

## **Executive Summary**

### **Tourism Kelowna – Final Report**

#### **1.1 Introduction:**

The objective of this research is to consider the relationship between continued tourism growth and the environment within the context of climate disasters. It also interrogates how communities respond to the demands for growth and the impacts of climate change disaster with resiliency strategies. The approach considers resiliency and regenerative tourism models as a basis for sustainable community development in the City of Kelowna in British Columbia, Canada. Kelowna is a mid-sized city with a long history of tourism where many locals rely on the industry for their livelihood. The project partnered with Tourism Kelowna through a Mitacs Accelerate internship. Recently the organization has proposed a destination development that has four main strategic goals: seasonality, destination management, internal excellence, and external engagement. Under the second goal of destination management, the purpose is to “foster the sustainable growth of the destination.” This goal served as the focus of the research and the project aims to create deliverable strategies to implement this goal. However, the original timeline for the project encountered unforeseen delays and challenges due to the 2023 McDougall Creek forest fire that occurred in Kelowna last summer from August 15 to September 21. The fire itself and its aftermath created challenges for the local tourism industry and the progression of the research which resulted in a re-evaluation of the goals of the project creating an opportunity to focus on the imminent need for an understanding of tourism resilience and regeneration within the study area. My supervisor, myself and Tourism Kelowna decided that for a project that aims to research regenerative tourism strategies in Kelowna, BC, it would be irresponsible to ignore the importance of incorporating recovery and resilience strategies into the project.

#### **1.2 Literature review:**

The tourism industry relies heavily on a pristine, healthy and livable environment to thrive off of. This research showcases the vulnerability that this relationship inevitably produces as the tourism industry actively degrades the environment that it is reliant on. While this relationship has been researched for many years, the issues remain. As early as 1974, Plog wrote that “tourism contains the seeds of its own destruction with the ability to destroy the very environmental attraction which visitors come to a location to experience” (Plog, 1974). The industry continues to exploit the natural environment for financial profit and many environmental issues persist and are increasingly prevalent (Hussain, 2021).

Considering this vulnerability the research reveals that a paradigm shift towards a more sustainable and regenerative tourism industry is critical. This is supported through destination-specific regenerative tourism models that reduce the vulnerability of the destination while increasing environmental sustainability (Pollock, 2019).

As climate change continues to impact destinations resiliency has become increasingly important to consider for tourism businesses. Few businesses can effectively respond to disaster while maintaining sustainable practices, as initial recovery efforts often overshadow sustainability initiatives (Espiner et al., 2017). Resiliency strategies will vary across businesses and should be adapted to fit varying needs however the overall importance of the concept and its application does not change (Awedyk & Niezgodna, 2018).

Tourism in the face of climate disasters poses a variety of vulnerabilities and risks (Bahadur et al., 2010). This is the case for the industry in Kelowna, BC, as many businesses are focused on

the day-to-day operations as a means of economic profit due to slim operating times and profit margins (Cradock-Henry & Fountain, 2020).

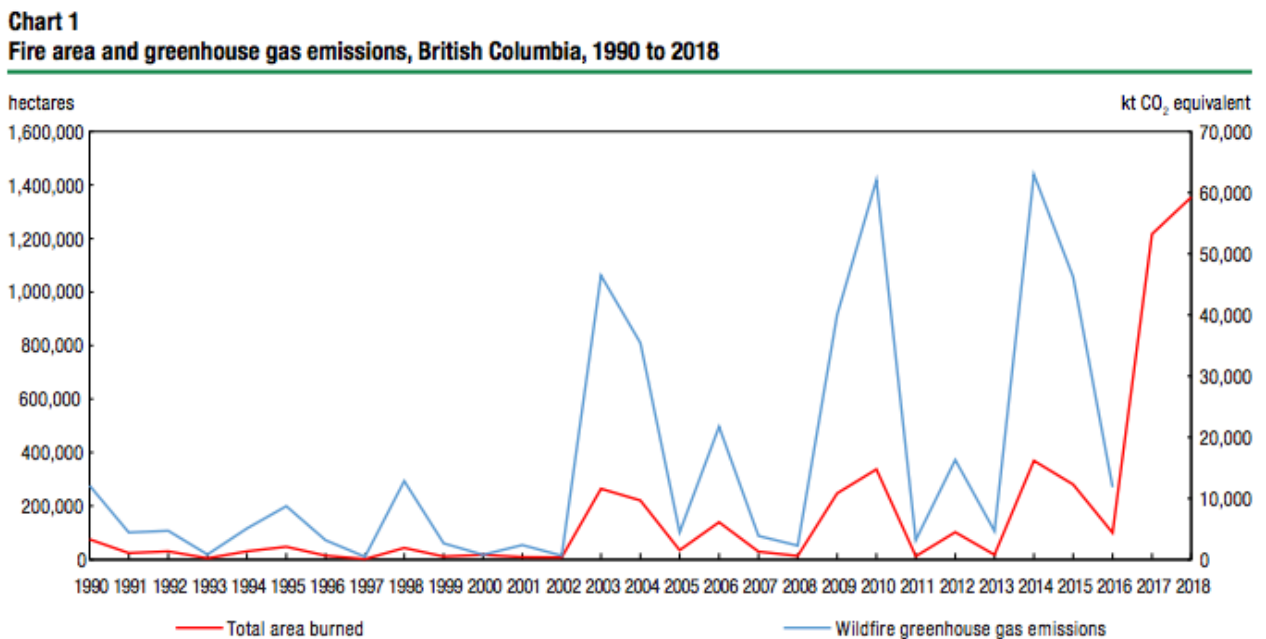
Disasters are inevitable and have the potential to create long-term impacts. Recovery strategies aim to respond to a disturbance in an attempt to lessen the impact of a disaster. Media coverage during and after a disaster significantly influences destination recovery. Real-time footage and appropriate information are essential to restore confidence and positive media can help to rebuild a destination's image (Fountain & Cradock-Henry, 2019).

Adaptation strategies regarding the recovery phase include working with local authorities and ensuring effective communication between emergency management and tourism organizations. It is vital for the community to work cohesively and have continuous communication during and after a climate disaster (Becken, 2013; Sharma & Tham, 2023).

Regeneration is a critical phase following a climate disaster that is essential for fostering a more resilient and sustainable destination. A resilient system is one of anti-fragility where it emphasizes recovery and adaptation rather than resisting shocks and disturbances. Whether the community has the ability to return to normal or not, there is an opportunity to re-invent how the system operates (Saarinen & Gill, 2019; Cradock-Henry et al., 2018). See figures below regarding various trends in climate disaster prevalence in Canada and their subsequent impacts.

**Figure 1**

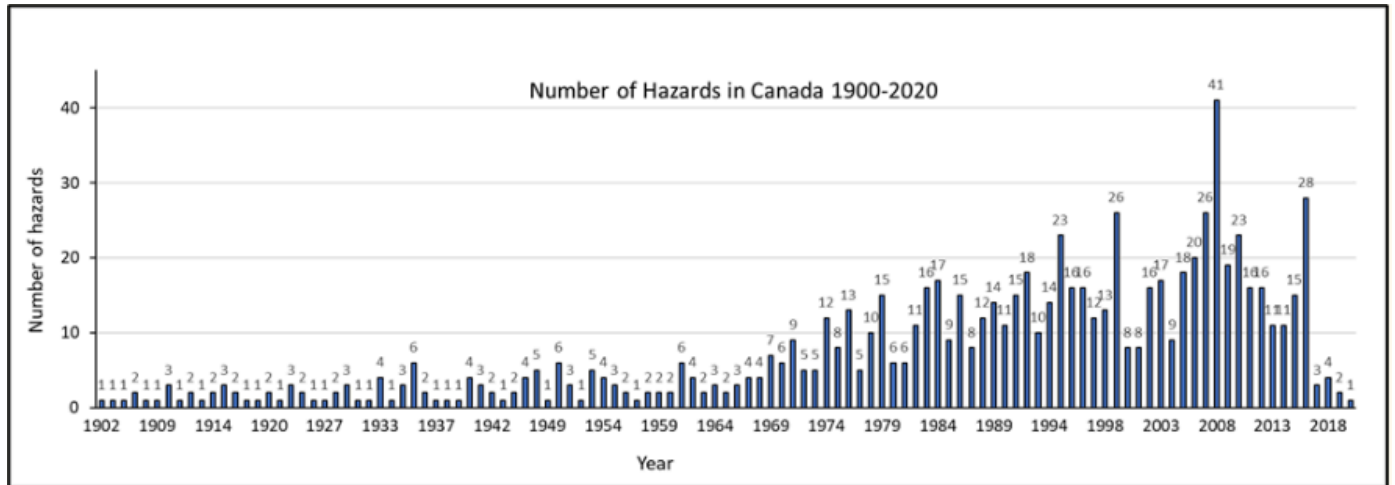
Graph illustrating the increase in hectares burned in British Columbia and the relationship between fire area burned and greenhouse gas emissions produced.



Note. Statistics Canada. "Fire Area and Greenhouse Gas Emissions, British Columbia, 1990 to 2018," *Statistics Canada*, 2019, [www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/16-508-x/16-508-x2019002-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/16-508-x/16-508-x2019002-eng.htm).

**Figure 2**

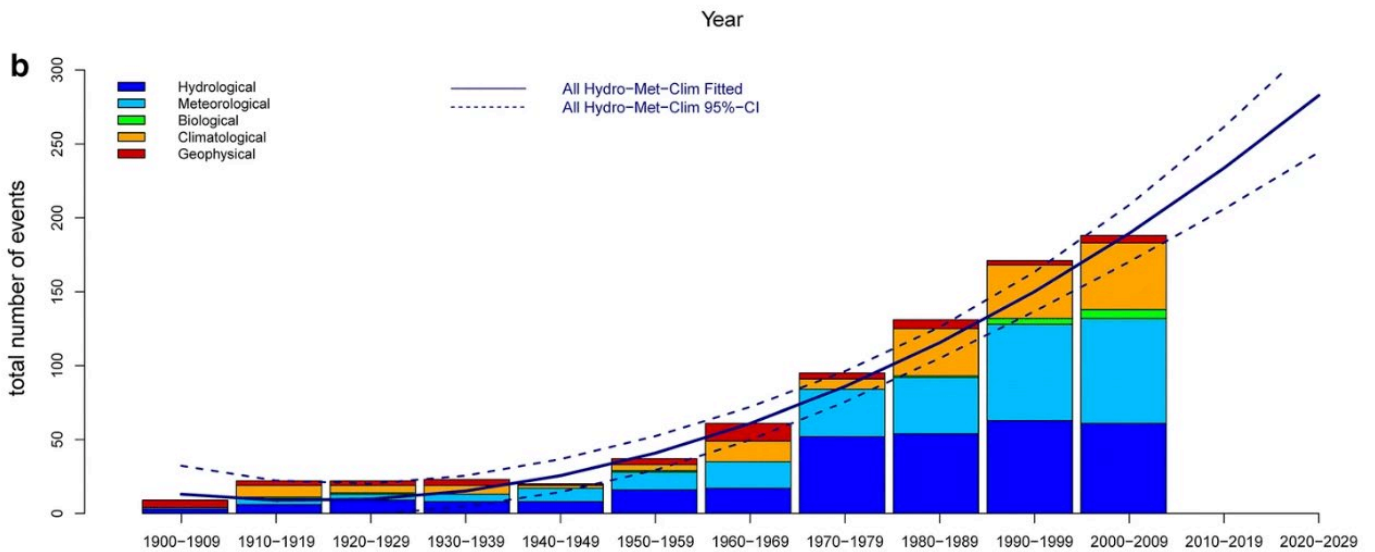
Graph displaying number of hazards occurring in Canada over a 30-year period between 1900 to 2020



Note. Agrawal, Nirupama, et al. “Number of Natural Hazards in Canada between 1900 and 2020,” *Canadian Journal of Emergency Management*, 2021, [cdnjem.ca/v1n2i/disaster-risk/](http://cdnjem.ca/v1n2i/disaster-risk/).

**Figure 3**

Graph illustrating the increase in frequency of natural disaster in Canada by classification



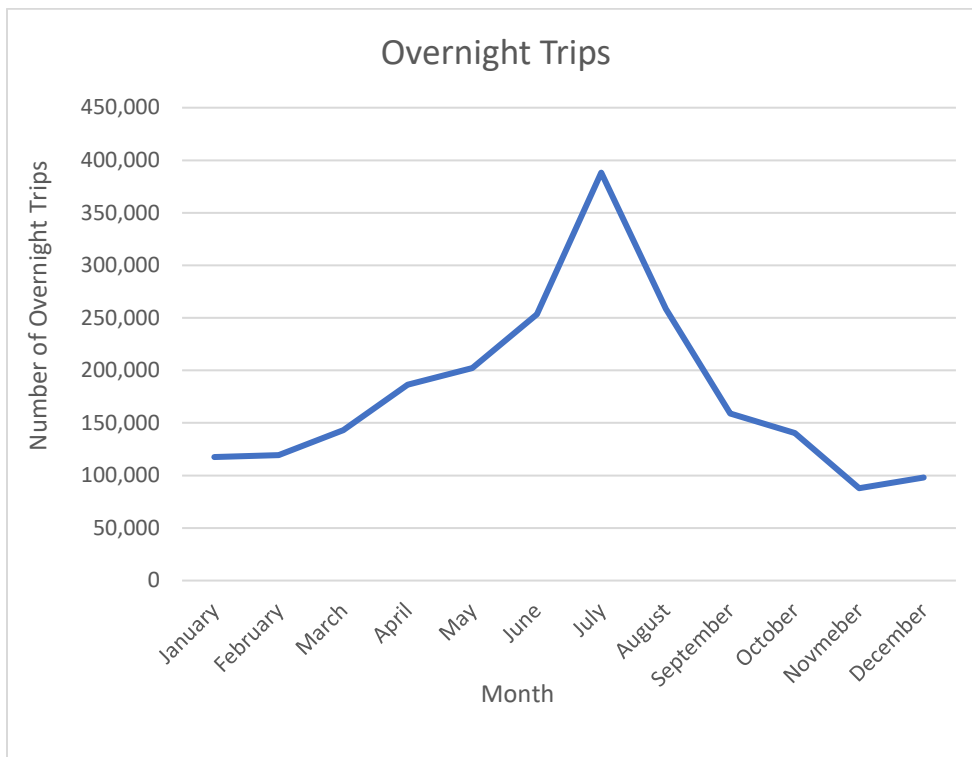
Note. Godsoe, M., et al. “Natural Hazard Frequency by Decade and Hazard Subgroup in Canada (1900–2030),” *Natural Hazards* (2019) 98:293–317, 3 Apr. 2019, [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11069-019-03599-z#Fig1](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11069-019-03599-z#Fig1).

### 1.3 The Study Area:

The choice of site for this research project is Kelowna, BC (see *figure 1*) due to the local economy's reliance on tourism-based revenue as well as the local tourism industry's reliance on the environment. Additionally, the McDougall Creek forest fire directly affected the area, impacting the environment, and the local tourism industry (see *figure 2*). This is especially significant as the fire burned during the city's busiest tourist season from August 15, 2023, to September 21, 2023 (Government of British Columbia, 2023). Kelowna is a mid-sized city that markets itself as a four-season destination having outdoor activities year-round. Kelowna and the Central Okanagan generated over \$1 billion Canadian dollars to GDP in 2018/2019 from tourism (Tourism Kelowna, 2022). Based on the most recent tourism information available for 2021, the majority of the top reasons for visiting Kelowna all rely on some aspect of the environment. These include sightseeing, winery touring, water-based recreation, beaches, outdoor activities, farm to table food experiences, events, agricultural experiences, and golf (Tourism Kelowna, 2022). All of these activities not only expect a pristine environment but also demand and put stress on local resources such as land, energy and water. Some of the major environmental threats that Kelowna is facing due to tourism include, but are not limited to, biodiversity loss, lake pollution, energy usage, land conversion (Sunlu, 2013) and finally climate disasters (such as the McDougall Creek forest fire). Considering the literature of how this industry relies on the condition of the environment, Kelowna, BC, will provide the appropriate choice of site to conduct research regarding resiliency strategies and the relationship between destination development and environmental sustainability. See figures below representing visitor trends in Kelowna, BC.

**Figure 1**

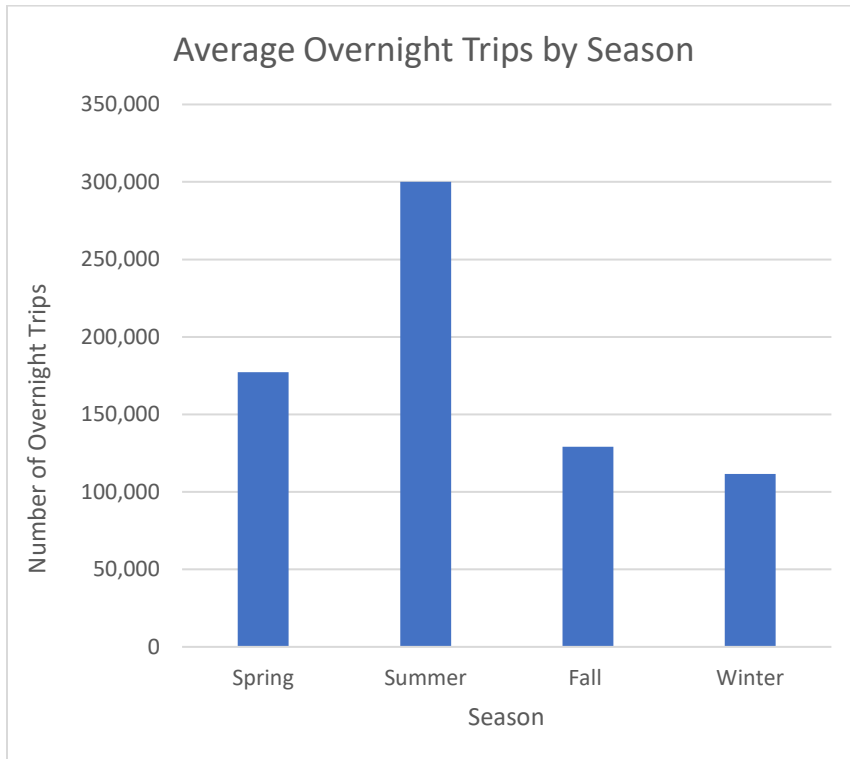
Line graph representing trend in overnight trips



Note. The information used in this graph represents the trend in overnight trips across 12 months of the year showing increases and decreases per month. Data sourced from Tourism Kelowna, (2024)

**Figure 2**

Bar graph representing average overnight trips per season



Note. Averages were calculated in three month increments per season. The information used in this graph represent the trend in seasonality of the destination. Data sourced from Tourism Kelowna, (2024)

#### 1.4 Methodology:

Using a qualitative case study approach within Kelowna, BC, that includes semi-structured interviews and community-engaged research, the project will then answer a series of research questions under the framework of regenerative tourism and resiliency: 1) Can tourism destination development and environmental sustainability coexist in the context of Kelowna, BC?; 2) Can community-engaged tourism development contribute to both resiliency strategies and regenerative tourism strategies? 3) Can recovery and resiliency strategies implemented at the local level lead to a pathway for regeneration? 4) How can community engagement at the local level support community recovery and resiliency against future climate disasters? These research questions will not only help Tourism Kelowna in its implementation of its destination development plan, but will simultaneously create destination specific resiliency strategies.

This multi-method research strategy was designed to progress in multiple phases. During the first phases an empirical theoretical approach was adopted in order to gather context in the study area and in the field of research (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). During the first phase an extensive literature review on selected topics of tourism, sustainability, regeneration, recovery and resiliency will be conducted. The last phases involve the primary research portion of this project which will adopt a humanist theoretical approach that values the knowledge and expertise of individuals (Aitken & Valentine, 2015). This entails doing semi-structured interviews with key informants through a community engaged research process. The information collected from these participants will be used to uncover what recovery and resiliency strategies are best suited for the destination considering the local environment and how these strategies can be pathways to regenerative tourism implementation.

## 1.5 Results:

Nine interviews were conducted with key informants in the tourism industry. These participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique which entailed choosing participants due to their expertise and experience in the field of research. Each key informant had a different role in the tourism industry and worked for different organizations. All of the participants transcripts were organized and coded using a qualitative data analysis software called NVivo. 34 distinct codes were identified when processing the nine transcripts. While some codes were predetermined from the literature review conducted in phase one, other codes arose from the dissemination of the transcripts. These codes were then sorted and organized into 8 themes that were produced from the interview transcripts.

The themes include: 1) The impacts of Climate Change on Tourism; 2) Factors that Increase Vulnerability; 3) Navigating Destination Reputation Post Climate Disaster; 4) Community Responses to Disaster; 5) Short-term Recovery Strategies; 6) Long-term Resiliency and Adaptation Strategies; 7) Sustainability and Regenerative Tourism Strategies; 8) Barriers and Limitations to Resiliency and Sustainability.

These themes can be further organized regarding the emergency management toolkit associated with this document. These broader themes are: 1) What makes a business vulnerable; 2) Short term recovery tools; 3) Medium term resiliency tools; and 4) Long term sustainability and regenerative strategies.

### 1. What Makes a Business Vulnerable

#### Environmental Factors

*“A shifting climate is impacting the tourism industry in Kelowna. And I don't want to talk about any specific disaster, but rather look at it from the big picture, because it doesn't matter if it's a forest fire. Heat, wave, cold, snap. The common thread across all of these disasters is that it prevents tourism businesses from operating, or it is a deterrent from visitors coming to a destination.” – Key Informant #9*

The changing climate is causing an increase in climate disasters and in turn negatively impacting the tourism industry in Kelowna, BC. One of the main concerns was the disruption that a climate disaster causes. While a disaster may only last for 2 weeks the repercussions extend far beyond that point. It causes financial hardships, forcing businesses to make budget cuts impacting their services and activities provided or laying off staff. It also causes visitor uncertainty.

Tourism operators will have fewer days to generate revenue which adds to their challenges as a business as there are added stressors on top of generating revenue to keep their doors open and their staff paid. Not only are visitors threatened with natural disaster when coming to a destination that has succumbed to the effects of climate change, but now visitors are also threatened by government closures. This affects tourism businesses ability to operate and generate revenue but simultaneously it impacts visitors ability to create a positive tourism experience and participate in the visitor economy. One key informant describes this phenomena as multi-pronged considering the scope of impact that a natural disaster can have.

## Economic Factors

As Cradock-Henry and Fountain mentioned, small to medium sized tourism destinations are more vulnerable compared to larger destinations (Cradock-Henry & Fountain, 2020). Some of the interview responses help to explain this claim. Around 80-90% of the businesses in Kelowna operate at a small capacity and have anywhere from two to ten employees. This small size of business places them in a more vulnerable spot than larger businesses simply due to the lack of resources available. This may be in terms of number of employees or lack of funding to access resources when needed. This also increases their lack of preparedness.

The interviews also revealed that many businesses either cannot access insurance coverage for their business due to cost or lack of manpower to apply for insurance. Another factor that increases vulnerability are businesses slim operating window and high dependence on the natural environment simultaneously.

Foreign labor may also decide to no longer come to a destination that has shown a pattern of natural disaster during the tourist season as the perceived risk is too high.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created long-lasting vulnerability within businesses. The unpredictability of the pandemic saw great economic loss and certain business closures as there was little to no warning of the effects that the pandemic would have on visitor numbers. Some businesses received loans from the government and had to pay these loans back in recent years or this past year. This caused more economic loss when these loans were being paid off and the McDougall Creek forest fire occurred during peak tourism season. Businesses found themselves struggling to pay back loans and make up business revenue with a lack of visitors in the region.

## Social Factors

A business that is less connected to their community will be more vulnerable. They have less resources to access and cannot rely on other community members for support. Their efforts in restoring the visitor economy would be individual rather than community led. There is a lack of resources and leverage when a challenge is not shared between the community. These factors of vulnerability are important to consider and understand when addressing strategies to increase resiliency and sustainability within the tourism industry.

Consumer uncertainty is also affecting the industry as there is a decrease in confidence in the destination. This may reduce the number of visitors going to a destination and may impact the destinations reputation. Consumer confidence dropping due to an increase in perceived risk is a major contributor to a decrease in visitor numbers during and after a climate disaster. Another issue surrounding consumer confidence involves visitors experiencing poor weather and environmental conditions during a trip and has long-lasting consequences on their perception of the destination and the likelihood of their return.

## 2. Short Term Recovery Tools

### Environmental

*“It's reaching them on a personal level as a community or regional destination marketing and management organization with up to date, real time information on what's actually happening on the ground and what they might experience in a destination. So, it's there's that personal touch that's needed. Because that's where your credibility is.” – Key informant #2*

Some recovery initiatives that the DMO's in the Okanagan have implemented are a means to control the messaging such as having cameras in the community that are live to show what the weather and environmental conditions are on a day to day basis 24 hours a day. Tourism Kelowna has a camera outside of the visitor center that runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week so that visitors can be informed about what the conditions are at an exact time. This camera creates a level of credibility with the destination management organization as well as the destination itself. Visitors are able to see for themselves what the conditions are like without having to be there physically or rely on previous media stories that may no longer be accurate to the current conditions. Advocating visitors to refer to these is an important tool.

### Economic

Participants outlined the importance of targeting domestic and regional markets. This will provide a better likelihood of booking and interaction with the destination rather than targeting international markets where it is more expensive and time consuming to travel to the destination.

This marketing can also target the shoulder seasons as a potential time for visitors to come to a destination. If a disaster has occurred during the peak visitor season, DMO's can also use their marketing budget and efforts to promote other seasons and events occurring at different times of the year. If more tourists come during the shoulder seasons rather than the short summer peak season, the tourism industry overtime will become less volatile and more reliable to the business owners and operators.

Lastly it is important to consider the financial support through the form of grants and bursaries that are provided to businesses during a time of crisis. A list of some emergency and disaster resources can be found at the end of the document.

### Social

*“You want to give communities confidence that it's safe for people to visit, and that they want to welcome visitors again. And part of that is getting decision makers, the premier, local MLAs Cabinet Ministers, members of Parliament through their media and communications, channels to talk about what's happening in their communities, and that it is safe, and that it's a good time to travel. There is value there that here are some of the things that that people are experiencing, etc., that helps from a credibility perspective as well, and makes people infinitely more inclined to want to travel again.” – Key Informant #2*

The local community plays a vital role in the post disaster climate of the destination. The media plays a vital role in how visitors conceptualize what is going on in a community. Ensuring the correct messaging is going out is critical. This is where the role of destination management organizations was highlighted in the interviews as being important to ensure safety messaging and allocating resources but also reducing fear mongering around the destination. Their main role in a crisis situation is communication and this is where the aspect of community interconnectedness



can assist. Part of this includes more communication between destination management organizations and local government. Ensuring that the tourism sector and the destination management organizations get a seat at the table during a time of crisis. Their expertise and knowledge of the area and the community provide valuable information when dealing with a disaster.

It is also pertinent to ensure positive destination reputation as this can improve visitor retention and promote the visitor economy thus increasing all aspects that come with an increase in tourism such as financial gain and community development. This also includes advocating for specific and purposeful media messaging where the exact boundary and area of the wildfire is crucial. Additionally, it is important to include the areas nearby that are not impacted or affected to ensure visitors are still traveling to those destinations and supporting those visitor economies.

### 3. Medium Term Resiliency Tools

#### Environmental

*“they can't operate as they used to, and they need to change, adapt to the new reality and operate differently and that's also true in terms of dispersion right when they're looking at seasonal dispersion. They know that they can't rely on the summer, therefore they need to build out their shoulder seasons or their winter season...that gives them a whole other revenue stream that makes them more sustainable, economically viable throughout the year.”* – Key informant #5

Season dispersion was a topic brought up in the interviews with regard to getting the industry to promote and start planning for providing services and activities during the shoulder season. The shoulder season is in regard to the months before and after the busy tourist months. Tapping into the shoulder season can decrease a businesses vulnerability to the effects of climate change as they are not reliant on one season having their ideal weather conditions. Different destinations can work together to promote each other when a disaster has occurred to ensure the region continues to uphold a positive destination image and the visitor economy has an opportunity to thrive. Understanding and being knowledgeable about the current environmental conditions of the region is crucial.

#### Economic

Tourism businesses can benefit from partnering with other local businesses in the region. This can look like two tourism operators that sell different services at different times of the year working together so that their staff and revenue have stability year-round.

Another strategy discussed was diversification within the context of a more resilient tourism industry. This refers to businesses that may expand their products and services to reach a more diverse audience for a longer period of time. This includes businesses increasing their services to reach more visitors during a longer period of time.

Hiring long term staff was another resiliency strategy. If you have product and services that are offered year round, you can have long term staff that is reliable and well educated on your business operations. The volatility of the industry is reduced and this increases employment security which may be more attractive to potential staff. Long term staff is also more educated and well versed in business operations that would be an advantage during times of uncertainty and disaster. For businesses that can't offer year round product and services and don't require long term staff could partner with another organization that operates during a different season to ensure employment year round.

## Social

*“When you have community members that you can rely on and work together and collaborate with. There's often times more resilience in response to a climate disaster, it becomes a more coordinated effort. There's better communication channels and people are able to really understand where overlaps are occurring. So if there is a challenge that is shared, even if it's between unlikely tourism operators. Because the tourism network is so diverse and operators, when there are overlaps, there may be opportunity to share resources or leverage actions to have these exponential impacts whether it's taken alone versus as an entire destination.”* – Key informant #9

Firstly, it is vital for residents to understand the value of tourism, particularly in boosting the local economy, developing the community but also in their role as emergency response providers. Secondly, the role of tourism in a disaster response setting partially lies in working with other community entities such as the government and media outlets to ensure adequate and real time information is being provided to residents and visitors while also supporting the local community recovery.

Community interconnectedness was an important resiliency strategy mentioned throughout the interviews. The more connected and involved a community is to one another, the more resilient they are to a disaster as they can work together and problem solve using resources across industries and government.

## 4. Long Term Sustainability and Regeneration Strategies

### Environmental

*“Looking at the traveler market. There is that growing demand both from employees and from consumers on demand for sustainable travel.”* – Key informant #9

Regenerative tourism has a unique opportunity to showcase a destination in a manner that is sustainable while also benefitting the local community. This is a key component of the regenerative philosophy when applied to tourism. Some of the main aspects of regenerative tourism include being community driven, providing unique tourism experiences to that destination and lastly, creating positive environmental impacts. These are implemented at the community level locally within individual tourism businesses but also more collectively within system of government and destination management organizations. Tourism is part of a larger ecosystem in a community. Educating community members on the importance of adopting this systems approach to tourism will be a key component in promoting regenerative tourism strategies at the local level.

Another strategy is tapping into and promoting the visitation from more local regional markets. These visitors have less distance to travel and are therefore considered more reliable and additionally cause less environmental stress. After a disaster, advertising and marketing towards domestic visitors is key as they are able to get to the destination in a timely manner to help support the recovery of a destination.

### Economic

There are two main benefits that businesses receive as an immediate response to their sustainability efforts. Firstly, with the appropriate retrofits, businesses can save energy and as a result save money to reduce business expenses. This includes small changes that businesses can implement depending on their operations. Secondly, the credibility and reputation that businesses can advertise promoting that they are sustainable can make them more attractive and desirable to

visitors and consumers. One key informant discussed a hotel implementing more sustainable strategies within their operations and receiving an additional star on a booking website as a result of this. This credibility expands to potential employees that want to be associated with a business that promotes regeneration rather than destruction. Finding employees that align with these sustainability goals is crucial when attempting to create a regenerative tourism industry.

## Social

*“regeneration as a concept is as a philosophy about giving back to your community being part of the community ... So if you've got a community that is resilient, it doesn't really matter too much what kind of emergency that comes along, whether it be environmental whether it be social it you're you've got more resources around you if you're a well connected community.” – key informant #8*

Indigenous knowledge and practices is a key strategy when implementing sustainable strategies to the destination. This parallels the ideology that the tourism industry should have more involvement in these decisions as well. Using their knowledge and involving their voices into the decision-making process is valuable. The value that many indigenous groups associate with the land that tourism operates on can be adopted to place more importance on protection and conservation. This could involve consulting indigenous

When regeneration as a philosophy is integrated into a community it increases resilience. There is more integration and community members prioritize creating positive change and ensuring all components of the community are accounted for.

## 1.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The main conclusions that the research uncovered pertaining to Tourism Kelowna enforces the idea that because tourism drives economic prosperity within the region it is essential that not only should key industry players be involved in decision-making but that the value of tourism is widely understood and advocated for across all aspects of the community. During the semi-structured interviews, many participants expressed the importance of ensuring tourism is part of the decision-making process in emergency management systems within their local communities. For Kelowna, this would entail the local government including the Destination Management Organizations as well as some local stakeholders within the industry to be included in the conversation and the policy making surrounding emergency management. Tourism Kelowna can continue its efforts in ensuring the local residents and community members continue to understand, advocate and appreciate the tourism industry that supports the destination.

This framework considers regenerative tourism because it perpetuates the idea that tourism is part of a greater and larger system where all of the components work together to create a destination that supports the environment and the people that inhabit it. Everything within this system is interconnected, supporting one another. This translates to emergency management when considering the recovery and resiliency strategies that focus on building social capital to create a more connected community. When the value of tourism is understood, it is more supported in the community and therefore more likely to be included in policy and decision-making. Tourism can support the destination and local community during an emergency as shown through the literature and interview results. The gap in knowledge that this research fills considers the importance of including tourism as a part of emergency management within a destination. When tourism is valued, resources are appropriately allocated, resiliency strategies are

implemented and sustainability can be prioritized. Environmental degradation is reduced and social capital is built.

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