (11.3% or 6 of 53) and Manitoulin (9.4% or 5 of 53). Cochrane and Kenora districts each had three participants (5.7% apiece) followed by two in the City of Greater Sudbury and one each in Rainy River and Thunder Bay districts. One respondent was based in Southern Ontario but worked for a Tourism agency that deals with Northern Ontario.

3.1.2 TYPES AND SIZES OF ENTERPRISE

The enterprises that responded were primarily private corporations (40.7% or 22 of 54), with notable proportions that were sole proprietorships or not-for-profit corporations (18.5% or 10 of 54 each), and incorporated partnerships (14.8% or 8 of 54). Two respondents participated from government agencies and one was a cooperative enterprise. No Indigenous community-owned enterprises took part in the survey.

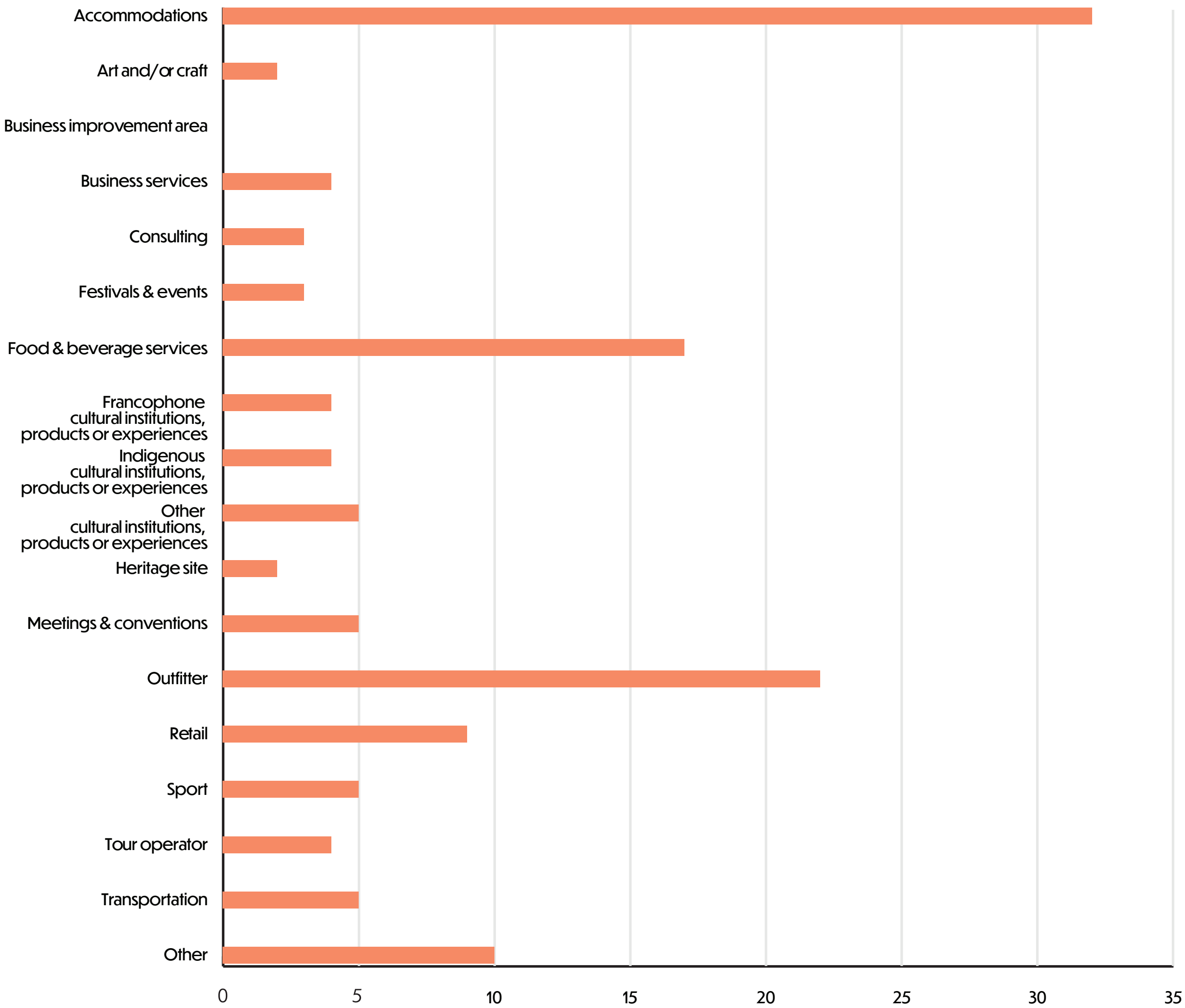
The vast majority were also small and medium sized enterprises (SME), reflecting the prominent role that SMEs play in the tourism industry throughout the region. Figure 12 provides a breakdown of respondents based on the number of employees.

Figure 12: Number of full-time employees per responding



While there was a wide range of types of services offered by the survey respondents, the most significant proportion were tied to accommodations (59.3% or 32 of 54), followed by outfitters (40.7% or 22 of 54), and food and beverage service (31.5% or 17 of 54). A full breakdown is apparent in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Services offered by responding enterprises

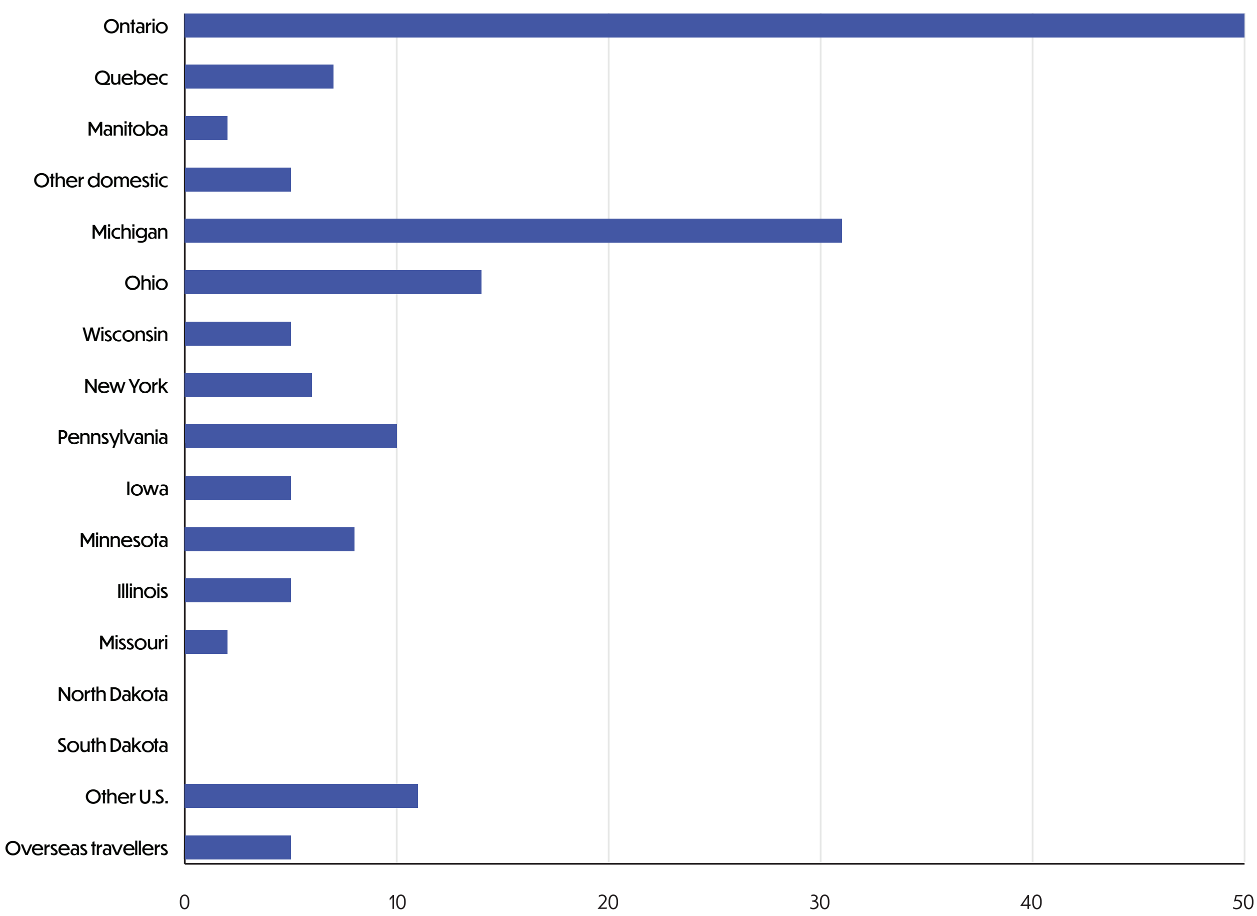


The vast majority catered primarily to leisure travellers (88.9% or 48 of 54), followed by close to a third who frequently deal with business travellers (29.6% or 16 of 54) or those visiting friends and relatives (31.5 or 17 of 54).

3.1.3 ORIGINS OF CLIENTELE

Asked to consider what proportion of their clientele came from a selection of locations in an average year, Ontario received an average score of 50% followed by Michigan with an average score of 31%. Other common locations from which visitors arrived included Ohio (average of 14%), Pennsylvania (average of 10%), Minnesota (average of 8%) and other locations in the U.S. (average 11%) excluding Wisconsin, New York, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and North and South Dakota, which were unique options. The Dakotas average 0% while the remaining listed states averaged between 6 and 2 percent. Other common origin points within Canada included Québec (average of 7%), while Manitoba registered only an average of 2% and 5% from other origin points in Canada. Notably, enterprises that operate or can serve visitors in French received significantly higher proportions of their clientele from Québec. The comparatively low-scores for both Manitoba and some border states, however, are likely a result of the survey sample coming disproportionately from the Algoma region and the Northeast.

Figure 14: Average score in response to proportion of visitors from various origin locations



3.1.4 LANGUAGE AND INDIGENEITY

Nearly a third of respondents (31.5% or 17 of 54) reported the ability to offer service in French, though only 16.7% (9 of 54) find that they do so regularly. Two (3.7%) also indicated the ability to provide service in an Indigenous language and one in German. All of the respondents provide service regularly in English.

Among the 53 respondents who answered questions about the identities of their business owners, 9 (17%) were Francophone and 7 (13.2%) identified as Indigenous. Only one enterprise operated on-reserve, while 3 (5.8%) indicated that they operated both on- and off-reserve.

3.1.5 APPROACHES TO MARKETING

Operators generally used a diversity of methods to market their enterprises. There is significant uptake of social media among the tourism operators who responded to the survey. Fully 88.9% (40 of 45 respondents) indicated that they used social media to market their business. The next highest selected option was for tourism organizations (73.3% or 33 of 45), followed by tourism websites, such as northernontario.travel (66.7% or 30 of 45). Trade shows were used by 17 respondents (37.8%), as well as the option of "other paid advertisements," while only 12 (26.7%) advertised in trade publications.

3.2 Tourism Infrastructure According to Tourism Operators

Tourism operators frequently mentioned improved transportation options (air and rail) as something their clients report wishing to see in Northern Ontario. Additionally, visitors would like to see improved highway travel with more rest stops and gas stations.

Operators recognize the importance of transportation as well, as transportation improvements were two of the top five items operators believed would improve tourism experiences. According to the survey, the supports that operators need the most to increase visitors and improve tourism experiences are as follows:

- Increased access to grants and subsidies
- Upgrades to facilities or equipment
- Access to qualified and/or capable workforce
- Improved road conditions/construction
- Other improvements to transportation infrastructure.

Tourism operators also indicated that access to better internet would make Northern Ontario a more competitive destination for tourists. Notably, social media was the most used form of marketing reported by tourism operators. According to the survey, 95% of tourism operators in Northern Ontario use social media to market their business or organization.

3.3 Development of Northern Ontario Tourism Industry

The commitment of operators to the industry's development is apparent not only in their own efforts to offer quality products, but also in the advice they have for the government and other stakeholders.

3.3.1 FEEDBACK

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they actively collect customer feedback, with over 60% (32 of 53) indicating they collected feedback "sometimes," and over 30% (16 of 53) indicating they did so "all the time." Less than 10% (5 of 53) indicated they did not collect feedback. Of those collecting feedback, social media was the primary means of doing so, with 70% (35 of 50) of enterprises indicating they collected feedback in this manner. This was followed by email and reviews on websites or online booking platforms at 52% each (26 of 50), travel review sites, such as TripAdvisor or Expedia, at 48% (24 of 50), customer review surveys or comment cards at 40% (20 of 50), while monitoring visitation and sales data as an indicator of satisfaction was carried out by 18% (9 of 50) of enterprises.

3.3.2 DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF TOURISM OPERATORS

Asked to consider what supports are necessary to increase visitors and improve the tourism experience in Northern Ontario, Table 1 reflects respondents thoughts in relation to their own business or enterprise:

Table 1: Supports needed by tourism operators

SUPPORTS NEEDED BY TOURISM OPERATORS	HIGHEST PRIORITY	HIGH PRIORITY	MODERATE PRIORITY	LOW PRIORITY	LOWEST PRIORITY
Increased access to grants and subsidies	57.69% 30	21.15% 11	7.69% 4	1.92% 1	5.77% 3
Upgrades to facilities or equipment	26.92% 14	40.39% 21	15.39% 8	5.77% 3	7.69% 4
Access to qualified and/or capable workforce	20.40% 10	36.74% 18	14.29% 7	6.12% 3	12.25% 6
Access to more marketing opportunities	14.00% 7	24.00% 12	26.00% 13	16.00% 8	12.00% 6
Improved road conditions/construction	18.75% 9	16.67% 8	29.17% 14	12.50% 6	16.67% 8
Other improvements to transportation infrastructure	18.37% 9	28.57% 14	18.37% 9	10.20% 5	20.40% 10
More networking or partnerships with other enterprises	16.33% 8	26.53% 13	14.29% 7	22.45% 11	14.29% 7
More research about the tourism market	14.00% 7	30.00% 15	22.00% 11	16.00% 8	14.00% 7
Access to bilingual/multilingual services or workforce	6.12% 3	16.33% 8	16.33% 8	18.37% 9	24.49% 12
Guidance on target markets / where to advertise	6.12% 3	36.74% 18	20.40% 10	16.33% 8	16.33% 8
Access to opportunities to increase cultural awareness	6.12% 3	16.33% 8	26.53% 13	22.45% 11	16.33% 8
Improvements to way-finding	10.87% 5	19.57% 9	26.09% 12	19.57% 9	17.39% 8
Increased access to loans or capital investment	16.67% 8	12.50% 6	29.17% 14	16.67% 8	20.83% 10
Receive support from a mentor through a mentorship program	2.44% 1	7.32%	17.07% 7	21.95% 9	29.27% 12
Management or business training for myself or staff	2.00% 1	16.00% 8	26.00% 13	28.00% 14	16.00% 8
Knowledge of suppliers	6.38% 3	6.38% 3	38.30% 18	25.53% 12	14.89% 7
Assistance with product development	8.16% 4	16.33% 8	26.53% 13	20.40% 10	22.45% 11

Legend

0-9.99%	10.00-19.99%	20.00-29.99%	30.00-39.99%	40.00-49.99%	50.00%-100%

The five highest weighted priorities were, in order, increased access to grants and subsidies; upgrades to facilities and equipment; upgrades to facilities and equipment; access to qualified and/or capable workforce; access to more marketing opportunities; and improved road conditions / construction tied with other improvements to transportation infrastructure (e.g., greater variety, increased service, etc.).

The five lowest rated priorities included increased access to loans or capital investment; receiving support from a mentor through a mentorship program; management or business training for myself or staff; knowledge of suppliers; and assistance with product development.

Table 2 indicates results to a similar question with respect to respondents' consideration of the tourism industry at large in the North. Given the more general frame of the question, some of the options were different from those asked about respondents' personal experiences.

Table 2: Supports needed for the regional industry

SUPPORTS NEEDED BY TOURISM OPERATORS	HIGHEST PRIORITY	HIGH PRIORITY	MODERATE PRIORITY	LOW PRIORITY	LOWEST PRIORITY
Access to better internet	57.50% 23	27.50% 11	12.50% 5	2.50% 1	0.00% 0
Grants and subsidies (including wage subsidies)	58.00% 29	30.00% 15	8.00% 4	0.00% 0	4.00% 2
More local/authentic tourism experiences	41.18% 21	31.37% 16	15.69% 8	9.80% 5	1.96% 1
Greater variety of tourism products/activities	29.17% 14	35.42% 17	31.25% 15	4.17% 2	0.00% 0
More season-specific tourism activities	34.04% 16	31.92% 15	22.28% 10	10.64% 5	2.13% 1
More marketing	29.17% 14	39.58% 19	14.58% 7	10.42% 5	6.25% 3
Other improvements to transportation infrastructure	31.91% 15	29.79% 14	17.02% 8	22.28% 10	0.00% 0
Improved road conditions/construction	29.17% 14	31.25% 15	20.83% 10	16.67% 8	2.08% 1
Access to qualified and/or capable workforce	21.28% 10	46.81% 22	14.89% 7	8.51% 4	8.51% 4
More information about tourism market demand	20.83% 10	33.33% 16	35.56% 17	8.33% 4	2.08% 1
Higher quality accommodations	16.67% 8	41.67% 20	29.17% 14	10.42% 5	2.08% 1
More networking and partnerships	23.91% 11	28.26% 13	28.26% 13	13.04% 6	6.52% 3
Loans and other capital investments	19.15% 9	29.79% 14	31.92% 15	12.77% 6	6.38% 3
Tourism research & development	14.89% 7	34.04% 16	23.40% 11	19.15% 9	8.51% 4
Greater cultural sensitivity or awareness	10.64% 5	31.91% 15	31.91% 15	19.15% 9	6.38% 3
Management or business training for operators	6.52% 3	30.44% 14	36.96% 17	19.57% 9	6.52% 3
Improvements to way-finding	8.70% 4	30.44% 14	23.91% 11	28.26% 13	8.70% 4
Access to bilingual/multilingual services	10.64% 5	19.15% 9	29.79% 14	27.66% 13	12.77% 6

Legend

0-9.99%	10.00-19.99%	20.00-29.99%	30.00-39.99%	40.00-49.99%	50.00%-100%

The five highest weighted priorities for the regional industry were, in order, access to better internet; Grants and subsidies; More local/authentic tourism experiences; Greater variety of tourism products/activities; And more season-specific tourism activities.

The lowest weighted priorities included tourism research and development; greater cultural sensitivity or awareness; management or business training for operators; improvements to way-finding; and access to bilingual/multilingual services.

While not all options were the same for each question, there are some notable shifts between what respondents report for their own needs versus their perceptions for what the needs of the region are. While access to grants and subsidies is a common concern, aspects related to diversification rated highly for the region at large, while related themes (e.g. assistance with product development) generally rated as low priorities. This is not necessarily a contradiction, however, as one can see a need for greater diversification in an industry at large while still affirming the important role played by existing enterprises. Furthermore, a business may be diversifying without requiring any assistance in doing so. Workforce and enterprise-specific infrastructure concerns also rated higher in importance when respondents were reporting on their own experiences.

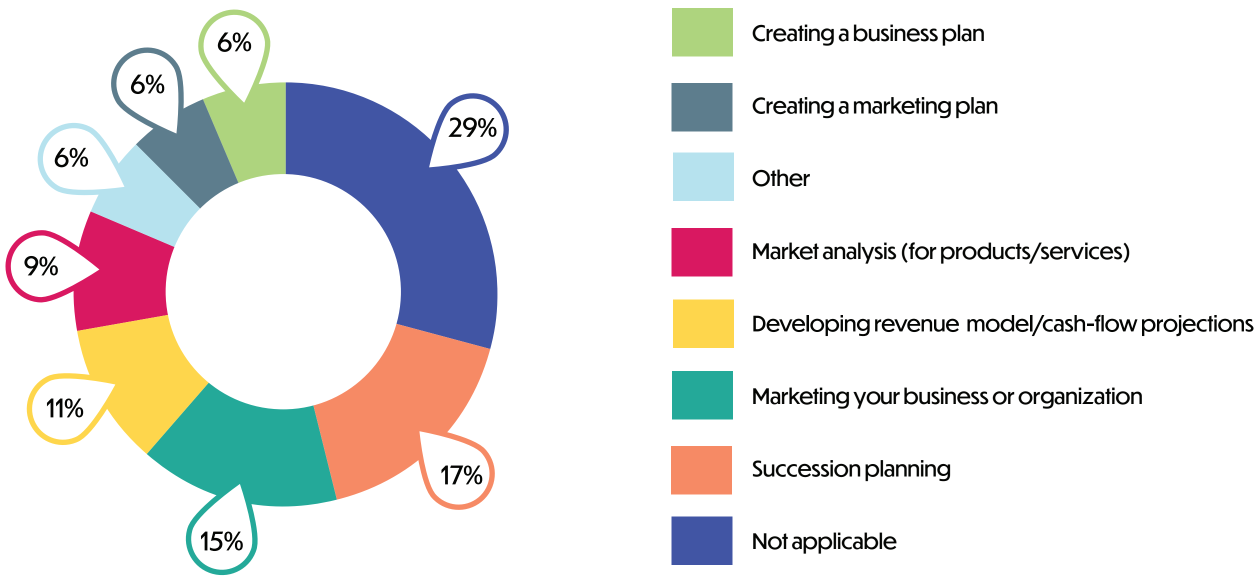
Notably in both questions, “Access to bilingual/multilingual services or workforce” and “Access to opportunities to increase cultural awareness” rated higher among operators who were Francophone and/or Indigenous or who served Francophone and/or Indigenous markets. These also rated lower in regional considerations than those for individual enterprises, suggesting that in this arena, as in others, respondents were not interpreting their own needs as necessarily reflecting those of the regional industry.

More generally speaking, respondents were significantly less likely to identify an item as a “lowest priority” when referring to the industry at large compared to when they were assessing their own experience. This is likely given that it is easier to assess whether something is not a priority for one’s own business than to make assumptions about its utility for others.

Interpreting the results of these two questions is thus quite complicated. The question about the regional tourism industry is fundamentally about perception, and the differences that it demonstrates from the priorities of individual enterprises may be misguided. It is possible that respondents are assuming that others do not share their problems (and strengths) to the degree that they actually do. That said, it is also possible that, whether through networks or observation of industry trends, that those who work in the industry are attuned to the needs of other operators. Consequently, in any decision related to policy change, development, or new industry supports, both perspectives should be considered.

Though it was not highly weighted in the responses to both questions about the development needs of the industry, those who did indicate that business or management training was a priority for them were asked what type of training it is that they would like to receive. Though 46.3% of question respondents indicated it was not applicable, the highest ranking relevant category was for succession planning (26.8% or 11 of 65) followed closely by marketing your business or organization (24.4% or 10 of 65). Figure 15 provides a detailed breakdown.

Figure 15: Management or business training needs or responding tourism enterprises



When prompted for open-ended suggestions to government or industry actors to grow the tourism industry in Northern Ontario, the most common themes were related to grants and financial support as well as infrastructure development, including rail transportation and internet access. Among the former theme, contributions included:

- "Grants for resort green energy upgrades retrofit. Tax breaks and HST rebates"
- "More assistance to provide accessibility dollars to upgrade buildings"
- "Provide grants to operators and provincial advertise and truly market Northern Ontario"
- "More government support to encourage project development. Less red tape that strangles startup projects"
- "We require grants to help businesses not loans we can not pay back. Investments for green climate for business."
- "Assist with liquidity over the next year especially if the border doesn't open"
- "Including tour operators in the eligible tourism business[es] for the grant would have been nice. Some businesses could have used some funds to expand during the pandemic so that they would be ready for reopening."

Rail service, high speed internet, and cell reception were also highlighted among the infrastructure needs:

- "Develop efficient passenger rail services across the north from southern areas."
- "The best way for tourists to travel throughout the vast distances of Northern Ontario is by passenger trains. That service must be restored on existing rail beds. Tourists love traveling by rail."
- "...improve cell phone service, improve internet service."
- "Access to high speed internet for all."

Other infrastructure suggestions ranged from the uniquely specific to more general sentiments:

- "Please develop the trail for cyclists between Nipigon and Thunder Bay. Allow private campgrounds to open in Lake Superior Provincial Park region and generally in areas dominated by the Ontario government campgrounds"
- "More cooperation from MNRF building and maintaining trails"
- "Help us make us better than we were before, for us to offer better accommodations and experiences for our guests"

Marketing was another common theme among the suggestions, with many underlining the importance of increasing the travel distances of those from southern Ontario, or promoting incentives for American travellers to return:

- "Try to convince people from Southern Ontario to travel North and further than Sudbury"
- "Convince people from the south that driving the long distance to the north is worth it"
- "Faire de la promotion en Abitibi-Témiscamingue [Do marketing in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region of western Québec]"
- "Larger marketing campaigns, increased focused on the north at tradeshows, conferences"
- "Rebates to domestic and US customers…"
- "For our American guests the ability to only charge them 50% of HST was a large incentive for them to travel to Canada Outdoor Tourism destinations."
- "Market the fact that it is not crowded up here, the fishing is better, the hiking is wilder, etc."

Notably, the importance of opening the U.S./Canada border was underlined a number of times, not only to provide access to American visitors, but also for business owners in Northern Ontario who normally reside in the United States. One participant commented "You cannot save northern Ontario tourism without reopening the US border." The damage done to the industry by the closure highlights an important area for policy development if border closures become more frequent occurrences in the future.

Other concerns were tied to how the government of Ontario understands and interacts with the tourism industry, particularly in the North. One participant noted "Gov't has to recognize that the tourism industry in Northern Ontario is one of THREE resource based industries in the north - Resource based tourism, mining, and forestry…"

3.3.3 SEASONALITY OF NORTHERN ONTARIO'S TOURISM SECTOR

With respect to the seasonality of operations, respondents' decisions about what seasons to operate were driven almost exclusively by practical concerns. Nearly three quarters (71.1% or 27 of 38) indicated their operations were seasonal because the services they provide were only capable of being done in the seasons in which they operate. Just over ten percent (4 of 38) indicated it was because they found it was not profitable to operate in other seasons. No respondents indicated that their seasonality was due to personal preference or competing obligations in other seasons. Among the 18.4% (7 of 34) who selected "Other," some indicated that they do operate year round, while others emphasized additional seasonal constraints, such as not having road access, or that they scale operations down in certain seasons rather than close completely.

3.3.4 INDIGENOUS AND FRANCOPHONE TOURISM DEMAND AND INVESTMENT

While most operators who responded expressed that they did not know whether demand for Indigenous and Francophone-specific tourism was increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same, those who did weigh in generally felt that demand was increasing or remaining the same. With respect to Indigenous tourism, 17 of 53 respondents (32.1%) felt that demand was increasing and 8 (15.1%) felt it remained the same, only one respondent (1.9%) felt that demand was decreasing. With respect to interest or visitations from Francophone tourists, 10 of 52 (18.9%) felt demand was increasing while a further 16 (30.2%) felt it remained the same. Only two (3.8%) felt that demand was declining.

While raw data on investment will be the subject of further investigations, operators' perception of investment in Indigenous and Francophone tourism exhibited similar trends. For Indigenous tourism, 19 of 52 respondents (36.5%) felt that investment was increasing, compared to two (3.9%) each respectively noted that this investment was decreasing or remaining the same. A significant majority, 31 of 52 (59.6%) indicated "I don't know." Similarly for Francophone tourism, 7 of 53 respondents (13.2%) felt investment was increasing, 3 (5.7%) that it was decreasing, and 8 (15.1%) that investment remained the same. An even larger majority, 35 (66%) indicated "I don't know."

3.4 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tourism operators have faced severe financial challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.Nearly four out of every five (79%) tourism operators indicated their largest challenge while operating during the pandemic was profitability. Further, 54% indicated their revenue decreased by over 50%.

The detrimental impact of the pandemic on Northern Ontario's tourism industry is palpable. Asked to rate the impact of the pandemic on their operations to date, with 1 indicating no impact and 10 indicating great impact, the average score recorded was 9. Similarly, when asked to consider the likelihood of future impacts of the pandemic, the average recorded score was 8.7 on the same scale.

Estimates of average visitations also plummeted. Table 3 provides an overview of the decline in the 2020-21 year compared to previous established norms:

Table 3: Average number of visitors comparing the last 12 months against an average year

AVERAGE NUMBER OF VISITORS	AVERAGE YEAR	LAST 12 MONTHS	% CHANGE
Winter (DEC.-FEB.)	2 680	1 331	-50.34%
Spring (MAR.-MAY)	826	58	-92.98%
Summer (JUN.-AUG.)	2 032	570	-71.95%
Fall (SEPT.-NOV.)	576	234	-59.37%

Note that the significant variations in the decline between seasons may be influenced by a number of factors, including varying stay-at-home orders, border closures, as well as that respondents recorded comparatively low levels of visitations during shoulder seasons. The above numbers reflect the averages of respondents and are not a representative sample of the industry at large.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic certainly had a devastating impact on the tourism industry in Northern Ontario, the survey results show positive indications towards survival and recovery. A question which asked tourism operators to note all of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to their tourism operation found that permanent closure/ bankruptcy was the lowest occurring event caused by the pandemic (see Table 4). Further, of the tourism operators that were closed at the time of the survey, nearly all indicated that they plan to restart their operations in the future (60% or 27 of 45 respondents, compared to 3 or 6.7% who were undecided. The remaining respondents indicated the question was not applicable). The pervasiveness of the pandemic and its effects, however, pose significant threats to the sustainability of many enterprises in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic did have a positive effect on a notable minority of tourism operators. Over a quarter of responding operators (26.7%) experienced an increase in sales, visitations, or reservations as a result of the pandemic, even if only modestly for some. Over half of these enterprises operated some form of accommodations (54.6% or 6 of 11) and roughly a quarter offered some kind of tour operator service (27.3% or 3 of 11).

Among visitors, 15% indicated that travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were a contributing factor for their decision to travel within Northern Ontario, as they had to forego out-of-province or international travel.

However, the significant effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on tourism operators should not be understated. Asked to consider the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Table 4 reflects respondents thoughts in relation to their own business or enterprise:

Table 4: Impacts of the pandemic on tourism operators

IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON TOURISM OPERATORS	OCCURRED A GREAT DEAL	OCCURRED SOMEWHAT	OCCURRED A LITTLE BIT	DID NOT OCCUR	NOT APPLICABLE OR TOO SOON TO TELL
Slower sales or reservations compared to previous year	73.33% 33	4.44% 2	4.44% 2	8.89% 4	8.89% 4
Rescheduling of reservations	60.00% 27	13.33% 6	4.44% 2	6.67% 3	15.56% 7
Developing and implementing new health and safety protocols	57.78% 26	17.78% 8	6.67% 3	4.44% 2	13.33% 6
Cancellations	59.09% 26	6.81% 3	6.81% 3	9.09% 4	18.18% 8
Constraints on cashflow/liquidity	55.56% 25	20.00% 9	6.67% 3	8.89% 4	8.89% 4
Reduction in capital projects and/or expenditures	51.11% 23	15.56% 7	13.33% 6	8.89% 4	11.11% 5
Temporary closure	37.20% 16	6.98% 3	11.63% 5	20.93% 9	23.26% 10
Supply chain interruptions	25.58% 11	18.61% 8	25.58% 11	11.63% 5	18.61% 8
Staff Layoffs	29.54% 13	2.27% 1	11.36% 5	27.27% 12	29.55% 13
Difficulties recruiting staff	11.90% 5	16.67% 7	11.91% 5	26.19% 11	33.33% 14
Increased sales, visitations, or reservations	6.67% 3	13.33% 6	6.67% 3	62.22% 28	11.11% 5
Permanent closure/bankruptcy	2.38% 1	0.00% 0	7.14% 3	40.48% 17	50.00% 21

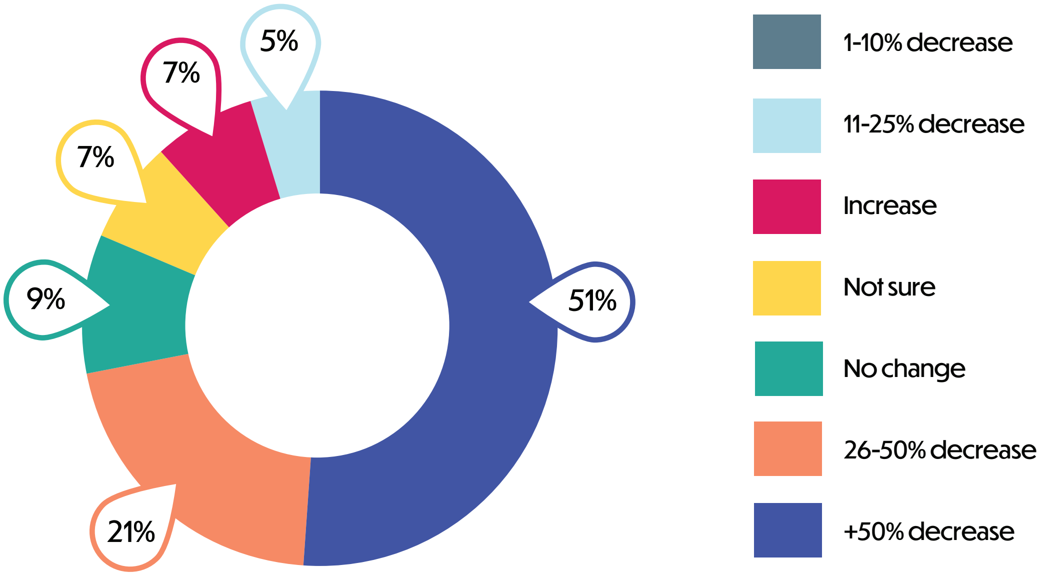
Legend

0-9.99%	10.00-19.99%	20.00-29.99%	30.00-39.99%	40.00-49.99%	50.00%-100%

The most prevalent impacts included slower sales or reservations compared to previous years; rescheduling of reservations; cancellations; developing and implementing new health and safety protocols; constraints on cashflow or liquidity; and reduction in capital projects or expenditures, with more than half of respondents indicating these impacts “occurred a great deal.” Over a third experienced temporary closures, and more than a quarter experienced supply chain interruptions or had to lay off staff.

Among those who experienced a decline in revenue, more than half experienced a decline greater than 50% (22 of 43 respondents, or 51.2%). Over 20% (9 of 43) indicated a decline in revenues between 26 and 50%, and 4.7% (2 of 43) a decline between 11 and 25%. Three (7%) indicated they were unsure. The question was not applicable to the remainder, with some indicating no change or an increase in revenue.

Figure 16: Ranges of declining revenue due to COVID-19 pandemic



Of those enterprises who indicated they planned to continue operating (i.e. that did not close permanently), over three quarters indicated profitability was likely to be a challenge in the year to come (75.6% or 34 of 45), and nearly two thirds expected attracting consumers to return to be challenging (64.4% or 29 of 45). Other challenges that respondents foresee include how to safely operate during the pandemic (55.6%), having enough operating cash to restart (51.1%), marketing during or after the pandemic (37.8%), and rehiring staff (24.4%). Unique responses supplied by the respondents included "Waiting for the border to open, otherwise another major loss year," "More closures and shutdowns, downturn in economy, border closure extended indefinitely," "supply chains" and "The inability of our US guests to come into Canada. 100% of our business is dependant on US customers." Five of 43 comments indicated the border closure would be a challenge.

Although the survey did not specifically ask about the United States border, some operators indicated that their operation is dependent on the international border with the United States being open. For example, in response to a question which asked operators what support is needed to increase visitors, a respondent indicated that they had no issue filling reservations. However, a majority were American guests who were unable to travel.

While operators have shifted gears by necessity because of COVID-19, many indicated they planned to innovate further even when or if the pandemic ends. Though 31.1% (14 of 45) indicated they plan to operate as they did before the pandemic and 22.2% (10 of 45) were unsure, 46.7% (21 of 45) expressed they were planning to adapt business operations in the future. These innovations included “improved cleaning measures, unsure about mask wearing into the future and social distancing in coming years,” “crowd control,” “invest in outdoor dining, air filtration systems,” “digital strategy, customer behaviours and adapting to needs/requirements with offerings,” and “hoping to expand the parts that worked well during the pandemic” which reflected common themes. For some, however, the change reflects a decrease in capacity, with one respondent noting “reduced services” and another stating “Nous avons vendu plusieurs maisons alors nous allons pas viser la même grosseur de groupe qu’avant la pandémie [We sold several houses so we won’t aim for the same group size as before the pandemic].”

The pandemic has had significantly detrimental impacts on the tourism industry in Northern Ontario, and most operators are hurting. Support for the industry is clearly necessary, and many operators were not shy about sharing their frustrations. Asked for suggestions to the government or industry to promote growth in tourism, one respondent replied: “Growth? You’re joking right. We are all about to go bankrupt and the government doesn’t give a shit about us. No help whatsoever as we watch it all fall apart.” Another noted “Talk to us on how you can help? We know our industry and can provide knowledgeable feedback” emphasizing the importance of policy to be made in communication with the industry’s entrepreneurs themselves.

The impacts have also differed between the Northeast and Northwest of the region, with one participant noting “I think there are significant differences in target markets between lodges that operate in the northeast of the province and those that operate in the northwest.” Those in the Northwest appear to be much more reliant on American tourists and have a smaller surrounding population to draw from in their absence.

4.0
Conclusion

Survey results from the Northern Ontario Tourism Development and Recovery Strategy in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic study emphasize the strengths of Northern Ontario's tourism industry, particularly those connected to the natural environment and outdoor recreation across all seasons. The pandemic, however, has hit the industry hard, not because of high local case numbers of COVID-19 (though at the time of writing, COVID-19 infections are climbing throughout the region well beyond the points they attained during the data collection phase of this study). Rather the greatest impacts come from the impacts on the origin locations of many habitual visitors to the region and related restrictions, such as the closure of the U.S./Canada border.

Still, some domestic travellers were able to venture to Northern Ontario for the first time (at least as a holiday destination). 44% of new visitors in the past year were motivated to come to Northern Ontario due to various pandemic restrictions and nearly 90% who changed their plans or original destination did so as a result of the pandemic. These visitors were largely attracted by the same assets that were most influential for repeat visitors, namely "location, natural environment, or scenery." These visitors were also more likely to take part in more nascent tourist activities, such as cycling, than in activities that are the traditional strength of Northern Ontario tourism, such as fishing and hunting.

New visitors were also somewhat more likely than repeat visitors to express interest in more train (40%) and air travel (20%) options to the region. One respondent noted "Flying to the Sault is critical to me since I don't own a car. [I] don't need a car in Toronto."

Average scores between new and repeat visitors were relatively consistent, with the largest difference being a 1.3 variance between the average score repeat visitors gave to the quality of camping amenities (8.6) versus that given by new visitors (7.3). Repeat visitors were also more likely to give higher scores for fishing or angling (8.8 compared to 8) and activities for children (6.5 compared to 5.8), while new visitors offered higher scores for motor-vehicle touring (7.6 compared to 6.7) and cycling trails and routes (7.6 compared to 6.8), as well as urban amenities (5.9 compared to 5.3). While these differences are modest, they may shed some light into changes that have occurred with various segments of the tourism landscape compared to entrenched perceptions, such as recent investments that have been made in cycling infrastructure or touring routes, such as the Group of Seven tour route.

Though new visitors were not as likely as repeat visitors to recommend Northern Ontario as a travel destination to others, when asked if their experience in the past year made them more or less likely to travel to the region in the future, 42.1% indicated their experience made them more likely to return and the same percentage indicated it made no change in likelihood of return. This bodes well for the region to be able to retain a notable portion of the new markets it attracted and make further inroads among domestic travellers.

4.1 Improving the Visitor Experience

The vast majority of participants who responded to the visitors survey indicated that they had no unmet expectations (47.2%) or that what was missing was a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions (39.7%). Other common themes tied to new or greater variety of amenities included more water-based activities and related rentals or service (e.g., parasailing, pontoon boat rentals, SeaDoo rentals, boat tours, fishing guide), and longer seasons for amenities that are seasonally limited. New visitors were more likely to highlight a desire for better quality and variety of restaurants or dining experiences and a greater variety of tourism products.

Both visitors and operators emphasized the need for more marketing and transportation infrastructure. However, there was also a tension expressed between protecting the natural beauty and isolation of the region, versus increasing awareness of Northern Ontario as a destination. One respondent noted: "I would have liked the assurance that the next time I go to Northern Ontario, the natural areas, scenic vistas will be protected. I have this ongoing feeling that Northern Ontario will be unsustainably like southern Ontario has." Conversely others highlighted the need for additional infrastructure to accommodate more visitors, with comments including "More cabin rental options along Superior shores," "More campgrounds," and "More scenic lookouts, better access to natural attractions, better signage, better advertising in Ontario."

There was also considerable interest expressed in Indigenous and Francophone tourism, even though these were not the leading reasons for most travellers to come to the region.

Overall, however, most of those who make the trip to Northern Ontario (or residents who stay for their holidays) express high levels of satisfaction with their experiences.

4.2 Supporting Tourism Operators to Grow the Industry

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a debilitating impact on the industry, with over half of reporting operators indicating that they experienced a decline in revenue of more than 50%. Visitations also plummeted, declining on average among the respondents between 50-93% from the previous year, depending on the season.

Consequently, the greatest area of need identified by operators to grow the industry included increased access to grants and subsidies. One respondent noted "We require grants to help businesses not loans we can not pay back."

The next most common themes that were identified that would improve the tourism experience in the region included: upgrades to facilities or equipment; greater access to qualified or capable workforce; improved road conditions; and other improvements to transportation infrastructure. Many of these themes reiterate what has been expressed by visitors.

Though business or management training was not a high priority for most respondents, those for whom it was relevant noted the greatest needs related to succession planning and marketing your business or organization.

Though the industry has been devastated, there is rich potential for the tourism industry to drive the regional recovery should the pandemic abate. This is, however, conditional on the right investments being made to seize on new markets and opportunities that emerge in the pandemic's wake. As one participant demanded: "Help us make us better than we were before."

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