



Project Insights Report

# Indigenous Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation in Indigenous Tourism Development in Northern Canada



**PARTNERS**

Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada  
Diversity Institute



**LOCATIONS**

Newfoundland and Labrador  
Northwest Territories  
Nunavut  
Quebec



**INVESTMENT**

299,762



**PUBLISHED**

February 2025



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## Executive Summary

In spring 2022, the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada, in collaboration with Toronto Metropolitan University and the Diversity Institute, invited Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada’s northernmost communities to participate in the Northern WE in Tourism study.

The project aimed to understand the challenges facing northern Indigenous women in tourism post-COVID and to co-create recommendations to support them.

Data collection included the following:

- Twenty-three interviews with Indigenous women entrepreneurs;
- Fourteen interviews with organizations in the ecosystem;
- Six sharing circles attended by 17 Indigenous women entrepreneurs;
- Four visioning circles attended by 28 Indigenous women entrepreneurs;
- A survey completed by 28 Indigenous women entrepreneurs;
- In-person visioning circles on the Day of Ceremony, with 53 women having participated.

#### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Significant capital investment in capacity-building initiatives within and across northern communities must have Indigenous oversight to safeguard and sustain the livelihoods of Indigenous women in the North.
- 2 The hub-and-spoke model, where a central “hub” coordinates and delivers resources, services or information to various “spokes,” or localized units, should be adopted to help Indigenous women entrepreneurs navigate complex and fragmented systems.
- 3 A culture of support that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, learning and sharing knowledge can be fostered by incorporating Two-Eyed Seeing, which balances Indigenous and Western worldviews, in training.

## ▶ The Issue

Northern Canada is home to approximately 150,000 people, with Indigenous Peoples constituting more than half the population. This region has the highest proportions of Indigenous Peoples in the country. Indigenous women are particularly overrepresented in remote areas, accounting for 72% of the women in these regions. Against the backdrop of Reconciliation, the looming threat of climate change, and governing policies that place increased environmental and development stress on Indigenous Peoples and their lands, renewed calls for economic diversification and the equitable distribution of resources have become a national priority.

Systemic and geographic barriers in the North often prevent Indigenous women entrepreneurs from accessing the support needed to build sustainable livelihoods in tourism. Currently, investment in the endeavours of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in Canada lags behind that of men, leaving women overexposed to risks such as climate change, changing markets, interest rates and inflation.

The Northern WE in Tourism study seeks to address systemic barriers hindering Indigenous women’s equitable participation in the northern tourism industry. By combining Indigenous and Western knowledge through the Two-Eyed Seeing approach, the study aims to identify effective training and resources for Indigenous women entrepreneurs at all stages of tourism business development. To achieve this, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with northern Indigenous women entrepreneurs and supporting organizations.



## What We Investigated

The study aimed to identify the barriers that Indigenous women entrepreneurs encounter in the tourism industry and determine the support mechanisms needed to build sustainable and successful tourism enterprises. By adopting an Indigenous-led approach, the study emphasized the importance of co-creation, centring the perspectives and experiences of Indigenous women in developing relevant and effective solutions.

This project aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the benefits of Indigenous tourism to women entrepreneurs?
- What are the barriers to Indigenous tourism to women entrepreneurs?
- What factors contribute to a successful tourism enterprise among women entrepreneurs in Canada's North?
- What training and support are needed to encourage sustainable livelihood development in relation to tourism among Indigenous women in Canada's North?

From July 2022 to July 2023, a series of one-on-one, in-depth interviews; talking circles; visioning circles; and surveys were conducted to gather insights from Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry in the North.

## What We're Learning

Systemic issues, such as discrimination, loss of culture, lateral violence, intergenerational trauma and mental health challenges affect the ability of Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the North to maintain their businesses. The intersectionality of being a woman, a caregiver and Indigenous further exacerbates their socioeconomic status. The North's remoteness limits access to business development services, and Indigenous women require opportunities that are neither exclusively online nor housed at locations that require travel with overnight stays. The study also discusses challenges with conducting business in the North, such as the cost of shipping and the need for reliable internet.

The project offers insights into the Two-Eyed Seeing approach, a concept that recognizes the strengths of Indigenous perspectives of knowing and Western knowledge systems to enhance access to appropriate training and resources for Indigenous women entrepreneurs at all stages of tourism business development. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with Indigenous women entrepreneurs and the organizations that serve them. These interviews were supplemented by quantitative data from two surveys.

The study highlights the challenges of mastering the skills required to run a successful business in Canada. Indigenous women participants identified the need for financial literacy training in schools and the availability of free courses for entrepreneurs. Marketing and social media skills are crucial for businesses in the North to develop and promote authentic products, price them competitively, and effectively share their unique stories. Indigenous tourism businesses in the North face complexities that require flexibility to address seasonal infrastructure deficits and emerging challenges in the sector. The lack of support in completing "actionable" business plans leads to frustration when grant applications and loan requests are denied.

This study underscores the need for culturally appropriate training led by Indigenous Peoples. Participants cited the importance of having training programs that respond to their specific needs and recognize the realities of the North. Coordinated and flexible access to wraparound supports was identified as necessary. This includes affordable childcare and Elder care on an as-needed basis and quality food, health-care services and affordable housing to facilitate equitable participation in programs.

Access to Indigenous women mentors with first-hand experience and expertise in tourism helps Indigenous women in the North enrich their technical and social-emotional business skills. Participants in the study emphasized the importance of learning from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Aunties and other community members for success. Supportive networks that allow women the flexibility to access and receive support when needed are critical in developing culturally safe and responsive ecosystems that build confidence.

The recommendations in the report have been co-created by researchers and research participants to identify the necessary elements for skills-based programming and business development.

**Invest in capacity building:** This study identifies bottlenecks and barriers to access that prevent Indigenous women from participating in Western business and skills development models. It emphasizes the need to provide supports aligned with Indigenous women's identities.

**Empower Indigenous women:** Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the North are frustrated, believing their needs and opinions are neither respected nor validated by the organizations assigned or funded to serve them. Investments in capacity building are needed in a way that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, learning and sharing knowledge by adopting Two-Eyed Seeing.

**Improve the relevance and accessibility of supports:** Invest in supporting in-person, in-community training. Acknowledge that there is a place for online learning by developing hybrid models in Northern Indigenous communities to ensure the transfer of culture and knowledge with on-the-ground support as needed. Ensure that Indigenous-serving organizations employ a dedicated Indigenous person familiar with the culture of the community they serve and who speaks or understands the language to assist in training and skills development and alignment.

One notable lesson learned is the importance of culturally appropriate training programs led by Indigenous Peoples. Successful training initiatives must consider the specific needs and realities of Northern Indigenous communities, including caregiving responsibilities, limited internet access and the need for flexibility in program delivery. The study underscores the necessity of incorporating wraparound supports, such as childcare and Elder care, and ensuring that training is accessible without requiring travel and overnight stays.

The duplication of training services and the lack of coordination among support programs lead to inefficiencies and frustration among participants. The absence of a cohesive strategy and centralized resources makes it difficult for Indigenous women to navigate available supports and achieve business success. These findings highlight the need for a more integrated and responsive ecosystem that can streamline access to necessary resources and provide comprehensive support to Indigenous women entrepreneurs in the North.

## ★ Why It Matters

Small businesses are the lifeblood of the Canadian economy, and nowhere is this truer than in the North. The COVID-19 pandemic devastated the tourism industry, where many Northern Indigenous businesses operate. The new, increasingly digital landscape presents further challenges, with existing supports often ill-suited to the specific needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs, particularly women.

Connecting Indigenous women to the resources needed to build sustainable livelihoods in tourism is crucial. However, Indigenous women in the North face significant and compounded barriers that hinder their access to necessary support for starting, sustaining and scaling their businesses, and additional, tailored assistance would support them to succeed.



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## ► What's Next

Lessons from this project and others are being integrated into the Future Skills Centre's entrepreneurship competency framework, which is designed to address the diverse needs of entrepreneurs at various stages of development, across different sectors, and with varied intersectional identities.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### **How to Cite This Report**

The Diversity Institute. (2024). Project Insights Report: Indigenous Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation in Indigenous Tourism Development in Northern Canada, The Diversity Institute & Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/indigenous-tourism/>

Funded by the  
Government of Canada's  
Future Skills Program



Indigenous Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation in Indigenous Tourism Development in Northern Canada is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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