



EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT & PREPAREDNESS IN TOURISM:

Indigenous Engagement Insights Report

May 25, 2026

Cover image: Buffalo and Pipe
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**TOURISM INDUSTRY
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA**

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Table of Contents

3 Executive
Summary

5 Project
Introduction

6 Methodology

7 Themes

10 Recommendations

12 Conclusion

13 References

14 Appendix:
Acknowledgement
and Contributors

This report was authored by Tatâga Inc. for the Tourism Emergency Preparedness initiative led by the Tourism Industry Association of Canada (TIAC) and funded through the Department of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada's (ISED) Small Business and Entrepreneurship Development Program (SBEDP). The report's findings and recommendations are solely considerations proposed by the report's authors and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the report sponsors, funders or project collaborators.



Executive Summary

Tourism is a major economic sector in Canada. In 2025, the tourism sector generated \$132.9 billion in revenues, contributed \$52.5 billion to Canada's GDP, and accounted for roughly 10% of the country's total workforce. Within this broader visitor economy, Indigenous tourism is a distinct and growing sector: in 2023, Indigenous tourism generated an estimated \$3.7 billion in revenues and directly contributed \$1.6 billion to GDP, while connecting visitors to Indigenous lands, cultures, knowledge systems, communities, and experiences.^[1]

This report summarizes engagement with Indigenous tourism operators and community members to better understand how emergencies are experienced, prepared for, responded to, and recovered from within Indigenous tourism contexts. The findings show that emergency management in Indigenous tourism extends beyond technical and operational planning. Participants across interviews consistently emphasized that emergency preparedness and recovery are shaped by relationships, local knowledge, land access, cultural responsibilities, and community capacity, particularly in rural and remote settings.

Four high-level and interconnected themes emerged from our engagement: relational approaches are central to safety, wellbeing is interconnected, Traditional Ecological Knowledge is safety infrastructure, and critical gaps exist between systems and lived experiences. Together, these themes highlight opportunities to strengthen Indigenous-led emergency preparedness for the tourism sector through practical tools, culturally grounded planning, improved local capacity, and stronger recognition of Indigenous tourism operators within emergency management systems.

[1] The Conference Board of Canada. (2025). Indigenous tourism sector impact in Canada. Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada, https://indigenoustourism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/indigenous-tourism-sector-impact-in-canada_jan2025.pdf



Hummingbird Approach

This visual summarizes the four interconnected themes that emerged through the engagement, using the hummingbird as a guiding metaphor for Indigenous approaches to emergency management that move with intention, care, speed, stewardship, and responsibility to all relations.

Emergency Management in Indigenous Tourism: 4 Interconnected Themes

1: Relational Approaches are Central to Safety

Emergency management in Indigenous tourism begins with kinship, trust, and responsibility to one another. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community emphasized that safety is carried through relationships before, during, and after crisis.

4: Critical Gaps Exist between Systems and Lived Experiences

Emergency systems do not always reflect the realities of Indigenous tourism communities, including access roads, hospital distance, service coverage, communications, and evacuation barriers. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community emphasized the need for planning grounded in place, infrastructure, and local response capacity.



2: Wellbeing is Interconnected

Emergency management must consider the wellbeing of people, land, animals, and community together. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community described recovery as relational and holistic, grounded in the understanding that everything is connected.

3: Traditional Ecological Knowledge is Safety Infrastructure

Traditional Ecological Knowledge functions as both an early warning system and a response system, carried through close relationships with the land, water, animals, seasons, and Elders. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community described TEK as place-based intelligence that helps communities recognize risk, prepare early, and respond in ways that protect people, land, and community.

A Hummingbird Approach

Like the ruby-throated hummingbird, Indigenous emergency management moves with purpose, speed, and care, guided by connection to all our relations.

Artist: Joseph Tapaquon
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Project Introduction

Indigenous tourism operators and communities are increasingly navigating emergencies that affect public safety, business continuity, land-based practice, cultural continuity, and community wellbeing. These risks are especially important given the growing role of Indigenous tourism within Canada’s visitor economy.^[2] Many Indigenous tourism experiences also depend on healthy lands, safe access routes, seasonal knowledge, and strong community relationships, making climate-driven emergencies and infrastructure disruptions especially relevant to the sector.^[3] Several operators described how wildfire smoke, road closures, changing weather patterns, and infrastructure disruptions directly affected visitor safety, business continuity, and access to cultural and land-based programming.

This report summarizes qualitative research conducted for the Tourism Emergency Preparedness initiative. Through engagement and conversation with Indigenous tourism operators, community representatives, and Indigenous emergency management practitioners, our goal was to form a deep understanding of how emergencies are experienced within Indigenous tourism contexts, and to identify gaps and opportunities for future emergency management, response, and recovery resources.



The findings are organized around four interconnected themes: relational approaches are central to safety, wellbeing is interconnected, Traditional Ecological Knowledge is safety infrastructure, and critical gaps exist between systems and lived experiences.

[2] Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. (2022). Building back better: Strategic recovery of Indigenous tourism in Canada 2022–2025. <https://indigenoustourism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ITAC-Building-Back-Better-2022-2025.pdf>

[3] Statistics Canada. (2025, April 8). Emergency preparedness and extreme weather experiences of First Nations people living off reserve, Métis and Inuit in Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250408/dq250408a-eng.htm>



Methodology

This project used an Indigenous, relational approach to engagement and analysis, informed by Shawn Wilson’s framing of research as ceremony and his emphasis on relational accountability throughout the research process.^[4] Engagement emphasized respectful conversation, participant agency, and responsibility to the people, places, and knowledge shared throughout the process. Participants could decline questions, speak off record, or end interviews at any time, and were not asked to share culturally sensitive knowledge outside appropriate protocols. Analysis was also relational: insights were developed by visiting with the data, working carefully with the information shared, and interpreting meaning with guidance from research participants so that themes which emerged were remained grounded in their experiences and Indigenous ways of knowing.

Analysis and Theme Identification

Interview notes, transcripts, and field reflections were reviewed for recurring examples, shared concerns, and practical experiences across participants. Rather than treating the interviews as one-time data points, the analysis involved visiting with the data, returning to what was shared, and working carefully with the meaning, relationships, and responsibilities carried in each conversation. Participants shaped the work not only by sharing their experiences, but also by helping validate the direction of the findings as the themes took form. Through this participatory process, themes emerged where participant experiences consistently pointed to similar issues across different contexts, including safety, preparedness, recovery, infrastructure, local knowledge, and community wellbeing. The final themes reflect both repeated patterns in the interviews and the deeper relationships between emergency management, Indigenous tourism operations, land, culture, and community care.

[4] Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing. <https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/research-is-ceremony-shawn-wilson>



Themes

The four themes emerged through an Indigenous-informed thematic synthesis of the interview notes, transcripts, and field reflections. Rather than applying a rigid coding structure, the analysis involved repeated reading, reflective analysis, and evaluation across participant perspectives, and careful organization of insights into patterns of meaning. The final themes were selected because they appeared consistently across interviews and reflected recurring concerns raised by tourism operators, community representatives, and emergency management practitioners. While participants spoke from distinct regional and professional contexts, several common patterns emerged related to safety, preparedness, recovery, infrastructure, and community well-being.

The themes also emerged through ongoing reflection on participant experiences and relationships between the issues discussed. This meant looking beyond repeated words or topics and paying attention to the relationships between safety, land, culture, business continuity, infrastructure, visitor care, community wellbeing, and recovery. Across the interviews, participants consistently showed that emergency management in Indigenous tourism is not only a technical process. It is also relational, cultural, emotional, and place-based.

Theme 1: Relational Approaches are Central to Safety

Emergency management in Indigenous tourism begins with kinship, trust, and responsibility to one another. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community emphasized that safety is carried through relationships before, during, and after crisis.

Participants across all interviews emphasized the importance of trust-based relationships in emergency preparedness and response, particularly in regions where formal emergency services may be delayed or limited. Participants described safety as being grounded in relationships. Several participants described relying on informal community networks, neighbors, guides, Elders, and local responders during emergency situations. As Shaylon Bourque of Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement shared, “*We just kind of rely on each other... to keep each other safe.*”



Theme 2: Wellbeing is Interconnected

Emergency management must consider the wellbeing of people, land, animals, and community together. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community described recovery as relational and holistic, grounded in the understanding that everything is connected.

Across interviews, participants consistently connected emergency recovery to broader issues of mental, emotional, cultural, and community well-being.

This theme routinely emerged through participant discussions of recovery, community care, mental health, housing, food security, grief, Ceremony, and the emotional impacts of emergency events. While participants described recovery differently depending on their local context, most emphasized that recovery could not be measured solely through business reopening or economic indicators, particularly in communities already navigating housing, grief, displacement, or cultural disruption.

Participants instead emphasized that emergency recovery cannot must be considered equally with people's physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing. As Mackenzie Brown of Warrior Women and former Director at Indigenous Tourism Alberta shared, *"Are they attending community events? Are they attending therapy? How many people are getting out and about and are doing okay? That for me is a better sign of success than being able to jump back into your business again."*

Theme 3: Traditional Ecological Knowledge is Safety Infrastructure

Traditional Ecological Knowledge functions as both an early warning system and a response system, carried through close relationships with the land, water, animals, seasons, and Elders. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community described TEK as place-based intelligence that helps communities recognize risk, prepare early, and respond in ways that protect people, land, and community.

Multiple participants described Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a practical and ongoing component of emergency preparedness, particularly in relation to weather observation, land conditions, seasonal change, harvesting practices, and environmental monitoring.



Examples included reading weather, water, wind, land conditions, seasonal change, harvesting cycles, cultural burning, oral history, and Elder knowledge as forms of preparedness and prevention. Participants described Traditional Ecological Knowledge as practical knowledge that supports decision-making, not as an add-on to emergency planning.

While participants described this knowledge in different ways depending on region and tourism activity, there was broad agreement that it should not be treated as secondary or symbolic within emergency planning systems. Several operators emphasized that land-based knowledge informed day-to-day decision-making around visitor safety, route planning, smoke exposure, and changing environmental conditions. Brad Robinson of Thrive Tours shared, *“You sort of have to live with nature, as opposed to enduring nature. We have action plans when we develop clean air quality and weather thresholds for go/no-go. When we know there are issues in current local conditions – we then have alternate plans we can adjust to. Also training guides to first aid and environmental literacy. Our guides also have a living obligation and opportunity to help support at the ground level.”*

Theme 4: Critical Gaps Exist between Systems and Lived Experiences

Emergency systems do not always reflect the realities of Indigenous tourism communities, including access roads, hospital distance, service coverage, communications, and evacuation barriers. Voices from the Indigenous tourism community emphasized the need for planning grounded in place, infrastructure, and local response capacity.

A recurring concern among operators and emergency management practitioners was the disconnect between formal emergency systems and the realities of Indigenous tourism operations, particularly in remote or northern regions.

Participants described gaps in infrastructure, response times, funding, communication, insurance, and jurisdictional coordination. They also emphasized that systems must be transparent about what they can and cannot provide, because overpromising support can create harm when communities and operators are already navigating urgent conditions.



Participants described recurring challenges related to communication delays, infrastructure limitations, unclear jurisdictional responsibilities, insurance barriers, and inconsistent access to emergency support. As Nick Mauro of Yukon First Nations Wildfire shared with us in his interview, “Be honest about what you can do... so you’re not giving people false hope.” While participants differed in their experiences with local emergency systems, most agreed that transparency, realistic expectations, and stronger local relationships were critical during emergencies.

Recommendations

Key Themes

1. *Relational Approaches are Central to Safety*
2. *Wellbeing is Interconnected*
3. *Traditional Ecological Knowledge is Safety Infrastructure*
4. *Critical Gaps Exist between Systems and Lived Experiences*

Recommendation 1: Advance Indigenous-Led Emergency Preparedness for the Tourism Sector Key Themes

Participants across interviews emphasized the importance of Indigenous-led planning processes that reflect local realities, land-based tourism operations, and existing community knowledge systems.

Indigenous tourism emergency preparedness should be designed with Indigenous tourism operators, communities, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous emergency management practitioners as central partners.^[5] This includes creating practical tools, training, planning resources, and response guidance that reflect the realities of land-based tourism, cultural programming, visitor safety, business continuity, and community wellbeing.

A strong next step would be to support an Indigenous-led advisory circle that can guide future emergency management resources, ensuring they are grounded in lived experience, regional realities, and the four interconnected themes identified through this work.

[5] Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. (2022). Building back better: Strategic recovery of Indigenous tourism in Canada 2022–2025. <https://indigenoustourism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ITAC-Building-Back-Better-2022-2025.pdf>



Recommendation 2: Invest in Relational, Place-Based, and Culturally Grounded Response Capacity

Several operators and practitioners identified gaps in local preparedness capacity, communication infrastructure, training access, and culturally appropriate recovery support. Participants consistently emphasized that effective emergency preparedness depends on relationships, local knowledge, cultural continuity, and realistic understanding of community conditions.

Emergency management systems should strengthen local capacity by investing in relationships, communication pathways, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, community-defined recovery, and practical infrastructure that supports Indigenous tourism operators before, during, and after emergencies.^[6] This includes improved access to planning supports, funding, insurance navigation, staff training, visitor communication tools, and culturally grounded recovery resources. These investments would help ensure Indigenous tourism operators are not only included in emergency systems, but are recognized as important leaders in preparedness, stewardship, and local response.

[6] United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. (2022). Words into action: Using traditional and Indigenous knowledges for disaster risk reduction. Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. (2022). Building back better: Strategic recovery of Indigenous tourism in Canada 2022–2025. <https://indigenoustourism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ITAC-Building-Back-Better-2022-2025.pdf>



Conclusion

This engagement highlights the importance of relationships, land, culture, and community realities in shaping emergency preparedness and recovery within Indigenous tourism.

A greater focus on wellbeing provides communities and operators with the ability to engage in emergency preparedness and respond in ways that reflect their own knowledge, responsibilities, and lived realities. The interview participants generously shared practical wisdom that points toward a stronger and more grounded approach to emergency preparedness. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of relationships, local knowledge, cultural continuity, and community realities in shaping effective emergency preparedness and recovery.

Moving forward, there is a clear opportunity to build on these insights in a positive and practical way. With continued Indigenous leadership, sector collaboration, and targeted investment, emergency management resources for Indigenous tourism can become more relevant, more usable, and more aligned with the communities and operators they are meant to support. This work provides a strong foundation for future tools, partnerships, and strategies that honors Indigenous knowledge, strengthen preparedness, and support the long-term resilience of Indigenous tourism across Canada.



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Appendix: Acknowledgement and Contributors

We are grateful to the contributors who generously shared their time, wisdom, and lived experience for this work. Their contributions helped ground the project in practical knowledge from Indigenous tourism, community, land-based, and emergency management contexts. Each participant brought a distinct perspective on how emergencies are experienced, prepared for, responded to, and recovered from across Indigenous tourism settings.

Contributor	Affiliation	Relevance to the Project
Brad Robinson	Thrive Tours (https://www.thrive-tours.ca/)	Thrive Tours is a premier Indigenous eco-tourism operator delivering land-based and cultural tourism experiences, making its perspective directly relevant to visitor safety, environmental risk assessment, operational decision-making, and the integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge into day-to-day tourism practice.
Nick Mauro	Yukon First Nations Wildfire (https://www.yfnwildfire.com/)	Yukon First Nations Wildfire (YFNW) is a partnership of eight Yukon First Nations stakeholders, providing emergency management and training services. With Elders, YFNW incorporates traditional knowledge and is visible in Yukon communities through our Initial Attack and Sustained Action wildfire programs.
Greg Hopf	Moccasin Trails (https://moccasintrails.com/)	Moccasin Trails is Indigenous-owned and deeply rooted in their Indigenous values, cultures, teachings, and beliefs. As an Indigenous tourism company delivering cultural experiences, Moccasin Trails provides valuable insight into wildfire disruption, client communication, cancellation impacts, business continuity, cultural care, and the role of community relationships in recovery.
Tim Patterson	Zuc'min Guiding (https://www.zucminguiding.com/)	Zuc'min Guiding operates in mountain-based and land-based tourism contexts where climate-driven hazards, access limitations, visitor movement, guide safety, and evacuation logistics are central to emergency preparedness and continuity planning.
Mackenzie Brown	Warrior Women (https://warriorwomen.ca/about-warrior-women/)	Warrior Women is an Indigenous tourism operator rooted in cultural, land-based, and seasonal experiences, making its perspective directly relevant to climate impacts on harvesting, programming, Ceremony, community wellbeing, operator vulnerability, and recovery after disruption. As a former Director at Indigenous Tourism Alberta, Mackenzie also brings critical sector-level insight into Indigenous tourism development, operator needs, and industry resilience.
Shaylon Bourque	Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement / Former Indigenous Tourism Alberta Employee	Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement provides a Métis community perspective shaped by rural and remote emergency realities, while Shaylon's former role with Indigenous Tourism Alberta adds sector-level insight into Indigenous tourism development, operator needs, infrastructure gaps, and localized preparedness supports.