

# Tourism Sustainability Assessment

*Nelson Kootenay Lake Tourism*

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## BACKGROUND

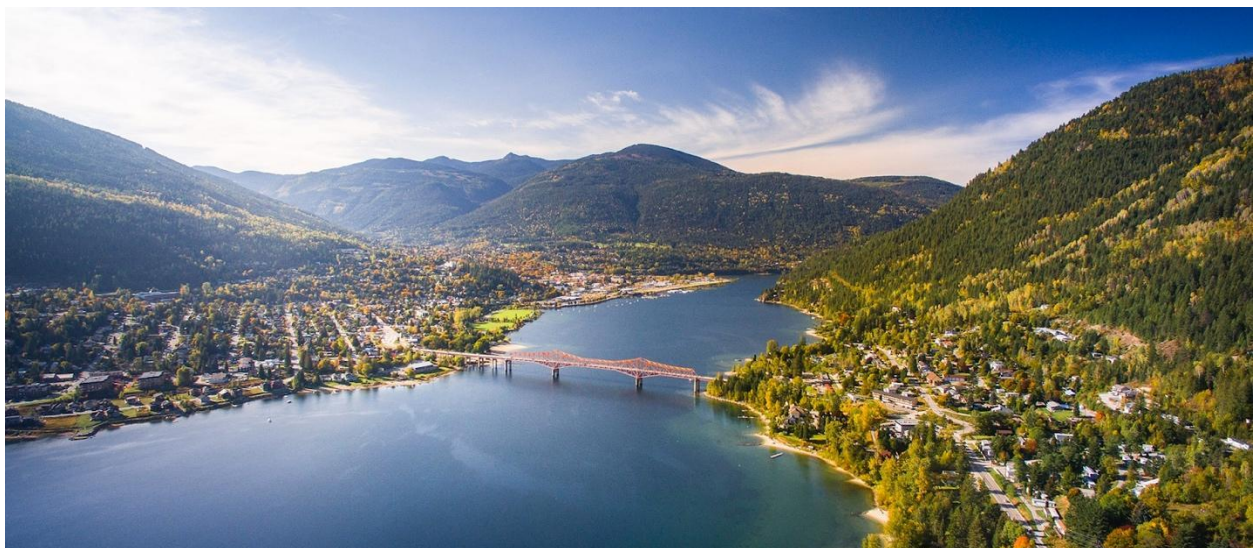
First Nations including the Ktunaxa, Sylix, and Sinixt have long called the Kootenay Lake region home, living closely with the land for generations. A little over a century ago, the discovery of rich minerals in the mountains led to an influx of prospectors and settlers in Nelson and neighbouring communities. Forestry followed, with the seemingly inexhaustible supply of timber.

Like most extractive industries, the booms wouldn't last forever, but the rapid development of townsites is a legacy that residents and visitors enjoy today. Despite its distance from urban centres, no passenger rail service and an unreliable nearby airport, the region has seen tourism steadily grow over the past decades to become one of the largest industries in the area.

Visitors seek what many residents moved here for; world class skiing/boarding and mountain biking, hiking, paddling and many other outdoor recreational opportunities. Our vibrant communities that support independent restaurants, shops, retreats, and artists are another draw. Surrounded and supported by nature, our communities have developed a reputation as environmentally progressive destinations.

It is in this context, in the summer of 2022, Nelson Kootenay Lake Tourism undertook a sustainable tourism assessment with its members with the specific goal to understand and support tourism sustainability through conservation and preservation of assets within the region. NKLT and its members should be congratulated on the vision and foresight to look critically at the health of its tourism industry and how it can respond to the growing need to balance environmental, social and economic priorities moving forward. Many other destinations are also moving in this direction.

The good news is that progress is well under way; members have demonstrated various sustainability initiatives, and there is a desire among members for more. NKLT can harness that energy, celebrate achievements, and work together with members to create the most sustainable destination in North America.

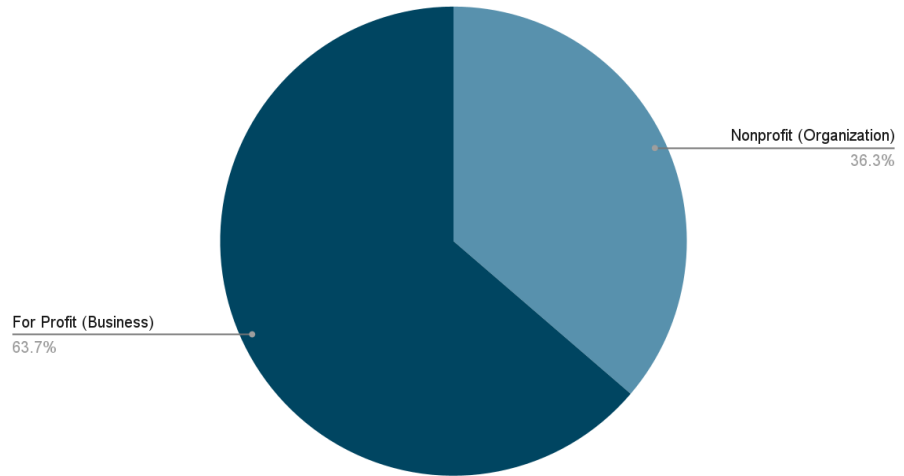


## SUMMARY & SURVEY RESPONSES

Feedback was collected from 100 members, with approximately  $\frac{2}{3}$  from the business community and  $\frac{1}{3}$  from nonprofit organizations.

Members provided their opinion on key questions, including how to define sustainability, whether or not they had a sustainability plan, what sustainable actions they are taking, and how NKLT can support sustainability outcomes.

Are you nonprofit or for profit?

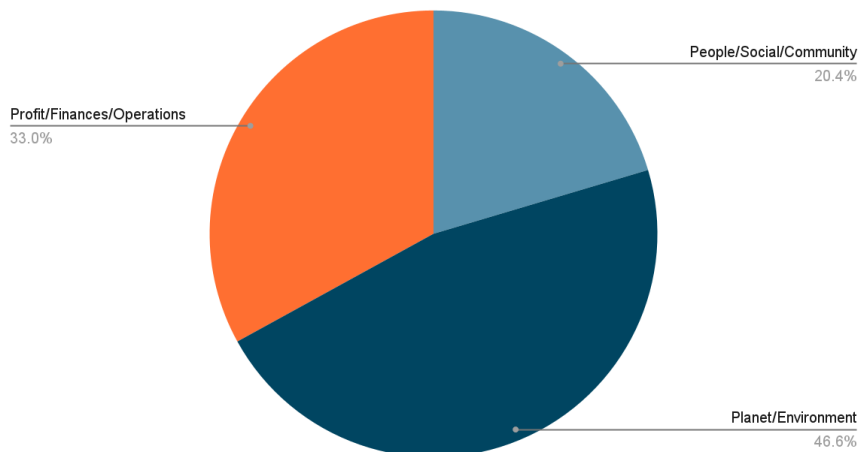


This report summarizes these findings and highlights opportunities for both NKLT and members to improve their sustainability efforts that fall within established frameworks.

### **What is “sustainability” according to NKLT members?**

A few responses noted that sustainability is simply maintaining services and operations. However, the vast majority of members generally provided responses that fit within the 3 P’s (People, Planet & Profit) framework. These three pillars can also be understood as representing Social/Cultural, Environmental and Economic goals, and are often referred to as the “Triple Bottom Line”.

What is “sustainability”?



NKLT members provided many examples of concepts and terms that fit within these categories, often with an emphasis on achieving financial goals (profitability) with minimal environmental impact. Some specific themes that appeared under the Planet pillar included minimizing

waste/energy/environmental footprint, recycling, climate change, habitat protection, and environmental stewardship. Supporting local has benefits to both the Planet and People pillar, while others noted the importance of treating staff fairly and supporting the local community. Profit was referred to in various terms, including business longevity, operational, consistent revenue, and financial growth. Many members noted that sustainability is dependent on satisfying all three pillars. In essence:

*Sustainability is acting in an environmentally and socially responsible way that is financially profitable now and in the future.*

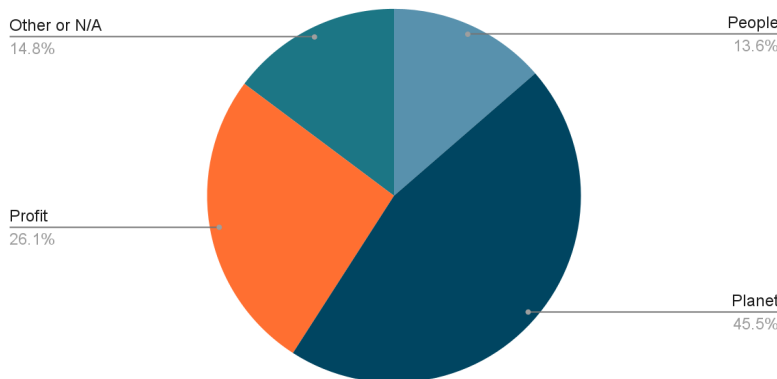
**Do you have a sustainability plan? If no, are you interested in creating a sustainability plan?**

Only 17% of members have a plan. However, 67% of respondents without a plan are interested in creating one. There could be an opportunity for NKLT to assist members in developing sustainability plans, perhaps using insight from members that have existing plans, and drawing from actions in other destinations.

**What sustainability actions are you currently implementing?**

It is important to note that sustainability initiatives and examples can straddle the 3 P’s; for example, encouraging active transportation can have economic, social and environmental benefits. *As a result, some responses reflected efforts in more than one pillar, but it was clear that most actions fit most clearly within the Planet pillar.* This is understandable, as terms such as “green” are often synonymous with sustainability and have a priority on the environment.

What sustainability actions are you currently implementing?  
(Grouped into the 3 P’s)



Many members noted their efforts at conserving energy. This included common actions such as more efficient lighting, less water use and waste, and recycling or composting as much as possible. Support for electric vehicles, shuttle services, habitat restoration and trail improvements were also voiced, all falling under the umbrella of the Planet pillar.

Profitability was the second most common response.

Securing grants and funding (including to maintain or upgrade assets) was commonly noted. Efforts to improve the guest experience, customer service, and demand pricing was also noted (which translates into more revenue).

Less commonly noted were efforts at addressing the People pillar. Some noted the importance of buying locally (which also supports economic needs), educating visitors about stewardship, and a few comments about living wages, training and accommodation for staff. There was no



reference to acknowledging the presence of Indigenous peoples or learning more about our cultural heritage. Interestingly, there were almost no comments about diversity and inclusion, social justice, or governance, key concepts that appear in the corporate world's movement towards embracing ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting.

***Does your organization/business have a measurable outcome to achieve in regards to sustainability?***

By far the most common response to this question was “no” (over 35% of respondents). For those who measure sustainability, being profitable is the greatest indicator, reflecting the most fundamental need of a business to be operational. Some noteworthy outcomes include achieving net zero as it relates to emissions, hiring more staff, and developing succession plans. It is worth noting that there was very little connection between sustainability actions (such as reducing energy use) and measurable outcomes.

***How can NKLT support your sustainability outcomes?***

Members expressed a strong interest in NKLT continuing efforts to market the destination including local sustainability achievements. Networking opportunities are also desired. This could help inspire members to action by seeing the efforts and best practices of their colleagues. Funding support was also commonly noted, including identifying grants that support sustainability initiatives.



## RECOMMENDATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

As consumers increasingly gravitate to supporting sustainable products, businesses, and destinations, there could be a competitive advantage for the Nelson and Kootenay Lake region to be more sustainable. Environmental and social considerations are increasingly on the radar of today's traveller, particularly with millennials. The region is already viewed as progressive in this way, thanks to its natural beauty, outdoor recreational opportunities, strong environmental values, and distinctively local and independent businesses. In fact, Nelson, Kootenay Lake, and the entire Kootenay Rockies region is already a Biosphere Certified Destination.

It is worth acknowledging that achieving complete sustainability is a daunting task. But that shouldn't stop members from doing what they can to make positive impacts. To paraphrase Anne Marie Bonneau:

*"We don't need a few people doing sustainability perfectly;  
we need everyone doing it imperfectly."*

Recognizing that sustainability straddles the pillars of planet, people, and profit, and that organizations have their own distinct operational considerations, worthwhile initiatives may look slightly different for everyone. There is no one-size fits all approach to sustainability.

Another way to look at this is to imagine what can members lose by trying to be more sustainable, versus what can be gained? The downside is negligible, while the upside is vast. The war in Ukraine is a potent reminder of the consequences with soaring energy prices, and the importance to be proactive to anticipate changes. The pandemic has also caused major disruptions to labour, supplies, and tourism demand. Climate change presents another (albeit longer term) shock that will require changes from consumers and businesses. The sooner that businesses can pivot towards supporting environmental and social endeavours, the greater their chances will be of long-term viability.

When it comes to tourism, sustainable actions are only part of the equation. These initiatives must be properly communicated to potential visitors. The examples section highlights efforts elsewhere, including Norway's sustainability designation program and the Queenstown Lakes District in New Zealand, that are supported by national and local tourism organizations. Although some sustainability examples may feel like a stretch, others are inspirational and aspirational, while the majority lie somewhere in between.

As such, there are many ways that NKLT could support its members in terms of sustainability.

- NKLT could collaborate with a "sister community" elsewhere (such as Queenstown NZ) to compete/gamify on sustainability initiatives
- NKLT could compile a list of sustainability initiatives (social and environmental) that members could work towards achieving (similar to a checklist). This could be segmented into immediate opportunities (largely defining and profiling existing efforts), short term opportunities (approximately 2 years, projects that may be in the works or require limited complexity or funding), and long term opportunities (approximately 5-10 years, including bigger ideas that may require more investment or collaboration)

- NKLT could profile sustainable tourism achievements on a specific page on its website; this could help drive tourists in search of “green” businesses to them, while also making it easier for local businesses to find ideas for their own sustainability initiatives. Examples that are deemed to be sustainable could include businesses that use a certain percentage of hydro or solar power, offset emissions, support environmental stewardships, use electric vehicles/bicycles, accommodations that meet “green” standards, living wage employers, etc.
- NKLT could advise members and offset the costs of a sustainability audit and certification (such as GreenStep) for members with the goal of having more certified businesses per capita than anywhere in North America
- NKLT could select a carbon offset provider (such as Less or CarbonZero) for members, and guide members through the purchasing process. NKLT could then easily highlight annual destination offsets measured by one provider
- NKLT could compile a list of sustainability funding opportunities for NKLT members. This could include grants for asset upgrades (such as the purchase of electric cargo bicycles or electric vehicles through the [Special Use Vehicle Incentive Program](#)), staff training (through [WorkBC’s Employer Training Grant](#)), and more
- NKLT could help members apply for funding from external sources by guiding them and providing them with valuable advice and in person training
- NKLT could act as a bulk purchaser of popular items (such as biodegradable containers) and resell to members at a lower cost per unit
- NKLT could work with Kootenay Rockies Tourism/Destination BC and transportation providers to provide increased shuttle service to the destination (potentially at reduced rates), and coordinate shipping and delivery of goods among members to reduce emissions and costs from multiple trips
- NKLT could work with the Chamber of Commerce and City of Nelson and restaurant members to coordinate composting services (such as a weekly compost pickup)
- NKLT could develop measurable sustainable outcomes for the destination and advise members on how to achieve them
- NKLT could work with the City of Nelson and Village of Kaslo to lobby BC Transit for electric buses, including smaller shuttles within the City and Village and throughout the region

NKLT could also highlight existing sustainability efforts such as:

- The lower CO2 emissions of propeller planes (compared to jet planes) that land at Castlegar airport
- Marketing to a regional audience that drives to the destination (instead of appealing to international visitors who need to take jet planes to reach Canada)



- Framing our self-propelled mountain and lake activities (mountain biking, ski touring, paddling, etc.) as environmentally conscious choices
- Locally grown produce throughout the region contributes to food security and reduces need for shipping food from further away
- The City of Nelson's unique AirBnB licensing program that limits and qualifies vacation rentals
- New Kootenay Lake ferry is electric ready
- Most local businesses run on renewable hydroelectric power generated by Nelson Hydro, a City owned utility
- The number of electric vehicle charging locations within the region and on routes accessing the destination
- Prevalence of grocery stores and restaurants that support local and organic producers and zero waste initiatives (such as biodegradable takeout containers)
- Ainsworth Hot Springs Resort owned by the Yaqan Nukiy (Lower Kootenay Band of Creston) and their infusion of traditional/local ingredients and recipes in their restaurant (as an example of embracing our local indigenous heritage)
- Oldest running Electric Streetcar in BC operated by volunteers and hosts over 20,000 riders per year

Members might also consider some of the following sustainability initiatives.

### **People**

- Offer employees living wages, as certified by *Living Wage for Families BC* (only 6 employers are presently certified in Nelson)
- Orient business more towards being a social venture/enterprise
- Conduct regular employee satisfaction reviews and helping employees to meet their personal goals
- Committing to hiring a diverse workforce, providing an inclusive work environment, and zero tolerance for discrimination

### **Planet**

- Purchase carbon offsets or work to become carbon netzero (for example, installing solar panels, using electric vehicles, replacing gas appliances with electric ones)
- Minimizing waste (for example, by composting or using a FoodCycler, using biodegradable containers, purchasing bulk supplies, etc.)

### **Profit**

- Dedicate a percentage of profits to local groups/associations (similar to 1% for the Planet)
- Creating succession plans
- Working with other NKLT members to achieve economies of scale through group purchasing, transportation, knowledge sharing, etc.

As noted earlier, the increasing number of customers that are seeking more sustainable businesses are often willing to pay a premium. This can yield increased revenue for a business

that can also be used to support social and environmental initiatives. More businesses and organizations positioning themselves this way helps to create more cohesive sustainable values for the destination. In turn, this can snowball by motivating existing businesses to come on board, and sets the standard expected of new enterprises.

Even if these efforts are too late to stop some of the impacts of climate change, they can still create a more sustainable tourism future for the destination. That is a future worth investing in.



## EXPANDED SURVEY & RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to the UN, sustainable tourism is tourism “that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.” It lists three key objectives of sustainable tourism that align with the 3 P’s (Planet, People, Profit):

- 1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural resources and biodiversity. (Planet)
- 2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance. (People)
- 3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation. (Profit)

It is also important to note that sustainable tourism is a continuous process, requiring monitoring, pivoting, and improvement as conditions evolve and change. This is consistent with the destinations featured in the Examples section; none of them have achieved complete sustainability, rather, it is a work in progress.

Why is it important to be more sustainable? There are multiple benefits, including:

- Reducing environmental footprint (and often financial costs, particularly due to lower energy usage)
- Providing staff with meaningful and fairly compensated work, in turn leading to increased employee retention and satisfaction
- Attracting customers who prioritize sustainability. A recent survey found that “four in 10 Canadian consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable and ethical products. That means there is a desire out there to shop with purpose. To buy quality over quantity. And to buy local and from small businesses.” This is consistent with the tourism industry and the growing number of travellers seeking destinations with sustainable tourism businesses and attractions
- Ultimately, it also means being more profitable, in turn providing more capacity to support social and environmental priorities.

## EXAMPLES

Although the concept of sustainable tourism has been around for years, initiatives are gaining steam at both the municipal and national level. Although no destination can yet claim to be entirely sustainable, their progress towards this goal is notable and serves as inspiration for other destinations and businesses. Sustainable certification and accreditation programs available to the tourism industry are also worth consideration.

### *Norway*

Norway has created a sustainable tourism designation for destinations that show progress toward increasing economic, social and environmental sustainability. Norway's program "includes 42 criteria and 104 indicators to be measured, registered and monitored. It covers nature, culture, environment, social values, community involvement and economic viability." Destinations are evaluated every three years. Although destinations may not currently be 100 percent sustainable, they can achieve certification by demonstrating significant progress towards their objectives.



### *Laax, Switzerland*

This small resort town in the Alps may be the greenest ski town in Switzerland. All lifts run on CO2 neutral hydro or solar power, while a new on-demand cable car system promises to be a more energy efficient way to access the alpine. Guests can also purchase a "Last Day Pass" that offsets 1000kg of CO2, and signifies a day the resort projects to no longer have enough snow to operate (currently estimated at April 7, 2056). Electric shuttles move guests around the resort, while gourmet vegan meals, free repair service for ski clothing, rewilding initiatives, and building designs that incorporate local materials all contribute to reducing the resort's impact on the environment.

### *Queenstown Lakes District, New Zealand*



On the other side of the equator, New Zealand's iconic Queenstown Lakes District (including Wanaka) has just announced a commitment to fully decarbonize the tourism industry to carbon zero by 2030. **This is the first destination in the world to do so. It has the potential to stimulate economic growth, diversify the economy, and support the long-term viability of tourism providers.** This initiative includes the participation of the Queenstown airport and transportation within the

district and aims to remove carbon as opposed to simply offsetting it.

### *Banff, Alberta*

Located within Banff National Park, the town of Banff is working towards increased sustainability. With limited sprawl, its 10,000 residents all live within walking or cycling distance of the downtown core. There are now 6 electric buses linking Banff with Canmore and Lake Louise, with the goal that 30% of their fleet is electrified by 2030. Free shuttle buses to the three local ski resorts are also available. A proposed passenger rail line linking Calgary with Banff is under consideration in addition to existing shuttle bus services. A Re-Use It Centre encourages residents to drop off items they no longer need that others may use instead of going in the garbage. The Town of Banff has a goal to reduce emissions to 30% below 2005 levels, and has recently added compost bins throughout the townsite.

### *Victoria, BC*

From the sea to the sky, the province's capital has many sustainability initiatives within the tourism sector. Eagle Wing Tours have been recognized for their environmental leadership by GreenStep, including becoming the first carbon-neutral whale watching company in the world. Although a bike share system has been discontinued, Victoria boasts an extensive cycling network with many rental shops. The Parkside Hotel is Biosphere Certified and the first Canadian Beyond Green member, and now features an on-site apiary. Indigenous led tours and the Malahat Skywalk demonstrate a connection to local human and natural heritage, while Harbour Air recently completed the first commercial electric flight and intends to electrify its entire fleet of aircraft.

Closer to home, here are just three local businesses taking concrete steps to become more sustainable.

### *Whitewater Ski Resort*

"Whitewater gained Greensteps Silver Certification for Sustainable Tourism in 2019. Part of our efforts include our third year of running a Green Team, measuring carbon emissions, developing a Sustainability Action Plan with measurable goals, improving waste management, and have hired a sustainability consultant with a strong background of the ski industry specifically. We also worked with the ski industry to create a sustainable stewardship program with best practices for all resorts to adopt, and have an internal policy to purchase locally and ethically as much as possible."

### *Bear Spring Eco Retreat*

"At Bear Spring Eco Retreat, we are implementing off-grid infrastructure (glamping accommodations with solar lighting, a gravity-fed septic system, and an event venue built almost entirely from salvaged materials). We also have a comprehensive composting system and recycling onsite, are investing in food security with 42 fruit trees and a garden, and are planting trees for shade around buildings and structures eliminating the need for air conditioning. We feature 100% cotton (biodegradable bedding only) and hang dry all laundry. We are actively seeking solutions to lower our transportation emissions, including exploring possibilities for shuttle service and advocating for active transport infrastructure through volunteer efforts."



### *Stellar Heliskiing*

“We will offset our emissions by purchasing high-quality carbon credits that meet comprehensive international standards....We are making contributions through data collection and financial support to projects that support environmental stewardship and clean technology....We are also using standardized energy use tracking tools to collect operational data so information can be consolidated with others in the industry to form a baseline for energy use.”

### **Certification Programs**

#### *GreenStep*

GreenStep offers many services to tourism businesses and destinations. This includes assessment, certification and training programs, energy, water and waste audits, carbon footprint measurement, and sustainability training. Some examples of their work includes developing a Sustainability Charter with Kootenay Rockies Tourism, a Sustainability Strategy with Prestige Hotels & Resorts, and Certification Support for Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association (TOTA).

#### *Certified B Corp*

This is an internationally recognized network of businesses that meet certain standards as set out by B Lab. It scores members on Governance, Workers, Community, Environment and Customers. It is also guided the 3 P's, with its aim of “transforming the global economy to benefit all people, communities, and the planet.”

## METHODOLOGY

Responses were collected by NKLT from August 17 to September 19, 2022. The results were tabulated and sorted into the three pillars of People, Planet and Profit, as most answers reflected a connection to at least one concept. As this is the global standard of defining sustainability, it was reasonable to follow established terms, and identify where NKLT members place emphasis on current actions and potential opportunities. Each response was grouped into at least one of the pillars (and sometimes two or three), unless otherwise appropriate (such as when members answered no to a question).

Research on sustainability definitions and initiatives included resources in BC, Canada and internationally.

## CONCLUSION

Nelson Kootenay Lake Tourism has provided its members with a meaningful opportunity to evaluate and improve their sustainability efforts. Other destinations are moving in this direction already, recognizing the benefits to People, Planet and Profit, and to the increasing priorities of travelers. There is a strong case to be made for NKLT members and the organization itself to do the same.

Indeed, Destination BC's recently released (March 2022) Strategic Framework for Tourism 2022-2024 is based on the same three pillars:

- People: improved quality of life, healthy & inclusive societies
- Planet: greener future, clean growth
- Prosperity: sustainable growth across BC, diverse workforce & career opportunities

Although there are no silver bullet solutions to achieve sustainability overnight, a commitment to these goals and measurable progress is an excellent starting point. Certifications can be useful in communicating sustainable initiatives to guests, but they are only one tool in the toolbox. As noted earlier, the Kootenay Rockies is a Biosphere Certified Destination, but this does not mean that it is "mission accomplished". Rather, it should be a signal for organizations within the region to work together on visibly moving the needle of sustainable initiatives.

Collective action will be required to make the Nelson and Kootenay Lake region a truly sustainable destination. Just as the term sustainability can mean many things and take many shapes, the efforts of members will likely also be unique to their own needs. These actions will need to be complemented by a robust marketing push by NKLT and other tourism marketing organizations to realize maximum benefits. By working collaboratively, sharing insights, and seeking solutions that are made in the Kootenays, NKLT and its members and communities have an opportunity to become a globally recognized sustainable tourism destination.

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