

2025/26 OHTO Impact Report

Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization (RT011)

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INTRODUCTION TO ONTARIO'S HIGHLANDS

Executive Summary

TOURISM - A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY VITALITY, RESILIENCE & IDENTITY

Tourism in Ontario's Highlands is more than an economic engine. It is a catalyst for community vitality, resilience, and identity. Through an integrated model of destination marketing, industry development, and research, the Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization (OHTO) is transforming how tourism contributes to rural communities, ensuring growth is not only measurable, but sustainable, inclusive, and aligned with the needs of the region.

This 2025/26 fiscal impact report highlights how OHTO's integrated, values-driven approach is delivering meaningful impact - growing the visitor economy, strengthening the tourism industry, and advancing a future where tourism contributes meaningfully to the well-being of the region. It highlights how tourism, when guided by shared values and strategic collaboration, becomes a powerful force for rural destinations - connecting people, place, and opportunity across Ontario's Highlands.



Ontario's Highlands: A Region Defined by Place + Purpose

Spanning six counties and 45 municipalities, Ontario's Highlands is one of the largest and most rural tourism regions in the province—covering more than 23,000 square kilometres of forests, waterways, farmland, and vibrant small communities.

Defined by its natural beauty and rural character, the region offers visitors a rare combination of authentic experiences, accessible outdoor adventure, and a deep connection to place. For residents, these same qualities contribute to a high quality of life, making tourism not just an economic driver, but a key component of community well-being.

**ONTARIO'S HIGHLANDS IS NOT JUST
A DESTINATION - IT IS A PLACE
WHERE TOURISM AND COMMUNITY
ARE DEEPLY CONNECTED.**

Tourism as a Catalyst for Community Strength

A person wearing a red jacket is holding a green cup up to the sun, creating a lens flare effect. The background shows a sunset over a field of bare trees.

In Ontario's Highlands, the visitor economy plays a critical role in sustaining local businesses, supporting employment, and enhancing community vitality. From main street shops and accommodations to outdoor outfitters and cultural experiences, tourism creates opportunities that extend far beyond the visitor experience.

However, maximizing these benefits requires a coordinated and strategic approach—one that aligns tourism growth with community priorities and long-term sustainability.

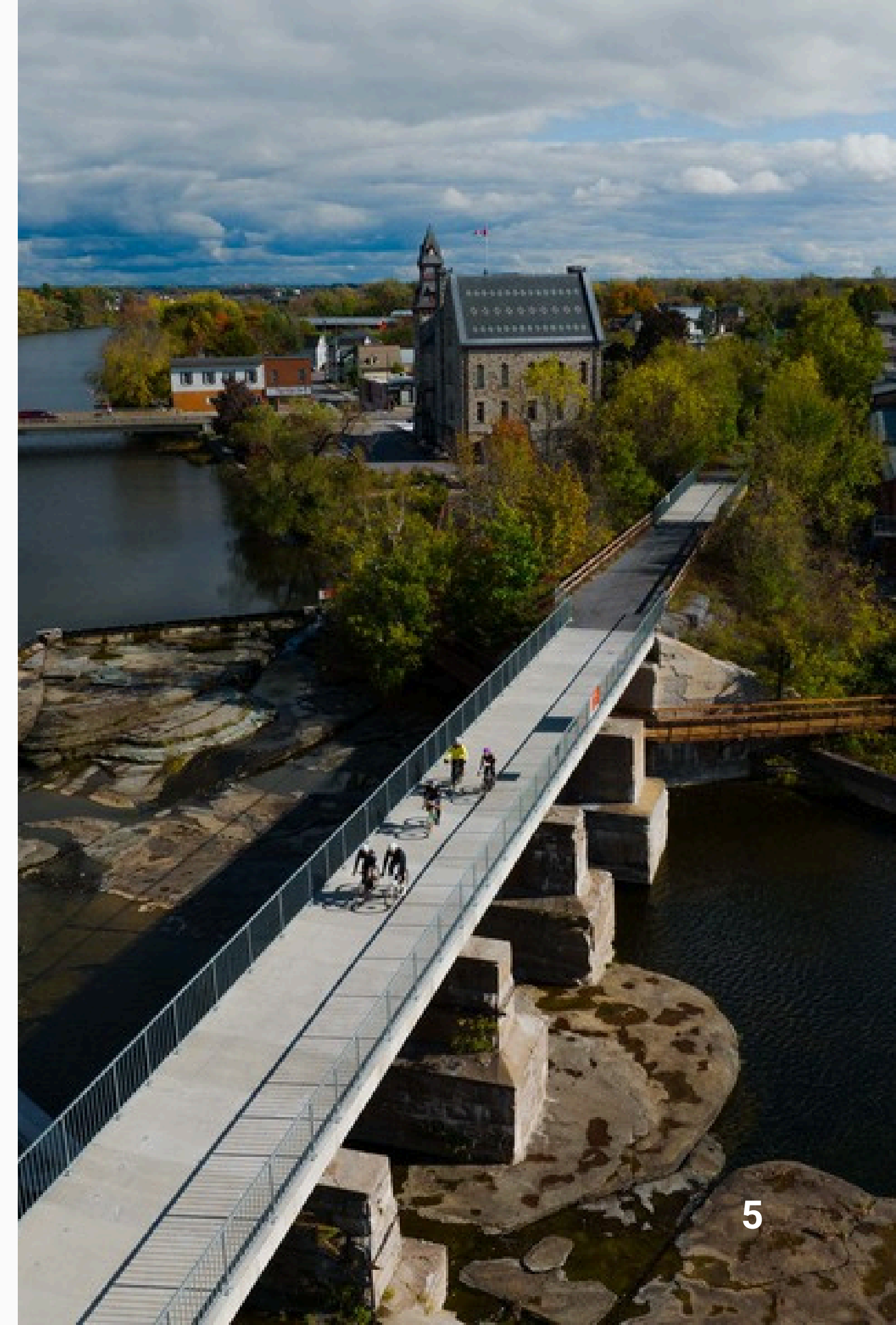
OHTO: Leading Regional Tourism Development

For more than 15 years, the Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization (OHTO) has served as the region's designated Regional Tourism Organization (RTO-11), funded by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming.

OHTO's role is to **strengthen communities through tourism** by:

- Building regional partnerships
- Delivering targeted marketing and development programs
- Providing industry with tools, training, and insights
- Supporting sustainable destination growth

This work ensures that tourism development is not only competitive, but also balanced, inclusive, and aligned with the needs of the region.



An Integrated Operational Framework

OHTO's impact is driven by a coordinated model built on three interconnected pillars:

DESTINATION MARKETING

Visitor: Driving awareness, engagement, and visitation through targeted campaigns and storytelling

Industry: Raising awareness of the importance of tourism and increase participation in capacity building programming.

INDUSTRY EQUIPPING PROGRAMMING

Providing operators and communities with the tools, knowledge and resources they need to thrive.

RESEARCH & PLANNING

Leveraging data and insights to guide strategic, sustainable development.

A Values-Driven Approach: Wander Sustainably

At the heart of OHTO's work is its commitment to Wander Sustainably - its responsible tourism approach for both visitor and industry-facing initiatives delivered by OHTO.

Since adopting this approach in 2021, OHTO has embedded these principles and their values across all aspects of its programming - from marketing and product development to industry training and partnerships.



**VALUE THROUGH VALUES: TOURISM THAT
RESPECTS PLACE, SUPPORTS PEOPLE, AND
SUSTAINS THE FUTURE.**

THIS APPROACH IS GROUNDED IN THREE GUIDING PRINCIPLES:



Inclusivity - Treat all individuals with respect, regardless of their background, beliefs, abilities, or identities (ie. 2SLGBTQIA+).



Community Alignment - Foster harmony, cooperation, and shared values within our community through building relationships, promoting collaboration, and working collectively toward common goals of tourism success.



Sustainability – Make choices that prioritize environmental, social, and economic well-being for both the present and the future needs of our communities.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white lace-trimmed dress, stands in a field of purple lavender. She is holding a woven basket filled with lavender flowers and looking upwards with a smile. The background is a soft-focus green landscape with trees.

IMPACT ON THE VISITOR ECONOMY

OHTO: Increasing Exposure to the Visitor Economy

OHTO's destination marketing model operates as a connected ecosystem that moves visitors from awareness to conversion. Provincial awareness generated by Destination Ontario is amplified through OHTO's Come Wander platform, which then channels engagement through regional and county partners before driving traffic directly to tourism operators.

This integrated approach ensures that marketing investment translates directly into visitation, engagement, and economic impact across Ontario's Highlands.

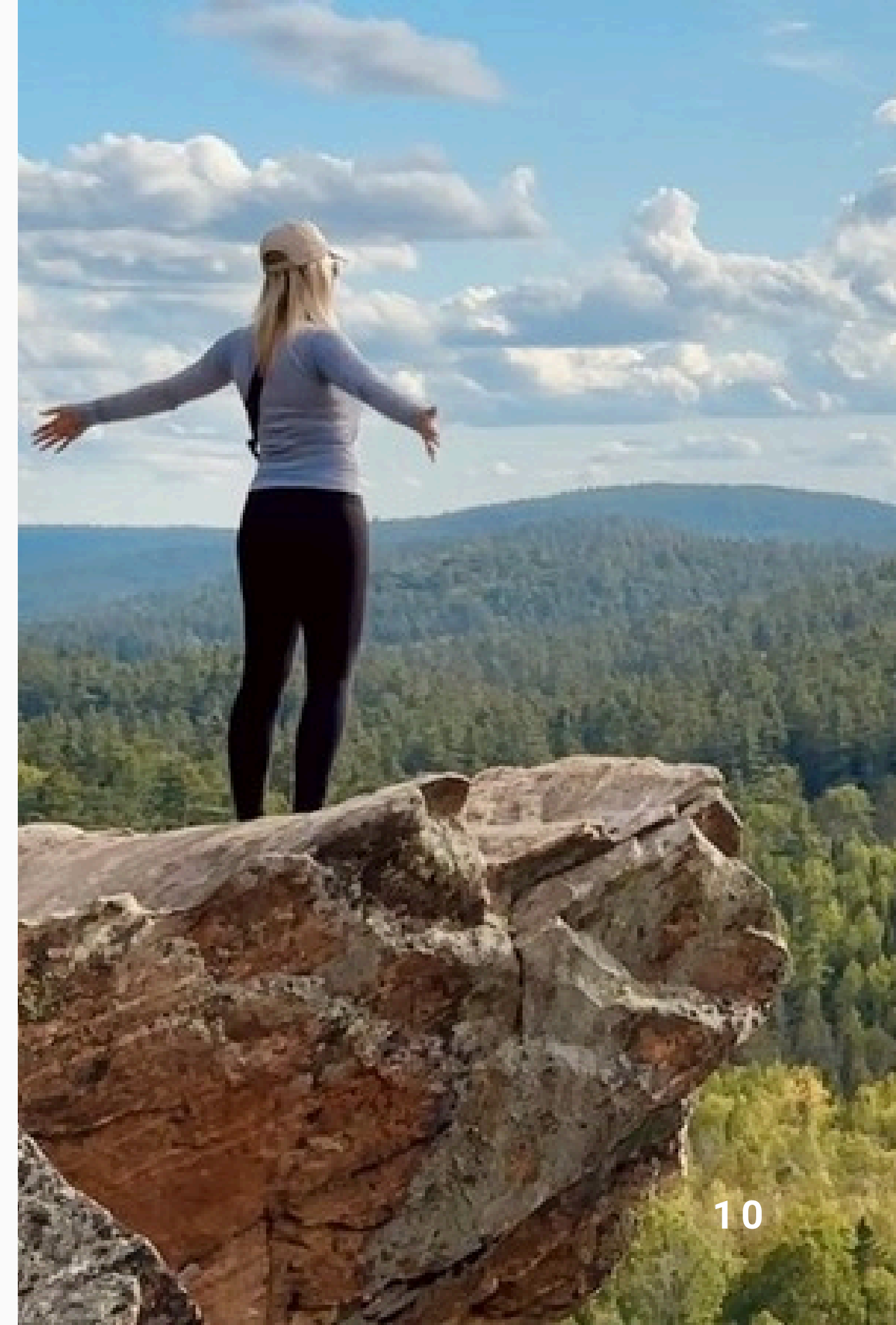
Always-On Marketing That Drives Measurable Results

At the core of OHTO's strategy is a year-round, digital-first content engine designed to capture attention, inspire travel, and convert interest into bookings.

2025/26 Content Performance

- 105 stories published
- 411,935 pageviews
- 281,658 total users reached
- 29,417 outbound clicks to operators
- 3,889 itinerary downloads

Impact: Continuous storytelling ensures the Ontario's Highlands region remains visible, relevant, and competitive, while directly driving traffic to businesses across the region, all-year round. This keeps the Ontario's Highlands region front of mind for visitors while providing information needed for trip planning and execution.



Amplified Reach Through Strategic Campaigns

OHTO leverages partnerships and targeted campaigns to extend reach, target niche markets, and maximize return on marketing investment.

CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS

Destination Ontario Spotlight Campaign

- 7.65M impressions
- 92,466 pageviews
- 4,382 referrals to operators
- 3,103 itinerary downloads

Village Media Campaign

- 358,000 impressions
- 3,600 clicks

Ontario By Bike Activations

52,000+ content views
per campaign activation
(2 activations)

Impact: Collaborative campaigns significantly expand reach within existing and new markets, while maintaining strong conversion to operator-level engagement.



Digital Audience Growth and Engagement

OHTO's digital ecosystem shows continued growth and engagement across platforms for consumer-facing channels:

- 73,262 total followers on consumer-facing channels
- 481,038 social interactions on consumer-facing channels

Impact: Strong social engagement signals meaningful audience engagement, connection to new audiences, and increased likelihood of visitation from travellers to our region.

ComeWander.ca: Turning Inspiration into Action

ComeWander.ca serves as the central conversion engine, bridging visitor inspiration with real economic outcomes. Operators are embedded directly into stories and itineraries through the website's Backpack function and supports users with trip planning to the region.

Operator Integration Results

- 118 claimed business listings in OHTO's Member Portal (19 new listings)
- 52 published profile listings on ComeWander.ca
- 819 backpack listings supporting itinerary planning
- 29,417 direct outbound referrals to operators

Impact: Marketing doesn't stop at awareness - OHTO delivers measurable referrals that drive real business outcomes.

Asset Development Partnership: Small Towns Ontario

The Asset Development Partnership for the Small Town Ontario campaign was a collaboration with County DMOs to gather video and photo assets in 2025 to use in a partnership marketing campaign in 2026 to promote small town visitation within the region. The campaign featured the following communities:

- Carleton Place, Lanark County
- Eganville, Ottawa Valley
- Sharbot Lake, Frontenac County
- Cloyne and Area, Lennox & Addington County
- Minden, Haliburton Highlands

The project led to the development of:

- 6 - 60 second consumer videos
- 6 - 30 second consumer videos
- 5 - 30 second industry videos
- 300+ photos

Impact: Leveraged resources with County DMO partners to reduce duplication and enhance asset libraries with new video and photos.



Local Wanderer Program

2025-2026

The Local Wanderer program is a micro-influencer content development program generating authentic stories, photos, and video assets shared on the website and social media. This program features longform, inspirational content highlighting Ontario's Highlands' many communities and unique experiences. In 2025-2026, the following was developed:

- **13 Local Wanderer stories** generating:
 - 4,000 page views
 - 789 click-to-operators
- **250+ photos**
- **13 reels** generating:
 - 69,678 reel views
 - 2,678 reel interactions

Impact: Leveraged Wanderer's networks to reach new audiences and extend reach, while creating authentic stories visitors trust.



Niche Marketing Driving High-Value Visitation

Flagship programs like Ride the Highlands (operating 12+ years) continue to attract high-yield travellers and support regional dispersal.

The Ride the Highlands program has been operating for over 12 years, and key activities include: growing the number of motorcycle friendly businesses in the region, development of additional routes, map production, and implementing a comprehensive digital marketing strategy, including influencer partnerships.

Impact: Niche experiences strengthen the region's brand while increasing length of stay and visitor spend.

RIDE THE HIGHLANDS RESULTS

- 221,072 website visits (+14.6% YoY)
- 363,408 blog views (+15.2% YoY)
- 7,617 maps distributed
- 1,283 souvenirs distributed
- 12,100 Email database subscribers (+8.02% YOY)
- 18,604 Facebook fans (+5.95%)
- Highest-impact initiative delivered by OHTO for consistent year-over-year satisfaction from participating operators (source: OHTO's 2025/26 Impact & Feedback Survey)

Expanding Global Reach Through Travel Trade

Now in its 11th year, OHTO's Travel Trade Partnership initiative extends the region's reach beyond domestic audiences by collectively marketing the region through coordinated trade sales, product development, and relationship-building efforts. Key activities delivered include export-ready itineraries, route maps, and partner packages, alongside hosted familiarization tours that provide first-hand experience of the region to buyers and media.

Travel Trade Partnership Results

- 25 regional partners collaborating
- 700+ global trade contacts
- 111 buyer appointments
- 600+ international agents engaged through webinars
- 1,100+ professionals reached through campaigns

Impact: The Travel Trade Partnership transforms Ontario's Highlands from a regional destination into a globally marketable product—embedding local operators within international sales channels and generating long-term, high-value visitation.



Wander Sustainably In Action

The “If Nature Had a Voice” 2025 campaign exemplifies OHTO’s commitment to responsible tourism, and demonstrates how marketing can influence both visitation and behaviour:

- 12,002 pageviews
- 489 operator referrals
- 28,475 social impressions

Impact: Responsible travel messaging is embedded into the visitor journey, shaping how people experience the region, not just where they go.

IMPACT ON THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

OHTO: Strengthening the Tourism Industry

Tourism growth depends on more than marketing, it also requires a strong, connected, and capable industry. OHTO's programming strengthens the tourism industry by equipping operators and its communities with the tools, knowledge, and partnerships needed to deliver high-quality visitor experiences.

Through integrated marketing, industry-equipping and research initiatives, OHTO ensures the region's tourism offering remains competitive, resilient, and aligned with evolving market demand.



Building a Connected Tourism Ecosystem

OHTO plays a central convening role across the region:

- 12 outreach engagements/meetings with local County DMOs, municipalities, and economic development offices
- 10 OHTO On The Go speaking engagements attended within and outside the region
- 3 OHTO Mix & Mingle industry networking events (20–30 attendees each)

Impact: A more aligned tourism ecosystem strengthens collaboration, reduces duplication and increases the efficiency and effectiveness of regional tourism development investment.

Industry Engagement & Participation

OHTO's integrated approach ensures operators are active participants in the tourism ecosystem and are supported through content participation (stories, itineraries, campaigns) and partnership opportunities.

Key Engagement Indicators

- 1,000+ operators and partners in the OHTO tourism network
- Strong newsletter engagement (20.9% open rate, 3.3% CTR)
- OHTO membership growth (+8.3% YoY)
- 24,000+ pageviews on OHTO.ca (21 new industry-facing inspiring stories on OHTO.ca)
- 1,560+ followers on industry-facing social channels (6% average engagement rate)

Impact: Strong engagement demonstrates relevance and value, driving deeper participation in tourism development.



**MEMBER TESTIMONIAL SUBMITTED DURING OHTO'S
MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGN IN SPRING 2026**

**"OHTO's support goes beyond marketing —
it directly strengthens infrastructure, builds long-
term tourism assets, and helps small operators
create experiences that draw visitors to the region."**

— Back Forty Artisan Cheese

Capacity Building that Delivers Results

OHTO's industry-equipping programming continues to deliver measurable value across the region, and through its **Expand Your Knowledge** program, operators are supported with education, training and resources aligned with their business development needs. Since launching in 2023, 662 unique viewers have watched 132+ hours of webinar recordings delivered through the Expand Your Knowledge program.

In addition, OHTO collaborated with the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario (TIAO) on the Skills That Travel initiative that delivered workforce training, recruitment and retention strategies for operators, and connected businesses with training pathways. OHTO also partnered with Haliburton County to host a Tourism Workplace Accessibility Clinic with Tourism HR Canada as part of the Haliburton County Business Summit in September 2025.

Impact: Training translates directly into improved visitor experiences and stronger business performance.

EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE PROGRAM OUTPUTS 2025/26

- 9 webinars delivered
- 395 registrations / 225 live participants
- 109 recording views + 87 resource downloads

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IMPACT

- 10 training initiatives delivered (up from 7 initiatives in 2024/25)
- 263 total participants across training initiatives (up from 143 participants in 2024/25)
- **70% reported improved business capacity and customer service** (source: OHTO's 2025/26 Impact & Feedback Survey)

Member Portal: Central Hub for Industry Support

The OHTO Member Portal serves as a centralized platform for learning and engagement with the industry, and continues to evolve as a key platform for capacity building:

- 118 registered members (+19 YoY)
- Access to 4 courses, 30+ webinar recordings and 8 research reports
- Engagement includes course completions, resource downloads, and webinar participation

Impact: A scalable, digital platform delivers self-directed learning for operators and communities and enables continuous industry engagement across a dispersed rural region.



Supporting Product & Experience Development

OHTO continues to strengthen the tourism offering through product development leadership, most notably the Eastern Ontario Rail Trail Loop (EORTL) project partnership initiative. This collaborative product development initiative is establishing a new signature cycling experience that leverages the existing 320km trail loop connecting the Counties of Frontenac, Lanark and Renfrew, the Town of Smiths Falls and the Township of Rideau Lakes.

OHTO also offers operators hands-on development support through:

- OHTO Discovery Calls (29 one-on-one consultations with staff)
- Experiential tourism training (partnership with RTO9 and Frontenac County - 45+ participants at the annual Frontenac Business Retreat)
- Letters of Support (10 letters were provided to support funding program applications)

Impact: Product development ensures there is a compelling, market-ready experience behind every marketing message.

EASTERN ONTARIO RAIL TRAIL LOOP

- Projected \$65M direct annual economic impact (\$100M in total economic impact)
- Collaborative partnership led by OHTO with 5 municipal partners and 1 conservation authority
- +\$170K invested by Project Partners and the Federal Government
- 2 new itineraries and cycling experiences launched
- Supported by 5-Year Roadmap and guided by a vision to be export-ready by 2030

Research & Data-Driven Decision Making

OHTO's growing research capacity is strengthening industry decision-making and investment readiness, and is fostering a data-driven tourism ecosystem:

- Unlocking Tourism Trends 2026 Edition webinar and report (89 registrations, 42 attendees)
- 8 research reports delivered and available via OHTO's Member Portal
- collaborative Research Program Partnership with 3 counties to leverage resources for data collection and analysis

OHTO's 2025/26 Impact & Feedback Survey findings demonstrate strong value from the industry:

- **70% report positive impact from OHTO programming** (up from 60% reported in 2024/25)
- **67% say programs meet expectations** (up from 55% reported in 2024/25)
- 61% rated their experience with OHTO programming as 4 or 5 out of 5

Impact: This confirms that access to data and insights directly supports business planning, increases confidence in decision-making, and supports investment readiness.

Wander Sustainably in Industry Programming

OHTO embeds responsible tourism across all industry-facing initiatives, for example:

- Training on sustainability best practices and inclusivity through the Expand Your Knowledge program
- Promotion of certification pathways (Sustainable Tourism certification - GreenStep, Rainbow Registered accreditation)
- Launch of the Wander Sustainably with OHTO course and assessment in the Member Portal

Impact: Tourism growth in the region is balanced with environmental stewardship, inclusivity, and community-aligned development that enhances the visitor experience and community quality of life.

ELEVATING THE VALUE OF TOURISM

Reframing Tourism's Role

Across the region, tourism supports local businesses, creates employment, and generates public revenue. But its true value extends beyond economics: tourism sustains cultural vibrancy, enhances community amenities, and strengthens connections between people and place.

Despite its contributions, tourism is often undervalued in policy and investment decisions, particularly in rural destinations. As identified through OHTO's work with its communities, the greatest challenge facing the tourism industry is not infrastructure or funding - it is perception.

Tourism is frequently viewed as discretionary rather than essential. This perception limits its influence in decision-making and reduces opportunities for long-term investment.

Opportunity: Elevating tourism as essential community infrastructure unlocks stronger investment, better planning, and more resilient communities in rural and tourism-dependent destinations.

**TOURISM IN ONTARIO'S
HIGHLANDS IS MORE THAN
AN ECONOMIC DRIVER
— IT IS A FOUNDATIONAL
CONTRIBUTOR TO
COMMUNITY WELL-BEING,
IDENTITY, AND RESILIENCE.**

Tourism is a Community Builder

OHTO's approach positions tourism as a tool for strengthening rural communities:

- Supporting local businesses and entrepreneurship
- Enhancing quality of life through shared amenities
- Creating pride of place and cultural connection
- Attracting investment and talent to rural regions

With a **65% average tourism dependency across operators in the region**, tourism is a critical pillar of rural prosperity (source: OHTO's 2025 Tourism Performance & Sustainability Survey).

Connecting Visitor Experience and Resident Benefit

At its core, tourism in Ontario's Highlands is about shared experience - *"Tourism is Community and Community is Tourism"*.

Investments in tourism:

- Improve infrastructure that residents also rely on and benefit from
- Support vibrant downtowns and local services
- Encourage environmental stewardship and protection

This reinforces the need for community-aligned tourism development - a core principle of OHTO's Wander Sustainably approach.



A Responsible Path Forward

OHTO continues to lead a shift toward responsible tourism development, where success is measured not only by growth, but by balance:

- Economic vitality
- Environmental sustainability
- Social inclusivity

Through its integrated programming - marketing, industry development, and research - OHTO is demonstrating that tourism can be both a driver of prosperity and a safeguard for the future.

Looking Ahead to 2026/27 and Beyond

As Ontario's Highlands moves forward, the opportunity is clear:

- Strengthen recognition of tourism's full value
- Align investment with community priorities
- Continue embedding Wander Sustainably principles across all initiatives

The future of tourism in Ontario's Highlands is not just about attracting visitors - it's about building stronger, more resilient communities for those who live here.

Thrive Together with OHTO

We are building a tourism industry community, one where we can all rely on one another to promote our mutual agenda: to create the very best, most successful, and vibrant rural tourism region in Ontario.

Ways you can engage with OHTO:

- Become a member
- Subscribe to our monthly industry newsletter, *Highlands Highlight*
- Follow us on social:
 - Facebook: OHTO Insider Facebook Page
 - X (Twitter): OHTO Insider
 - LinkedIn: Ontario's Highlands Tourism Organization | RTO-11

Visit www.ohito.ca for inspiring local success stories and information on current programming and partnership opportunities.

