

2024-2025

ANNUAL REPORT



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Cover photo: Annie-Claude Roberge



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This past year has shown us, once again, the strength that comes from working together.

This was reflected in the success of the 2024 Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) and Eeyou Istchee Tourism (EIT) Annual General Meeting and Tourism Conference, held in September at the Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute. With the theme “*Reconciliation: Both a Journey and a Destination – The Power of Indigenous Tourism*”, the event brought together participants from across Eeyou Istchee, Baie-James, and other Indigenous Nations, as well as government and industry partners. We were proud to co-host this year’s gathering with Indigenous Tourism Quebec (ITQ), which also held their own AGM during the event.

The conference—our largest to date—offered an opportunity for meaningful dialogue about the connections between tourism, reconciliation, sustainability and innovation. Our partners, ITQ and the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC), played a key role in shaping these exchanges. These discussions were not just insightful—they were essential to building a shared vision for the future of Indigenous tourism.

COTA also attended the 2025 International Indigenous Tourism Conference (IITC) held in Montreal and hosted by ITAC. The gathering brought together Indigenous tourism voices from across the globe, including a strong delegation from Eeyou Istchee. The event was a celebration of culture and collaboration, and included workshops led by Cree artists. We were especially proud to see Nibiischii Corporation recognized with the ITQ Best Enterprise of the Year Award. This honour speaks to their commitment to sustainability and cultural preservation through innovative tourism experiences.

Innovation has remained a key focus for us this year. As visitor needs evolve, we’ve continued to invest in improvements that enhance the guest experience. This has included hotel upgrades, as well as the launch of Culture of Innovation Training—an initiative designed to encourage fresh thinking and support a mindset open to change. These efforts reflect our commitment to building a tourism sector that is resilient and adaptable, while staying firmly rooted in our values.

Moving forward, we remain grounded in the knowledge that meaningful progress happens when people come together. Whether through community dialogue, learning opportunities, or stronger collaboration across organizations, we are building a vibrant, authentic, and inclusive tourism future for Eeyou Istchee.

Thank you to everyone—our tourism operators, community members, and partners—who continue to guide and support this work.



As we reflect on another year of growth and collaboration, I'm proud to share the strides COTA has made toward a more sustainable future for tourism in our region. Sustainability is more than a guiding principle. For us, it's a core value that shapes every aspect of our work and decision-making.

In January, our team gathered at Waconichi, operated by Mistissini's Nibiischii Corporation, for a retreat that brought together staff from COTA, EIT, and Tourisme Baie-James (TBJ). Set against the peaceful backdrop of Waconichi Lake, the gathering provided space for reflection, connection, and learning. The retreat focused on sustainability in tourism and included training from GreenStep, a Canadian leader in sustainable tourism practices. This experience deepened our understanding of sustainability as a comprehensive concept—covering environmental, economic, social, and cultural aspects. It also served as a meaningful opportunity to highlight the work of the Nibiischii Corporation, a regional success story in sustainable tourism—made possible in part through COTA's ongoing support. The retreat also marked the start of our work on COTA's Sustainable Tourism Action Plan, setting the stage for a coordinated and long-term approach to tourism development in the region.

Our team also strengthened its commitment to sustainability on a global scale. In April, Rob Imrie, COTA's Director of Development, and I attended the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Conference in Stockholm, Sweden. While there, we completed a Professional Certificate workshop in Sustainable Tourism, equipping us with the tools and insights to champion responsible tourism locally. We were also proud to join a climate action cohort, where we identified practical steps to reduce the environmental impact of tourism.

Small actions can go a long way, too. This year, we continued our tradition of community clean-ups at the AGM and Tourism Conference, reduced waste by going paperless wherever possible, and prioritized reusable items to replace plastic options at events. During the holidays, our staff and board members received sustainable gifts—another simple way to reinforce the values we stand by.

Looking ahead, obtaining GreenStep accreditation as an organization is a key priority. It's another way to demonstrate that our commitment to sustainability is ongoing and grounded in action.

On behalf of the entire COTA team, we would like to thank you for your continued support. Together, we are building a tourism sector that honours our communities, respects our environment, and creates lasting value for future generations.

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The negotiations leading to the JBNQA provided the platform for gaining control over tourism development. With the signing of the Final Agreement in 1975, the legal framework for this control became a reality and paved the way for the creation of COTA as a treaty obligation under sections 28.4 and 28.6 of the JBNQA.

The Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association was incorporated on December 7, 2000 as a non-profit corporation under Part II of the Canadian Corporations Act. Since our incorporation we've been active in the development of the tourism industry in Eeyou Istchee. By promoting tourism, we're helping to transform our region's vast potential for economic, employment, and other growth opportunities.

Today, COTA is a member-driven association that provides services and support to our businesses, organizations, and communities so that we, as Crees, can build a thriving and sustainable tourism industry on our own terms.

- ◆ Development of high-quality and authentic Cree tourism products and experiences;
- ◆ Respect for individual initiatives and their role in economic development;
- ◆ Respect for values, including spirituality, self-reliance, and sharing;
- ◆ Honesty in communications and in operations;
- ◆ Protection and preservation of the Cree way of life;
- ◆ Recognition of a stewardship role regarding the environment;
- ◆ Encouragement of business opportunities through partnerships;
- ◆ Development and implementation of operational norms and quality standards; and
- ◆ Commitment to work together and communicate cultural pride.

Implement Section 28.6 of the JBNQA

- ◆ Provide marketing, booking, and promotion services, where necessary, for Cree outfitting and tourist operations.
- ◆ Provide business, management, accounting and professional services, where necessary, for Cree outfitters and tourist businesses.
- ◆ Conduct feasibility studies related to the establishment of individual outfitting or tourism facilities or a network of outfitting or tourism facilities.

Community Awareness and Capacity Building

- ◆ Place a priority on increasing awareness of tourism as a sustainable economic development opportunity.
- ◆ Increase the capacity of local and regional institutions to provide services by improving access to information.
- ◆ Support and undertake training and skill development initiatives that recognize Cree skills and align with industry standards.
- ◆ Support and encourage human resource development related to tourism.

Marketing

- ◆ Increase market share by researching the feasibility of regional projects that promote the communities.
- ◆ Conduct product development and market research that include visitor statistics and product inventories.

Financial Development

- ◆ Actively seek funding and other resources from governments, the private sector, and other sources.
- ◆ Develop, where appropriate, revenue-generating activities.

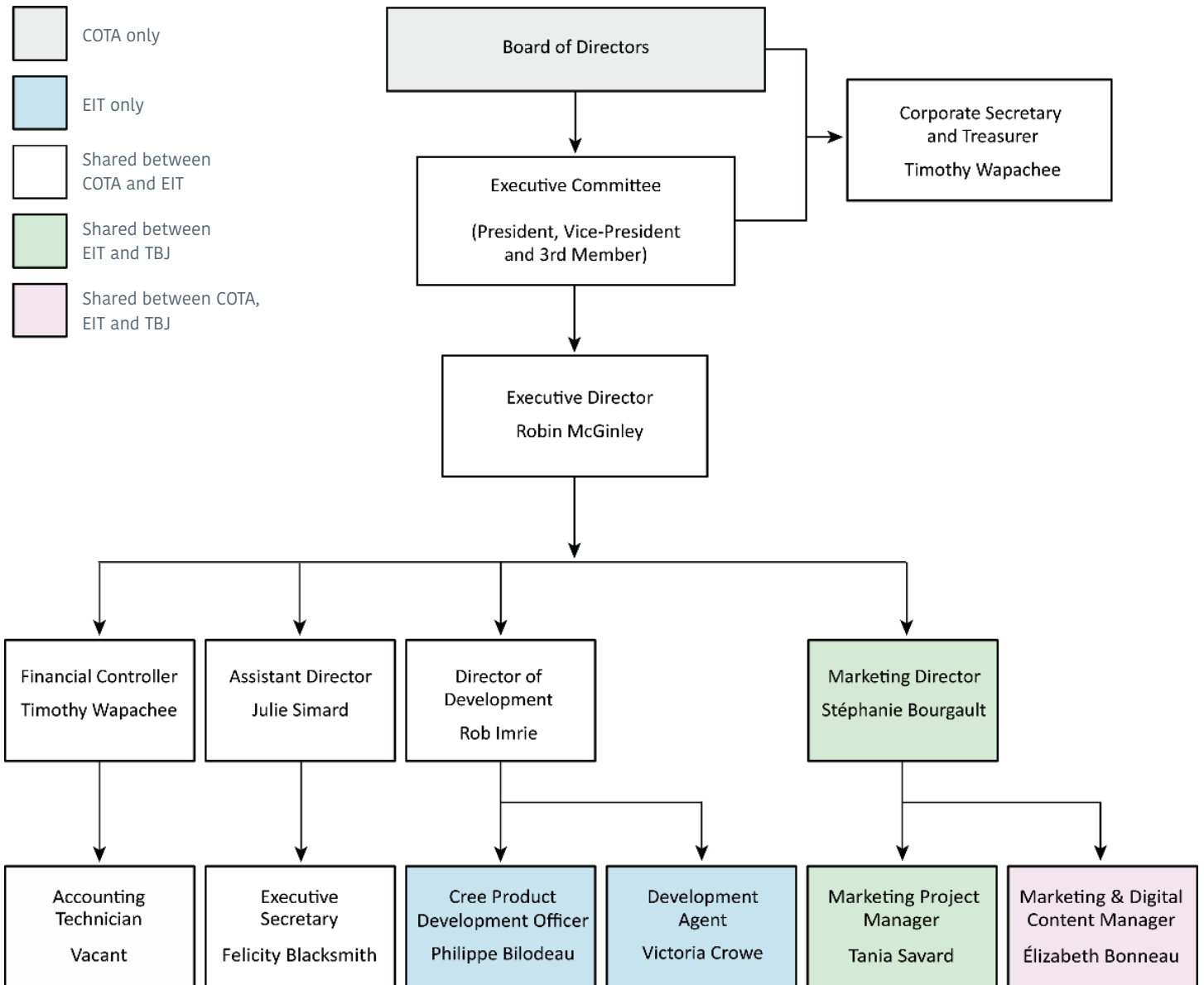
Communications

- ◆ Ensure effective communications with Cree stake-holders including Tallymen, governments, communities, and industry.
- ◆ Promote COTA's vision, objectives, activities, and accomplishments.
- ◆ Promote a positive image of the membership.
- ◆ Develop alliances and coordinate with other tourism and indigenous organizations to work toward common goals.
- ◆ Serve as a liaison between Cree tourism and outfitting operators, the tourism industry, and the markets they serve.
- ◆ Incorporate current technology to increase the ease and efficiency of communications and reduce the associated costs.

Industry Development

- ◆ Promote partnerships among Cree businesses, communities, and institutions.
- ◆ Represent the interests of COTA members at meetings with governments, commissions, other organizations, and non-native developers.
- ◆ Support the development of Cree tourist products that exceed market standards by creating quality standards and by recognizing success with awards.
- ◆ Ensure the participation of the Cree Nation in the development and promotion of tourism and outfitting activities.

The chart below illustrates COTA and EIT's organizational structure to March 31, 2025



Anderson P. Jolly (Nemaska), Edward Bearskin (Chisasibi), Irene Otter (Waswanipi), Stanley Shashaweskum (Wemindji), Ron Simard (Oujé-Bougoumou), Gilbert Baribeau (Mistissini), Stacy Bear (Waskaganish), Elvis Weapenicappo (Eastmain), Isaac Masty (Whapmagoostui), Johnny Saganash and Louisa B. Saganash (Elders Committee), Alexander Moses (CNG)

Anderson P. Jolly – President
Edward Bearskin – Vice-President
Irene Otter – Executive Member

Edward Bearskin – President
Irene Otter – Vice-President
Stanley Shashaweskum - Executive Member





1.1 2024 Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Tourism Conference: The Power of Indigenous Tourism: Reconciliation – Both a Journey and a Destination

In September 2024, the community of Oujé-Bougoumou welcomed over 85 participants to COTA's AGM and Tourism Conference, which focused on Indigenous tourism and reconciliation. The AGM took place on September 17, followed by the Tourism Conference and Awards Banquet on September 18. The events were organized in partnership with EIT and ITQ, with ITQ also hosting its own AGM on September 19.

All sessions were held at the Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute, with the banquet hosted at the Capissisit Lodge.

1.1.1 Tourism Conference

This year's event marked a significant milestone as our most highly attended conference to date. It offered a valuable forum for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas among participants from across the region and the broader tourism sector. Guests included representatives from:

- ◆ Indigenous Services Canada
- ◆ Canada Economic Development
- ◆ Government of Quebec
- ◆ Société du Plan Nord
- ◆ Apatisiwin Skills Development (ASD)
- ◆ Cree Nation Government (CNG)
- ◆ Indigenous Tourism Quebec
- ◆ Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC)

Speakers included Ron Simard (Tourism Officer) and Angel Mianscum (Deputy Chief) of Oujé-Bougoumou, Patricia Auclair and Andrew Germain representing ITQ, and ITAC's Keith Henry, and Sébastien Desnoyers-Picard.

In the afternoon, attendees participated in workshops exploring topics essential to tourism development and reconciliation, including:

- ◆ The Original Original Accreditation Program – facilitated by Keith Henry
- ◆ Réconciliation: Appropriation Culturelle vs Appréciation Culturelle – facilitated by Pierre Kanapé
- ◆ The Tourism Ecosystem: How to Effectively Work with the Network – facilitated by Andrew Germain and Laurence Lainé
- ◆ International Marketing and Trends – facilitated by Sébastien Desnoyers-Picard

1.1.2 Awards Banquet: Celebrating Excellence

The evening Awards Banquet celebrated individuals and organizations whose contributions have helped shape and strengthen tourism in Eeyou Istchee.

Award Recipients:

David and Anna Bosum – Oujé-Bougoumou

Honoured for their years of dedication to preserving and sharing Cree culture through Nuuhchimi Wiinuu. Their commitment has made them true ambassadors of cultural tourism.

Priscilla Blueboy – Waskaganish

Recognized for her years of service at Kanio Kashee Lodge. Her warmth and hospitality have left a lasting impression on many visitors.

Nibiischii Corporation

Celebrated for their growth, commitment to sustainability and innovative projects, positioning Nibiischii as a must-visit destination in Eeyou Istchee.

Cree Nation of Waskaganish

Acknowledged for enhancing the visitor experience with new interpretive panels and walking trails along the beautiful shores of the Rupert River.

Wiinipaakw Tours Solidarity Co-op

Offering guided tours from both Waskaganish and Wemindji, the cooperative filled over 70% of its scheduled on-water days in its first full season—an impressive achievement that has brought significant economic and cultural opportunities.

Accepting this award, was Captain James Georgekish, who sadly passed away in February 2025. James graduated from the first captains' training program in 2017 and was a founding member of the cooperative. He will be missed at our future AGMs and Tourism Conferences, where he was always enthusiastic about listening, learning, and supporting the cooperative's continued growth.





1.1.3 Pre-Banquet Activities and Entertainment

Before dinner, guests had the opportunity to explore a lively marketplace showcasing the work of local artisans and sample food and beverages from the Niimaawin Project—a collaboration between COTA and Papilles aimed at developing high-quality, travel-friendly meals for remote locations.

Music was provided by local artist Kenny Mianscum and DJ Waylon Martin Hunter, creating a fun and welcoming atmosphere.

1.1.4 Sustainability in Action

The AGM and Tourism Conference demonstrated our commitment to sustainable tourism through thoughtful and eco-conscious planning. Meals were served using reusable plates, cutlery, and cups, while all conference materials were provided digitally to reduce waste.

The community clean-up is always a fun event that brings attendees together around a shared action—one that demonstrates our commitment to sustainability and deep respect for the land.





1.2 Alternative Accommodations Feasibility Study

To support tourism growth and better serve visitors and local communities, a feasibility study was conducted in five communities—Waskaganish, Eastmain, Chisasibi, Waswanipi, and Nemaska. The study examined the potential for developing alternative accommodations, including RV parking areas, campgrounds, and cabins, to provide designated, community-supported locations for travellers.

These options are particularly relevant during busy summer months, when informal camping along the highway is a common practice. In addition to enhancing the visitor experience, these new accommodations would offer much-needed space during local events when hotel rooms are in short supply.

The study also examined the potential for creating shared community spaces, including the construction of a Shaptuan. This flexible, multi-use facility could accommodate a range of activities, from workshops and cultural events to communal cooking and gathering spaces.

The consulting firm BC2 led the project and conducted on-site assessments in all five communities, resulting in 5 studies that incorporated both community input and regional tourism goals.

Community Visits and Local Collaborations

Throughout the study, working with partners and community members was essential for identifying potential sites and ensuring the project aligned with local needs and values.

Sites visited included:

- ◆ Waskaganish – Site visit with Stacy Bear and Roy Weistche
- ◆ Eastmain – Site visit led by Redfern Mark-Stewart, with guidance from a local elder familiar with the area
- ◆ Chisasibi – Site visit carried out with the support of Kristen Sam
- ◆ Waswanipi and Nemaska – Site locations have been identified as part of broader community consultations.

This project is made possible thanks to funding from Canada Economic Development, and the Cree Nation Government.



1.3 Cree Knowledge Festival 2024

Building on the incredible success of the first Cree Knowledge Festival, COTA, EIT, the Cree Native Arts and Crafts Association (CNACA), and the Cree Trappers' Association (CTA) proudly hosted the second edition on December 6 and 7, 2024.

Held at the Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute in Oujé-Bougoumou, this year's festival embraced the theme "Bringing People Together." With both in-person and virtual participation options, the event welcomed people from all backgrounds to celebrate the vibrant culture and traditions of the Cree communities of Eeyou Istchee.

The festival offered a rich program over two days, featuring speakers, storytelling, panel discussions, and live performances that showcased Cree culture and history. In-person attendees had the opportunity to participate in workshops led by Cree artists, enjoy lunch served at the cultural village featuring meals from the Niimaawin Project, and be a part of a live broadcast from the venue.

To view a broadcast of the 2024 Cree Knowledge Festival, please visit the website at: cree-festival-cri.com

This event was made possible with funding from the Cree Nation Government, Heritage Canada, TD Bank Foundation, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec, Secrétariat aux relations avec les Premières Nations et les Inuit and Ministère du Tourisme.





1.4 Strategic Support for the Development of Culinary Solutions

In 2024-2025, COTA launched the Niimaawin Project, a series of culinary development initiatives in partnership with Papilles, designed to create food solutions that celebrate and reflect the unique flavours of Eeyou Istchee.

A community tour held in June 2024, brought the project to Chisasibi, Wemindji, Eastmain, Waskaganish, and Nemaska. Discussions with local chefs helped lay the foundation for creating meals that reflect the region's culinary identity.

In September 2024, recipe testing took place in Oujé-Bougoumou with Captains from Wiinipaakw Tours and a local tourism officer, assisting in refining the offerings in a real-world setting.

Additional testing during the COTA AGM and Tourism Conference, as well as the Cree Knowledge Festival, helped broaden engagement and incorporate community feedback. A final tasting event took place in January 2025 at Nibiishii, where staff and participating tourism operators sampled and rated the completed recipes.

Rooted in traditional recipes and using boreal herbs and spices, these meals are designed to be easy to prepare, nourishing, and memorable—perfect for tourism settings, community gatherings, and events.

This initiative was funded by Indigenous Services Canada and Société du Plan Nord.

Wild edible mushrooms

of Eeyou Istchee James Bay

1.5 Sustainable Non-timber Forest Products (NTFPs)

NTFPs are naturally occurring resources—such as berries, mushrooms, and tree bark—that can be harvested from forests without cutting down trees. The forests, bogs, rivers, and lakes of Eeyou Istchee are rich in biodiversity and offer significant potential for the sustainable use of NTFPs in tourism.

To explore this potential, FaunENord was contracted to lead a project focused on working with Cree communities to identify and inventory NTFPs found in and around participating areas. This information will help us discover creative ways to incorporate NTFPs into local tourism experiences, from meals to guided forest walks.

Some of the activities to incorporate NTFPs into tourism include:

- ◆ Encouraging local restaurants to provide meals featuring sustainably harvested NTFPs, such as berries, mushrooms, or forest teas.
- ◆ Offering training for Cree tourism officers and local guides to share knowledge about NTFPs and the boreal forest with visitors.
- ◆ Creating immersive experiences such as forest tours and educational activities that showcase the ecological and cultural significance of NTFPs.

In September and October 2024, FaunENord conducted an NTFP inventory along the coast of James Bay in partnership with Wiinipaakw Tours. They visited several islands and conducted a detailed survey of the area's natural features.

The project also produced its first educational pamphlet, which showcases a variety of mushrooms found in the region—a small but significant step toward connecting visitors with the land through learning.

This project is made possible thanks to funding from Indigenous Services Canada and the Indigenous Forestry Initiative.



2.1 Training for the Hotel Technology Improvement Project

Following the successful implementation of technological upgrades at several hotels in Eeyou Istchee last year, COTA launched a comprehensive training initiative for hotel staff that took place from January to March 2025. The goal was to ensure hospitality teams could confidently and effectively use the new systems.

These upgrades—part of COTA’s broader commitment to enhancing the tourism experience—included automated check-in/check-out kiosks, upgraded computer systems, and back-end management tools designed to improve guest comfort and streamline hotel operations.

The primary goal of the training was to help hotel staff become familiar with the new technologies, gain hands-on experience, and develop the skills needed to troubleshoot issues, manage bookings, and deliver a high standard of guest service.

Training sessions were delivered at the following hotels:

- ◆ Auberge Capissisit Lodge
- ◆ Mistissini Lodge
- ◆ Auberge Kanio-Kashee Lodge
- ◆ Eneyaauhkaat Lodge

The new self-service kiosks, in particular, have been well received by both guests and hotel teams. Guests benefit from added flexibility and convenience, with the ability to check in and out at any time, while staff are now better equipped to manage operations efficiently and respond to guest needs with greater ease.

This project is funded by Apatisiwin Skills Development and delivered in partnership with Houle Conseils.



2.2 Culture of Innovation Training

COTA's Executive Director, Robin McGinley, Assistant Director, Julie Simard, and Director of Development, Rob Imrie, are currently participating in a Culture of Innovation Training Program led by Philippe Mast through Corto-Rev and organized by the Alliance de l'industrie touristique. This initiative is designed to foster a culture of innovation within our organizations and equip our leadership team to navigate an increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment.

To date, the program has explored several important areas related to innovation and organizational growth, including:

- ◆ Fostering creativity and the generation of new ideas
- ◆ Strategic planning and effective execution
- ◆ Adaptive leadership during times of transformation
- ◆ Optimizing organizational structure and team dynamics
- ◆ Enhancing the employee experience through change

This training program is funded by Services Québec

2.3 GreenStep Sustainability Training

In January 2025, COTA, EIT and TBJ staff participated in sustainability training delivered by GreenStep, a Canadian organization specializing in sustainable tourism practices. The training took place during a staff retreat at Waconichi, operated by Nibiischii Corporation. The session focused on what sustainability means in the tourism industry and how our actions—both at work and in daily life—can have a positive and lasting impact on the environment, our communities, and future generations.

The GreenStep training emphasized that sustainability goes beyond environmental practices. It also includes economic, social, and cultural dimensions—all of which are crucial for developing a robust and balanced tourism sector.

Tourism is a vital means of supporting local jobs and businesses. COTA is committed to encouraging tourism that brings tangible benefits to community members, while also helping to protect and share Cree culture and traditions. This means supporting tourism activities that are respectful, inclusive, and rooted in community values.

This training was funded in part by the Cree Nation Government.

2.4 Professional Certificate in Sustainable Tourism

Ahead of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council Conference described below, Rob Imrie and Robin McGinley completed the Professional Certificate in Sustainable Tourism training. They successfully passed the final exam and received their Sustainable Tourism Certificate. This training provided them with a strong foundation in responsible tourism practices and further equipped them to support sustainable tourism development in Eeyou Istchee.

2.5 Microsoft Word Training

Two Microsoft Word training sessions were conducted for staff members — one in February and another in March — to enhance proficiency in document creation, formatting, and advanced Word features. The training was delivered by Technologia, a professional development organization specializing in software skills.

3.1 International Indigenous Tourism Conference

From February 25 to 27, 2025, staff from COTA and EIT joined an incredible group of delegates from Eeyou Istchee at the International Indigenous Tourism Conference (IITC) in Montreal. Organized by ITAC, IITC is the largest event of its kind, bringing together Indigenous tourism leaders, entrepreneurs, and advocates from around the globe.

This year, Cree excellence was proudly showcased. Attendees enjoyed engaging workshops led by Cree artists, including Deborah Ratt, who taught traditional beadwork, and Tim Whiskeychan with Emma-Jane Dixon Whiskeychan, who hosted a guided painting session. The Artisan Marketplace featured a wide array of handcrafted items from CNACA members and the new Wachiya store, celebrating the skill and creativity deeply rooted in our communities.

Throughout the conference, delegates from Eeyou Istchee formed meaningful connections, shared knowledge, and gathered new ideas to support the continued growth of Indigenous tourism in the region.

A major highlight of the event was the recognition of Nibiischii Corporation, which received the ITQ Best Enterprise of the Year Award. This award celebrates the growth, contribution, and accomplishments of an Indigenous tourism business in Quebec. With its unique accommodations and sustainable outdoor adventure offerings, the Mistissini-led corporation has become a model of excellence in Indigenous tourism.



Photo credit: Deborah Ratt



Photo credit: TAC/Simon Ratcliffe

3.2 Global Sustainable Tourism Council Conference – Stockholm, Sweden

In April 2024, Rob Imrie and Robin McGinley attended the GSTC 2024 Global Sustainable Tourism Conference in Stockholm, Sweden. The conference brought together over 500 delegates from more than 50 countries, along with hundreds more who participated via live broadcast.

Participants included a wide range of global and regional tourism stakeholders – from government representatives and development agencies to hotels, tour operators, NGOs, academics, and consultants – all collaborating to advance sustainable tourism practices.

The event featured insightful sessions on global sustainability initiatives in tourism, highlighting emerging strategies to support responsible travel. Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden was also in attendance, underscoring the significance of the event on the international stage.



3.3 Les Grands Remous: Innovative and Sustainable Tourism Summit

In January 2025, Julie Simard, Rob Imrie, and COTA's Cree Product Development Officer, Philippe Bilodeau, attended the inaugural Les Grands Remous: Innovative and Sustainable Tourism Summit. The event brought together tourism professionals and community leaders to share practical and creative solutions to the challenges posed by climate change and the evolving tourism landscape.

The summit served as a call to action, inviting participants to consider how tourism can better serve both people and the planet. Discussions focused on sustainable development, community well-being, and innovative tools shaping the sector's future. A highlight was exploring how artificial intelligence is being applied to support more sustainable tourism practices.

