



Voyageur Canoe Experience

Storytelling at Thousand Islands National Park

2018/19 Partnership Fund Success Story

1. How is Parks Canada expanding their offerings to meet the demands of a changing consumer market?

Parks Canada has been working to create new opportunities at our National Parks and National Historic Sites that appeal more to the changing market and new visitors we are seeing. For the past several years, Parks Canada sites across the country have been implementing changes that make camping more comfortable which appeals to both urban and new Canadian visitors as well as international visitors and visitors with young families. Our new camping offers, including equipped camping, diversified accommodations (oTENTiks, cabins, micro-cubes etc.), and a national Learn to Camp program.

At TINP, we have seen an increase over the past few years in visitors from urban centers (Toronto/Ottawa/Montreal), as well as more international travelers. Many visitors are looking for new, unique experiences as well as safe, accessible ways to experience the park.

We also recognise the growing demand and interest in Indigenous tourism in Canada and feel that Parks Canada is in a unique place to provide venues and support for facilitating these experiences.

2. How did you determine that a Voyageur Canoe Experience was the product you wanted to introduce to the park offering?

Thousand Islands National Park has identified a visitor demand for increased opportunities to access the St. Lawrence River and park islands among users who do not have access to a boat. The main questions we are asked EVERY DAY at our visitor centre are “how do we get to the islands” and “where are the boat tours”. We work with partners such as local water taxis, marinas and kayak outfitters to help visitors get to our islands, but there are currently few options for visitors who would like a short, personalized guided tour in this area of the Thousand Islands. We saw a great opportunity to launch a tour from the Mallorytown Landing Visitor Centre location where there was existing demand and potential to reach over 40,000 tourism guests during our operating season.

The park wanted to have a river-based offer that was accessible for people of all ages and that provided a venue for visitors to have an engaging river experience that allowed them to get close to nature and to be immersed in the stories from this region. We really liked the fact that the Voyageur Canoe was very accessible, stable, and able to accommodate a wide variety of visitors.

Given the rich Indigenous culture in the region, the lack of existing Indigenous tourism experiences, and Parks Canada's commitment to Indigenous reconciliation and promotion of Indigenous voices in the telling of our history and stories, we saw this program as a unique opportunity to provide Indigenous programming unique to this region. Considering the strong connection between the canoe and the Indigenous peoples in this area AND the history of early European exploration via the Voyageur Canoe, we saw an amazing opportunity to tell the story of the Thousand Islands region from this perspective.

3. What makes this Canoe ride an “authentic experience”?

We think there are a few ways that this tour provides an “authentic experience”. First of all, the replica Voyageur Canoe is designed to look very similar to the birtch bark canoes built by the early European explorers and based on the design of authentic Indigenous birtch bark canoes used in this area. The canoes are guided by interpreters (gouvernail) from the Rideau Roundtable in traditional `voyageur`` clothing. Their many years of guiding canoes and knowledge of the stories of the Voyageur experience added to the authenticity of the program.

We wanted to also create an authentic Indigenous experience and we knew that this would be a wonderful opportunity to expand on our already very good relations with the Mohawk community of Akwesasne. TINP has been building a unique partnership with this community for over 10 years now and we consult and work together on many different aspects of park management. We were fortunate to have an Indigenous Liason Officer working with us at the park this year who was born and raised in Akwesasne. Arihhonni David (Honni) is also an excellent interpreter and storyteller so he was the ideal person to work with to develop this new program. His knowledge of the Haudenosaunee culture as well as the indigenous history of the area was a key aspect of the program's authenticity. We worked together with Honni as well as Anishnaabe consultants and trainers from Indigenous Experiences Canada to train our staff and to develop and deliver the tours.

Finally, we think that there was a great synergy in the combination of the indigenous experience along with the voyageur experience. One of our first tours took place during our Canada Day event when we typically have quite high visitation. We had an amazing group of 18 people in the canoe ranging in age from 2-82 – folks that were from our local communities as well as new Canadian visitors from Ottawa, Brockville and Toronto and international guests from Germany and England. We were paddling the historic St. Lawrence River in the iconic Thousand Islands in a traditional Canadian canoe. We heard stories that connected the past to the present from the perspective of the European settlers and the Haudenosaunee along the shores of the oldest Canadian national park east of the Rocky Mountains. To top it off, we saw Canada geese, Loons and a Beaver lodge. One of our paddlers commented that this was the ultimate Canada Day experience and we thought that it was pretty close!



4. What challenges and opportunities came from this initiative?

Challenges:

Weather – High water levels led to closure of docks and boat launch needed for canoe launch area. Cancellation of program due to rain and wind.

Promotions- our Promotions Officer was on leave this summer and so we scrambled a bit to promote the program on our own. We had great help from RTO9 as well as our local tourism partners on both sides of the border.

We planned the canoe tours to be part of already scheduled special events (Canada Day and Parks Day). Both were very busy weekends for us at the park so this certainly worked in our favor for walk-up bookings. Many visitors came for the main events and then realised the canoe tours were available and booked on the same day. One of the challenges to having the events on these days was that there were many competing offers and events in surrounding communities.

Challenge with inexperienced and very young (under 10yrs.) paddlers – often we needed to cut the interpretation a bit to focus on actually helping to paddle the canoe. Suggestion that we may have different tours that would be specifically for younger families and/or less experienced paddlers.

We were reliant on availability of Rideau Roundtable canoes and staff to plan our events. Some of the dates we wanted were not available.

Availability of indigenous interpreters: We were hoping to have additional indigenous interpreters from the Native North American Traveling College (Akwesasne) so that we could have an indigenous interp in each of the 2 canoes. Unfortunately, they had already been booked for Canada Day and were unable to attend our Parks Day event due to an internal scheduling conflict. This meant we were relying heavily on Honni for our authentic storytelling experience. This became tiring for him doing back-to-back tours for 6 consecutive hours on very hot and humid summer days.

4. What challenges and opportunities came from this initiative? (con't)

Opportunities:

It's often a challenge for us to find interpreters from Akwesasne due to the distance (over an hour commute). Now that we see the demand for more indigenous programming, we think this challenge could become a great opportunity to find creative ways to hire additional indigenous interpreters at the park. One thing we have discussed is the sharing of summer students between organizations in Akwesasne (such as the NNATC, museum, MCA) and TINP. If staff could come to the park only a few days a week and work from their home community on the other days it would make the offer more amenable. This would also be a great opportunity to improve connections with the Mohawks of Akwesasne and open doors for TINP to share training and resources with organizations in Akwesasne as well. We're going to continue to work on these ideas over the winter.

We also see an increasing opportunity to work with Indigenous Experiences Canada to find interpreters who are Anishnaabe who may be interested in working at the park. This would add another layer of authenticity to the program as this region is the traditional land of both the Haudenosaunee and Mississauga Anishnaabe.

We think there is a real opportunity to get this program running on a regular schedule and be able to attract more group tours via the travel trade shows and also to appeal to visitors planning their trip experiences in advance. Advanced bookings for full tours would make the offer more cost-effective and easier for staff to plan.

Opportunity to connect with a new Parks Canada initiative called "Stories of Canada" which is helping to develop authentic Indigenous experiences at our sites and to market them through national and international travel trade. *Funding dependant*

Opportunity to provide a river experience for our visitors who would not otherwise have a way to get out on the water from this location.

5. Did you meet your goals?

Our goal was the following:

With Indigenous and regional partners, we will develop a unique voyageur canoe experience that will connect visitors with the natural and cultural history of the park from the perspective of local and indigenous storytellers and interpreters. The original plan was to offer the tour as part of 4 separate enhanced special events and assess its success and potential to be part of our regular offer.

We feel quite confident that we developed a unique new experience for Thousand Islands National Park. The feedback we received from the programs was very positive and many visitors have been asking if and when the Voyageur Canoe program will be offered again. Demand for the program was very high on the days it was offered and we were not able to accommodate all the visitors who wanted to participate. We have a list of over 50 names that requested for us to notify them the next time we offer the program.

While inclement weather and high water levels prohibited us from offering the program as part of our National Indigenous People`s Day celebrations in June, we were able to re-adjust our tour schedules for our other event days which enabled us to deliver the program to over 400 people over the summer season at both TINP and Fort Wellington NHS in Prescott.

We were pleased to be able to offer the program to some of our partners here at RTO9, senior staff from Parks Canada, local environmental NGOs, Social media influencers and various other tourism partners in the region. On Parks Day, we hosted a visiting international delegation that included the head of Water Practice for WWF China as well as several other professors from Tongji and Queens Universities who are working with WWF Shanghai to create of similar conservation areas for the Yangtze River.

Most of all we feel this was a great project to advance reconciliation with our Indigenous partners – the Mohawks of Akwesasne. Opportunities to learn from each other and work collaboratively strengthens our partnership and paves the way for new programs that will help to promote Indigenous voices in the telling of our history and stories.

