

Eeyou Istchee

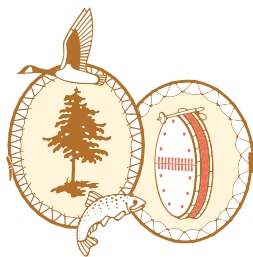
Tourism Strategy

2025-2030



The 2025-2030 Eeyou Istchee Tourism Strategy was developed by the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association and Eeyou Istchee Tourism, with the partnership and collaboration of the World Centre of Excellence for Destinations (CED). This initiative was funded by the Gouvernement du Québec and the Cree Nation Government.

Québec 



COTA/EIT would like to acknowledge and thank all community members who contributed to our Regional Tourism Strategy by participating in our consultations and surveys. This strategy is rooted in the input, ideas, and aspirations you shared, and we are grateful for your time, expertise, and commitment to the future of tourism in our region.

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Message from the President of Eeyou Istchee Tourism

As President of Eeyou Istchee Tourism (EIT), I am proud to present this collective strategy that reflects the voice, vision, and values of our Cree communities. Over the past several years, our region has shown resilience, adaptability, and leadership in advancing sustainable, culturally respectful tourism. Despite challenges—from forest fires to shifting travel trends—we have continued to grow a tourism sector rooted in the beauty of our land and the strength of our people.



This strategy captures more than priorities and plans; it is a commitment to collaboration, innovation, and the respectful sharing of our heritage with the world. I want to thank all community members, tourism operators, Elders, youth, and staff who contributed their knowledge and energy to this plan.

Together, we will build a tourism future that brings pride, prosperity, and preservation to Eeyou Istchee.

Edward Bearskin
President, Eeyou Istchee Tourism



Message from the President of COTA

It is with great pride that I share this strategy on behalf of the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA). COTA has its roots in the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) and was born from the recognition that tourism, when done on our terms, can be a powerful vehicle for self-determination, cultural preservation, and economic independence.

This document marks a new chapter—one shaped by our leadership, our knowledge of the land, and our partnerships across the region and province. As we implement this strategy, we remain committed to supporting Cree outfitters, tourism operators, and communities with tools, training, and opportunities that are aligned with our vision of a world-class, Cree-led, sustainable tourism industry in Eeyou Istchee.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to this plan and reaffirm our shared responsibility to make it a living strategy that grows with us.

Anderson Jolly
President, Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA)

Introduction: Context for Sustainable Tourism in Eeyou Istchee (2025-2030)

Tourism in Eeyou Istchee is entering a critical phase of transformation. As the global demand for Indigenous, cultural, and sustainable travel increases, Cree communities are uniquely positioned to lead a model of tourism development that is community-driven, climate-resilient, and rooted in cultural integrity.

Eeyou Istchee comprises nine Cree Nations spread across inland, coastal, and northern territories, each with unique geography and traditions. Over the past two decades, through the leadership of the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) and Eeyou Istchee Tourism (EIT), the region has made significant progress in advancing tourism as a tool for economic development, cultural preservation, and nation-building.

The 2025–2030 Tourism Strategy is informed by:

- The SMED (System of Measures for Excellence in Destinations) framework, applied through workshops delivered in the communities.
- Feedback from over 90 participants, including community leaders, youth, Elders, and business operators.
- Lessons from recent projects, including the development of culinary tourism, the Cree Knowledge Festival, Wiinipaakw Tours, and regional marketing campaigns.
- Alignment with the Québec Sustainable Tourism Growth Strategy (2025–2030) and national standards such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) and UN sustainable development goals (SDG).
- A commitment to reconciliation, inclusion, and cultural protection as core tenets of tourism.

A detailed overview of the methodology, including community engagement steps, workshop timelines, and contributor roles, is provided in Appendix A.

This strategy replaces earlier frameworks and is structured to:

- Respond to current environmental and economic realities (e.g., climate impacts, wildfire events, changing travel trends)
- Provide Cree communities with clear tools to take ownership over tourism development through local governance, master planning, and development support
- Ensure that all tourism activity enhances the well-being of Cree people, supports local businesses, and protects the land and waters for future generations.

In essence, this plan represents a collective vision for sustainable development that reflects Cree values, traditions, and aspirations for self-determined economic growth.

Vision, Mission, and Strategic Objectives

Vision

To position Eeyou Istchee as a world-class, Cree-led sustainable tourism destination that celebrates the land, empowers communities, and shares Cree culture with authenticity and respect.

Strategic Orientation Statement

Eeyou Istchee Territory – A regional tourism destination comprising nine local destinations, one in each Cree Nation.

Mission

To develop and implement a collective vision for a world-class sustainable tourism industry in Eeyou Istchee that is in harmony with Cree culture and values and that involves a partnership with Cree communities, institutions, and businesses.

Strategic Objectives

COTA Objectives (from Section 28.6 of the JBNQA)

1. Provide marketing, booking, and promotion services for Cree outfitting operations.
2. Provide business, management, accounting and professional services for Cree outfitters.
3. Conduct feasibility studies related to the establishment or siting of individual outfitting facilities, or a network of outfitting facilities.

EIT Objectives (as mandated in the Entente de financement 2022-2026)

1. Promote the Eeyou Istchee Baie-James region as a distinctive and attractive destination for cultural, adventure, eco-tourism, and outfitting.
2. Support the development of marketing of tourism products to stimulate regional economic vitality.
3. Strengthen infrastructure and access to information to improve visitor orientation, signage, and digital visibility.
4. Advance sustainable tourism practices reflecting Cree values, benefiting youth and Elders, and safeguarding the environment.
5. Facilitate innovation, digital transformation, and provincial alignment through leadership and coordination.

Strategic Pillars and Key Initiatives

Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

Goal: Lead in Indigenous-led sustainability and climate-resilient tourism practices.

Key Initiatives:

- Adopt GSTC sustainable tourism criteria and implement sustainable action plans for COTA, EIT, and Cree operators
- Support eco-certification training and infrastructure (EV stations, waste reduction, energy efficiency).
- Integrate climate adaptation planning into all tourism development.

Cultural Integrity and Immersive Experiences

Goal: Position Cree culture at the heart of the visitor experience.

Key Initiatives:

- Expand Elder-led storytelling, guided walks, and traditional foraging.
- Develop visitor education tools rooted in Cree values and protocols.
- Promote Cree culinary tourism with local chefs and seasonal foods

Governance and Community Leadership

Goal: Empower communities to lead tourism development that reflects their unique identity.

Key Initiatives:

- Develop local Destination Master Plans aligned with community goals.
- Establish Destination Governance Organizations (DGOs) in all 9 Cree Nations.
- Strengthen regional coordination through COTA and EIT support.

Innovation, Technology, and Data

Goal: Increase regional competitiveness through digital transformation.

Key Initiatives:

- Expand online booking systems and digital visibility.
- Train local operators in digital marketing, artificial intelligence and customer management tools.
- Collect and use tourism data to guide strategic decisions.

Promote Year-Round and Diversified Offerings

Goal: Reduce seasonality and build distinctive tourism experiences across all seasons.

Key Initiatives:

- Promote winter activities (snowmobiling, northern lights, winter culture, snowshoe, etc.).
- Develop cultural events and workshops for all seasons.
- Link inland and coastal experiences under the regional brand.

SWOT Analysis

A strategic overview of the internal strengths and weaknesses, and the external opportunities and threats shaping tourism development in Eeyou Istchee.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authentic Cree cultural experiences rooted in traditions and values• Welcoming communities known for hospitality and safety• Unique natural assets: boreal forests, marine environments, northern lights and wildlife• Good road access compared to other northern regions• Strong institutional support from COTA and EIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited reception infrastructure, signage, and rest areas• Few market-ready tourism packages• Short runways and many unpaved inter-community roads• Limited food service variety and trained culinary staff• Community animal control and visitor safety concerns• Insufficient number of certified guides and tourism workers, labour shortages.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High global interest in Indigenous and nature-based tourism• Potential to develop a Cree-Jamesian UNESCO geopark• Year-round tourism growth via winter and cultural offerings.• Cree culinary and guided foraging experiences in high demand• Expansion of EV charging infrastructure and low-carbon travel• Tourism as a tool for economic reconciliation and education• Access to strong funding programs (e.g., EPRTNT, ISC, CED)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wildfires and climate change impacting infrastructure and seasons• High cost of air travel to and within the territory• Short tourism season affected by weather and insects• Slow adoption of digital tools and booking platforms• Cultural misappropriation or visitor misunderstanding of protocols

Risk Mitigation Matrix

A summary of key threats and the corresponding strategies to manage or reduce their impact on the tourism sector in Eeyou Istchee.

Risk / Threat	Mitigation Strategies
Wildfires and climate change impacting infrastructure and seasons.	Implement climate-resilient infrastructure plans; prioritize emergency preparedness and fire-smart community training; develop off-season and indoor tourism products.
High cost of air travel to and within the territory.	Advocate for subsidized regional airfare through government programs; develop road-trip packages targeting drive markets in Quebec and Ontario.
Short tourism season affected by weather and insects.	Develop year-round tourism offerings (e.g., northern lights, winter festivals); promote indoor and cultural tourism; offer bug-preparedness kits/info.
Slow adoption of digital tools and booking platforms.	Invest in training and support for tourism operators on digital tools.
Cultural misappropriation or visitor misunderstanding of protocols.	Create mandatory visitor orientation materials; promote Cree-led cultural interpretation; establish Indigenous Tourism Code of Ethics.

Strategic Action Plan and Timeline (2025-2030)

A detailed roadmap of strategic projects and their implementation timeline, organized by strategic pillar.

Pillar 1: Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

Project/Initiative	Start Date	End Date	Lead Organization(s)	Notes
Apply for GreenStep certification for COTA (organizational level)	25/04	25/08	COTA + Sustainability Consultants	Achieve base certification and build capacity for regional standards
Train tourism operators in sustainability and support GSTC/GreenStep certification	25/10	27/10	COTA + EIT + Sustainability Consultants	Pilot certifications with 2–3 operators before wider rollout. Focus on climate adaptation and low-impact practices
Support communities to install EV charging stations at key tourism sites	25/06	27/12	COTA + Hydro-Québec + Municipalities	Coordinate grants, prepare infrastructure plans
	25/02	26/06	COTA + Training Partners	

Pillar 2: Cultural Integrity and Immersive Experiences

Project/Initiative	Start Date	End Date	Lead Organization(s)	Notes
Train tourism operators in cultural interpretation	26/01	27/12	COTA + Training Partners	Emphasis on storytelling, Cree protocols, and cultural safety
Create Indigenous Tourism Code of Ethics and visitor education materials	25/12	25/06	COTA + EIT	Distribute before peak travel periods
Develop and promote Cree culinary and foraging tours	26/01	27/12	COTA + Local Chefs + Elders	Feature seasonal packages, local ingredients, forest walks

Pillar 3: Governance and Community Leadership

Project/Initiative	Start Date	End Date	Lead Organization(s)	Notes
Establish Destination Governance Organizations (DGOs)	26/01	28/12	COTA + Community DGOs	Create governance structure, roles, MOU templates
Develop Destination Master Plans for each Cree Nation	25/02	26/03	COTA + Local Tourism Committees	Align with local needs, sustainability and cultural goals

Pillar 4: Innovation, Technology, and Data

Project/Initiative	Start Date	End Date	Lead Organization(s)	Notes
Expand online booking systems and digital tools for operators	25/03	29/12	EIT + Tech Partner	Ensure mobile-friendly, Cree-language accessible systems
Deliver AI training and pilot AI-based tourism tools	25/07	29/12	COTA + EIT + Innovation Partners	Explore applications in digital planning, marketing, and visitor services
Implement a data management system to collect and monitor sustainability goals	26/02	30/03	COTA + EIT + Tech Partner	Monitoring system that can help hotels and communities accurately measure against our sustainability goals.
Deliver DGO training and develop governance tools and templates	26/04	30/03	COTA	Focus on capacity building, planning templates, monitoring and model policies

Pillar 5: Year-Round and Diversified Offerings

Project/Initiative	Start Date	End Date	Lead Organization(s)	Notes
Launch winter and year-round tourism experiences	26/04	29/12	COTA + EIT + Local Operators	Consider electric snowmobiling, northern lights, indoor cultural events
Position flagship experiences (e.g., Nibiischii, Wiinipaakw Tours, cultural packages)	25/03	27/03	EIT + Tour Operators	Bundle and market flagship experiences internationally
Work with Aventure Écotourisme Québec (AEQ) for accreditation and risk management training	25/08	26/03	COTA + EIT + Training Partners	Help Cree operators receive risk management training and accreditation based on national and international best practices

Pillar 6: Marketing and Promotion

Brand Awareness Strategy

Promote the destination by sparking interest among potential targets through the creation of unique and exclusive micro- destinations.

Consideration and Conversion Strategy

Guide and advise potential visitors to engage their interest in local destinations and simplify their planning.

Partner Mobilization and Development Strategy

Generate new revenue streams by boosting member participation in the two RTAs' marketing activities, thereby cultivating a sense of belonging and collective pride.

Alignment with Québec Tourism Strategy

This strategy has been intentionally developed to align with the Government of Québec's "Stratégie de croissance durable du tourisme 2025–2030". The table below outlines key areas of convergence:

Québec Pillar		Cree Tourism Alignment
1	Destination Identity	Pillar 2: Cultural Integrity and Immersive Experiences — Showcases Cree-led, place-based cultural tourism.
2	Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism	Pillar 1: Sustainable and Responsible Tourism — GreenStep certification, EV readiness, climate resilience.
3	Economic Development and Regional Vitality	Pillars 3 & 5: Governance and Year-Round Offerings — Community plans, new experiences, job creation.
4	Innovation and Workforce	Pillar 4: Innovation and Technology — Digital marketing, data use, training programs, and tech adoption.
5	High-potential Tourism sectors	All Pillars — Indigenous tourism is at the core of the strategy for Eeyou Istchee and includes support and promotion for nature and winter experience development.

This alignment ensures that Eeyou Istchee contributes to and benefits from broader provincial initiatives while asserting Cree leadership in the future of sustainable and Indigenous tourism in Québec.

Implementation and Governance Structure

Community-Led Governance

At the heart of this strategy is a model of governance that empowers each Cree Nation to lead local tourism development. Through the creation of **Destination Governance Organizations (DGOs)**, every community will have the ability to guide its own tourism vision while contributing to a unified regional brand. Each DGO will be supported with training, technical services, and planning tools coordinated by COTA and EIT.

Roles and Responsibilities

Entity	Roles and Contributions
Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA)	Strategic coordination, operator support, training, technical services, and infrastructure advisory.
Eeyou Istchee Tourism (EIT)	Marketing, product development, visitor services, community branding, and digital tools support.
Community DGOs	Local planning, implementation of tourism projects, coordination of cultural events and businesses.
Cree Nation Government & Local Governments	Alignment with land-use planning, permitting, infrastructure, and community development plans.
Partners (provincial, federal, private)	Investment, co-marketing, innovation partnerships, and tourism capacity building.

Integration and Oversight

COTA and EIT will work in tandem to:

- Provide technical support and mentoring to local DGOs
- Monitor regional strategy progress and update community plans
- Ensure alignment with funding programs and provincial priorities
- Facilitate annual review forums and knowledge exchange events

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting

Effective implementation of this strategy depends on consistent monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management. This section outlines how progress will be tracked, results reported, and learnings applied across the region.

Objectives of Monitoring

- Track implementation progress of strategic actions and initiatives
- Measure outcomes related to sustainability, economic development, and community engagement
- Identify challenges and adapt approaches accordingly
- Support transparency and shared accountability

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Focus Area	Example KPIs
Sustainable Tourism	# of operators GreenStep/GSTC certified, # of eco-infrastructure projects
Cultural Experience & Preservation	# of Elder- or artist-led tours
Business and Employment Growth	# of Cree-owned tourism businesses supported
Seasonality & Visitation Patterns	Visitor volume by season, average length of stay
Digital Access and Marketing	Online booking availability, web and social traffic per operator
Community Leadership	# of active DGOs, # of community Master Plans completed or updated

Evaluation Cycle

Quarterly Check-ins	Annual Regional Review
With local DGOs and partners to review progress and address emerging issues	Led by COTA and EIT to compile progress across all communities
Public Reporting	Midpoint Review
Annual Report shared with stakeholders, community members, and funding bodies	Full strategy assessment to evaluate impact and make course corrections for 2028–2030

Strategic Targets (2025-2030)

These measurable targets support the achievement of the vision and objectives outlined in this strategy. They will guide community planning, partner engagement, and performance monitoring across the region.

🟢 Sustainability and Climate Resilience

- At least **5 tourism operators and/or communities** achieve GSTC or GreenStep certification by 2030.
- **EV charging infrastructure** installed in **at least 3 Cree communities** by 2027.
- All 9 DGOs receive sustainability and climate adaptation training by 2028.

🟡 Cultural Integrity and Immersive Experiences

- Deliver **3 new Elder-led or culture-based experiences** region-wide by 2028.
- Launch a **Cree Indigenous Tourism Code of Ethics** and distribute across 100% of operators by 2026.
- Host **at least 1 annual Cree-led tourism event or cultural showcase** by 2030.

🟠 Digital Innovation and Operator Support

- Ensure **at least 25% of Cree tourism operators** offer online booking by 2027.
- Deliver digital and customer service training to **10 operators or tourism workers** by 2027.

🟣 Governance and Community Leadership

- Establish and operationalize **Destination Governance Organizations (DGOs)** in **all 9 Cree Nations** by 2028.
- Develop or update **Destination Master Plans** for all 9 communities by 2026.

● **Product and Market Development**

- Launch **at least 1 experience or packages** (e.g., Nibiischii, Wiinipaakw Tours + inland stays) by 2028.
- Promote **winter tourism products** in at least **3 markets** (Québec, Ontario, international) by 2027.

Marketing and Promotion

Generate New Travelers

Increase audience engagement with the Eeyou Istchee Baie-James region by 2% per year, using targeted communications campaigns to raise awareness of the destination.

Boost Traffic to the Website

Increase the number of visits to certain pages of the destination's web site by 5% by 2028, by developing informative content and tools tailored to the needs of our audiences.

Generate New Revenue Streams

Increase member participation with TBJ and EIT in marketing activities by 5% by 2028, by implementing incentive initiatives and bolstering collaboration with members.

Adaptive Management

This strategy is designed to be flexible and responsive. Community feedback, new funding opportunities, or emerging challenges (e.g., climate disruptions) may lead to revised actions or updated timelines. All changes will be guided by the strategy's core vision and Cree values.

Appendices

Appendix A — Methodology

The Eeyou Istchee Tourism Strategy 2025-2030 was developed in collaboration with the World Centre of Excellence for Destinations (CED). The process followed CED's *System of Measures for Excellence in Destinations (SMED)* protocol.

System of Measures for Excellence in Destinations (SMED): The SMED process, developed by the World Centre of Excellence for Destinations, aims to engage stakeholders in order to produce feasible, concrete actions in support of sustainable tourism development. The SMED is an action-oriented, stakeholder-focused model that aims to build on strengths, identify issues, and develop concrete and feasible recommendations for ongoing improvement.

The consultative work on this strategy began in 2023, concluding in 2024 with a public presentation of the findings. The final report was published in 2025, at the conclusion of the 2020-2025 Eeyou Istchee Tourism Strategy.

The following steps were taken as part of the SMED process:

1. Creation of destination profile & stakeholder database: Prior to consultations, a destination profile of Eeyou Istchee was developed by CED experts. Additionally, a database of stakeholders was created for each Cree community, ensuring a well-rounded and targeted strategic approach.

2. Start-up seminar: Stakeholders were invited to a seminar to learn fundamental concepts and practices related to tourism destinations.

3. Community workshops: A workshop was offered in each community, covering sustainability, governance, activities, and services. These workshops constitute the core part of the SMED. The workshop schedule was as follows:

November 2023	Whapmagoostui
March 2024	Oujé-Bougoumou, Mistissini, Waswanipi
June 2024	Chisasibi, Wemindji, Nemaska, Waskaganish, Eastmain

As part of the workshops, participants completed four questionnaires:

- Questionnaire 1: Introduction to the SMED.
- Questionnaire 2: Motivations for visiting the destination.
- Questionnaire 3: Evaluation of the destination's performance by category.
- Questionnaire 4: Perceptions of the destination's tourist actors.

Once participants had completed the questionnaires, the CED experts led a session to discuss the results, inviting participants to suggest improvements for the destination's performance.

5. Community Surveys: To maximize community input, online surveys following the SMED methodology were promoted to community members via social media and scannable QR codes. These surveys were shared directly following the in-person workshops to ensure consistency in the data and process.

Happiness Index Tool: To ensure community well-being was integrated into our tourism strategy, CED also distributed the Happiness Index questionnaire during community visits. By considering these results in our plan, we can develop tourism in a way that strengthens sustainability and quality of life (QoL) in our communities.

6. Public Presentation: After receiving feedback from the communities, a preliminary strategy and list of recommended actions was compiled by CED. In following the SMED protocol, these findings were shared publicly with acknowledgement given to participants and supporters of the project. A formal report and summary sheet was later distributed to stakeholders.

Fall 2024

Public Presentation at COTA Annual General Assembly

Fall 2025

Formal report and summary sheet distributed to COTA members and communities

Appendix B — Definitions and Acronyms

- **COTA** — Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association
- **EIT** — Eeyou Istchee Tourism
- **DGO** — Destination Governance Organization
- **GSTC** — Global Sustainable Tourism Council
- **SMED** — System of Measures for Excellence in Destinations
- **AEQ** — Aventure Écotourisme Québec

Appendix C — Reference Documents

- JBNQA — James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (section 28.4 and 28.6)
- Entente de mandat 2022-2026 (EIT core funding agreement)
- Quebec Sustainable Tourism Growth Strategy 2025-2030
- SMED Community Workshop Reports (2024)
- 2025 COTA Presentation and Strategic Summary

Appendix D — Contact Information

For inquiries regarding this strategy, please contact the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association (COTA) / Eeyou Istchee Tourism (EIT):

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