

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY FOR ATLANTIC TOURISM

February 25, 2021

Key Observations

- COVID-19 has created pent-up demand for travel experiences. Consequently, destinations must be prepared to welcome back visitors when it is safe to do so. However, for this to occur, public health and elected officials must communicate and work with tourism stakeholders in advance. Proactive communication between public health officials, elected officials and tourism stakeholders on policy options related to public health restrictions such as the 14-day quarantine, vaccination timelines and the potential for a “vaccine passport” will ensure a more robust recovery.
- Federal and provincial governments have significant roles to play in driving recovery of the tourism sector. This may include investing in destination marketing, encouraging the development of tourism master plans, offering financial support to tourism providers and subsidizing wages for youth employed in tourism.
- Destinations must take a “community first” approach to tourism. Specifically, they must ensure the benefits of tourism are felt across the region and that actions are taken to mitigate the negative externalities of tourism. This is particularly important as destinations look at strategies to “build back better”. Such strategies may include taking action to enhance diversity and inclusion within the tourist economy, developing tourist infrastructure with both tourists and local people in mind, promoting rural tourism and fostering collaboration between government, public health and the tourism sector.

Purpose of the Note

On February 25, 2021, the MacEachen Institute hosted a panel of speakers to discuss public policy related to tourism recovery and COVID-19. This was the second of a four-part speaker series aimed at supporting public policy discussion leading up to the Nova Scotia provincial election.

Speakers

Ross Jefferson (President and CEO of Discover Halifax), **Melissa Cherry** (Chief Operating Officer at Destinations International), **Michele McKenzie** (corporate director and business advisor; founder of McKenzie Business Strategies) and **Tom Baum** (Professor of Tourism Employment in the Department of Work, Employment and Organisation at the University of Strathclyde). The panel was moderated by **Kevin Quigley** (Scholarly Director of the MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance).

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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Event Abstract

The tourism sector contributes significantly to the Nova Scotian economy, employing 10.8% of the working population and generating \$2.64 billion in revenue in 2019. COVID-19, however, has devastated the tourism sector, with annual accommodations sales down 55% as of October 2020 and the events industry laying off 75% of its employees due to event cancellations and revenue losses.

A faltering tourism economy can have a wide-ranging impact. Tourism employs people from many groups in society, including equity-deserving populations, immigrants, those without a high school diploma and workers under the age of 25. Rural communities have also felt the impact; tourism is an important revenue source where alternatives are limited. With these impacts and the pandemic's uncertainty, what can the government do to support this strategic sector for our region in the post-pandemic recovery?

Speaker Observations

Ross Jefferson

- Establishing a relationship between the tourism sector and public health is essential for a strong recovery. Even if a firm date for reopening is not available, stronger overall communication about items such as vaccine roll-out and travel restrictions will allow business operators to anticipate openings and make their own decisions about when to hire back staff.
- The visitor experience affects a range of sectors and is served by a complex supply chain of actors. Due to COVID-19, the tourism sector has experienced widespread layoffs and many individuals previously employed in tourism have found work elsewhere. Consequently, the tourism workforce is not on standby. Business start-up will require considerable planning and will therefore benefit from advanced notice.
- Visiting family and friends makes up half of all travel. Travel, therefore, is not just a selfish pursuit. Facilitating safe travel supports other health outcomes, such as mental health. Because COVID-19 is unlikely to disappear, the long-term focus should be on total harm reduction, not just COVID-19 harm reduction.

Melissa Cherry

- As destinations look at recovery strategies, there is a need for a strategic alliance among civic leaders, tourism stakeholders and elected officials. Because destinations will be forced to compete for a share of the tourism market, these players must strategically align themselves to send a clear and consistent message to potential visitors.
- Atlantic Canada is well positioned to make a strong recovery. New policy documents, such as the Federal Tourism Growth Strategy (2019) and the Halifax Regional Integrated Master Plan (2021) present opportunities for a more inclusive, community-first tourist economy.

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- There is an opportunity for the tourism sector to integrate with local employment agencies, connect with post-secondary institutions, and develop partnerships with the public school system to ensure the entire region shares in the benefits the tourism sector brings. Specific attention should be given to enhancing diversity and promoting equity within the tourism sector.

Michele McKenzie

- In 2020, Atlantic Canada's tourism sector was able to pivot towards the local tourism market. While this provided some relief in the short term, the local market is not enough to sustain the tourism industry over the long term.
- International travel is an important component of Atlantic Canada's tourist economy. Air travel, however, has been decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic and will take several years to recover. Governments have a role to play in instilling public confidence in the travel industry.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the demand for rural travel experiences. This presents an opportunity to further develop rural tourism in Nova Scotia in a socially and environmentally responsible way. Tourism recovery must be done in a manner that serves both local communities and the tourism market.

Tom Baum

- Employment in the tourism sector has been particularly impacted by COVID-19. Frontline workers in both the formal and informal economy have not only lost wages and jobs but have also been disproportionately exposed to COVID-19. Tourism recovery efforts must focus not only on enhancing the visitor experience, but also ensuring those employed in the tourism sector feel safe, have access to educational opportunities and are adequately compensated.
- As the sector recovers, sustainable tourism must be a priority. Sustainable tourism initiatives, however, must give equal weight to both environmental and social concerns. This means developing an industry where consumers appreciate the value of their experience and do not default to the least expensive option.

Conclusion

While local tourism propped up Atlantic Canada's tourism sector in Summer 2020, high-value international and domestic travel is needed to sustain the tourism industry in the long term. As vaccination rates increase and travel restrictions are lifted, there is an opportunity for the tourism sector to rebound. However, what recovery looks like is dependent on the extent to which elected officials, public health leaders and tourism stakeholders collaborate and plan for an equitable tourism economy.

More from the MacEachen Institute

The Institute is working to create resources and policy discussions focussed on the COVID-19 crisis. These include briefing notes like this one as well as panel discussions, videos and media commentary. You can find [all resources related to COVID-19 on our website](#).

Other briefing notes in this series

- [Falling Through the Cracks: Long-Term Care and COVID-19](#)
- [Climate Adaptation in Nova Scotia: Overblown or Underwater?](#)
- Race and Party Platforms in the Coming Nova Scotia Election

Other MacEachen Institute briefing notes

- [Observations from Toronto's Tourism Recovery Post-SARS in 2003](#)
- [Foot and Mouth Disease in the U.K. in 2001: Observations for Policy-Makers and the Rural Tourism Sector in the age of COVID-19](#)
- [Climate Risk Governance in light of the COVID-19 Crisis](#)
- [Labour Issues and COVID-19](#)
- [Quarantine and COVID-19](#)
- [People with Disabilities and COVID-19](#)
- [Nova Scotia Power and COVID-19](#)
- [Health Care Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic](#)
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- [Social Justice Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic](#)
- [Environmental Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic](#)
- [COVID-19: Leaders from the Health Community Identify Lessons from the First Wave and Concerns for the Second](#)
- [Lessons Learned from the First Wave or Lessons Merely Identified? Improving Nova Scotia and New Brunswick's health system for the second wave of COVID-19 and beyond](#)