

# The Sea-to-Sky Route to Learning

Putting the Learning Destination Strategy into Action



**Picture a place where arts and culture, academic pursuits, natural environment, history, and welcoming people all come together in the spirit of lifelong learning.**

Now picture Sea-to-Sky Route to Learning: a whole new learning destination – a place where visitors come for a range of travel-and-learn vacations.

Far-fetched vision? A growing community of educators, tourism businesses and activity providers in the Sea-to-Sky corridor don't think so. They're starting to realize the substantial economic benefits that could be gained by embracing the learning destination philosophy. And that's where the Learning Destination Strategy comes in.

What is the Learning Destination Strategy, and how does it support tourism? How could your organization or business benefit by adding learning to your operation? What is needed to move the learning destination concept forward?

## **What is a learning vacation?**

It's a vacation offering a high-quality learning opportunity, allowing visitors to experience the authentic cultural, historical and natural features of an area. Visitors travel to and stay at one or more locations away from their usual place of residence.

Some travel-and-learn pursuits are structured to appeal to all age groups, such as the Copper & Fire Expo at the BC Museum of Mining or a mountain bike skills training workshop on the Test of Metal weekend. Other experiences, such as international student exchanges and the Elderhostel Program, appeal to specific groups. Regardless of visitor profile, learning-focused travel is a fast-growing part of the tourism sector in North America.

**And that's where the Learning Destination Strategy comes in.**





**The Learning Destination Strategy** was developed at the request of the Squamish Learning Destination Steering Committee in 2006. It is a key component of the broader Squamish tourism action plan, itself part of the overall community destination development effort.

### Why are we looking to create a learning destination as a means of enhancing economic development?

There are two main reasons:

***The demand locally, nationally and internationally for education/learning travel products is strong and on the rise.*** The learning vacation sector offers substantial direct economic benefits and indirect spin-offs for host communities.

- ⇒ The number of “educated travellers” is increasing, as is the ethnic diversity and age span of this group.
- ⇒ Educated travelers are willing to pay for quality.
- ⇒ Demand for interpretation and education as part of the vacation experience is increasing. Programs that emphasize culture, nature and history are now, and will continue to be, in high demand.
- ⇒ Travellers are shifting from consumptive activities to environmentally friendly outdoor activities that bring people closer to, and in respectful harmony with, the environment, nature and the outdoors.
- ⇒ The demand for seniors’ market products will persist for several decades, particularly in Canada and the U.S.

***The Sea to Sky corridor is already well positioned to meet the demand for this growing interest.*** With Squamish as its hub, the region already has an extensive network of formal and informal educational institutions, learning organizations and businesses, and First Nations resources. This is called “educational clustering” and it creates a competitive advantage right off the mark. **Key advantages include:**

- ⇒ **A growing core of post-secondary educational facilities** – With the opening of Quest University and the potential for a new Capilano College campus, these institutions form the core from which more educational facilities can grow. By attracting teaching staff, support services, and student-related retail, entertainment, services and housing, these key facilities make Squamish and its neighbouring communities more attractive to business and visitors.
- ⇒ **A unique setting for students** – Post-secondary education is a truly global market today. The Sea-to-Sky corridor offers provincial, national and international students both proximity to world-renowned Whistler and Vancouver and a unique day-to-day small community living experience. The natural coast-and-mountain setting also lends itself to recreational, artistic, and wellness-related activities.

### Key trends in learning travel:

- ⇒ Well-educated people in higher income brackets lack time, so short programs (2 to 3 and 4 to 5 days) are becoming fashionable as baby boomers take more mini-vacations.
- ⇒ Tours involve activity combined with lectures, discussion and experiential learning opportunities.
- ⇒ The quality of the experience, not cost, is the driving factor for baby boomers.



Learning can take place both in and out of the classroom. In addition to our local academic institutions, here are some examples of dynamic learning opportunities: West Coast Railway Heritage Park; a weekend rock-climbing course; a guided birding tour in the estuary; and a visit to the Squamish Lil’wat Cultural Centre.

*The goal of the Learning Destination Strategy is to foster formal and informal learning as an economic driver.*



## How can your business or organization benefit from collaboration?

- ⇒ Co-operative marketing and communication will extend your individual resources and maximize the reach and impact of campaigns.
- ⇒ Partnering will give you access to new skill sets and new ideas.
- ⇒ The greater the number of experiences, programs and products included in a learning-related package, the greater the market appeal.
- ⇒ Collaboration on programming can result in a greater number of visitors as well as more repeat visitors seeking “Part 2 & 3” of the learning experience.

## Embracing the power of collaboration

Collaboration among local businesses and organizations will give everyone greater capacity to provide a top-quality product and establish the Sea-to-Sky corridor as a preferred learning destination. By building relationships and fostering connections to develop learning-focused packages, the existing educational cluster and business community can enhance the learning destination experience.

Collaboration and partnerships are key within and between three levels:

- ⇒ Educational attractions that create the pull to the region;
- ⇒ Services and activities – ranging from transportation, accommodation and restaurants to retail shopping, entertainment and other amenities – to support learners’ experiences; and
- ⇒ All the other businesses that support learners’ destination experience (such as bookshops, art supply shops and outdoor equipment suppliers).

Collaborative or partnership projects work best when they are anchored by unique attractions, themes or experiences around which other activities can be grouped. The clustering and packaging of unique co-created experiences enables organizations to draw more visitors than when acting independently.



## Adopting an “operator as educator” attitude

Not surprisingly, many business operators in the region currently see themselves solely as service or product providers, not as educators. But in an integrated learning destination, the job of instructor/teacher/trainer can be part of every business.

The entire community can play a role in education. Adopting this philosophy means becoming aware of the fact that the active learner-traveller is someone who seeks knowledge and experiences wherever he or she is, not just in a classroom or on a guided tour. For instance, coffee shop baristas who share their knowledge of the Brackendale eagles enhance the value of the visitor’s experience. So does the river rafting company whose tour guides provide clients with local First Nations history along the Elaho River. **Any business can add learning to their current offerings, generating economic benefits for themselves and the greater community.**

## Working together to differentiate this learning destination from others

What sets Squamish and the Sea-to-Sky corridor apart from other learning destinations? How different are its learning experiences and products from those offered by other destinations? Knowing the answers to these questions is a marketing must in today’s highly competitive travel and tourism market. What sets the region apart from others is what can become its strategic advantages.

Differentiation begins with the unique learning opportunities offered by the particular mix of existing educational institutions. Other possible opportunities include:

- ⇒ Creating links between these educational experiences and Howe Sound’s unique geological features, flora and fauna, and cultural and historical assets.
- ⇒ Developing initiatives with the Squamish and Lil’wat First Nations to enable visitors and locals to learn about and experience these cultures.
- ⇒ Tying Highway 99, recognized as one of the world’s most scenic drives, in with an exploring and learning experience.
- ⇒ Developing programs that position the “Sea to Sky Route to Learning” through delivery partners such as Capilano College, the Squamish Nation’s Cultural Journey, BC Museum of Mining, the West Coast Railway Heritage Park, Camp Summit, North Vancouver Outdoor School among others.



*If Squamish/Sea to Sky is to be a preferred learning destination it must **create meaningful experiences**. This is not passive participation. It is not sight-seeing. It is adding depth and understanding to what we see and what we do. It is inspiring learners with the intent to act on their insights from personal learning creating an impact, a difference in their own personal way.*

## What needs to be done to move the Learning Destination Strategy forward?

The success of a corridor-wide learning destination along the Sea-to-Sky rests with the whole region. Tourism providers, the business and service sectors, the formal and informal educational institutions – all, in effect, become the teachers, trainers and instructors for visitors who choose the area as a destination.

Moving ahead with the strategy requires all businesses, organizations and institutions to work together to:

- ⇒ Build partnerships that build the capacity of the educational and learning system.
- ⇒ Develop specialized and unique educational programs that reflect the authenticity of the Sea-to-Sky corridor.
- ⇒ Enhance the quality and market readiness of visitor products.
- ⇒ Communicate within the community the value and benefits of promoting learning and education.
- ⇒ Attract students, visitors, and educators through targeted marketing.



## What's next?

The Squamish Learning Destination Steering Committee is now busy working to put action plans into effect, moving the concept of the learning destination closer to reality. Among further ideas being considered as part of the strategy's implementation:

- ⇒ Pilot projects to test and evaluate the first efforts of packaging and marketing programs under a common theme.
- ⇒ Establishment of a coalition of local stakeholders to champion and guide implementation of the strategy.
- ⇒ Development of a theme around which to focus innovative learning products. Two possibilities include: *A sustainability/environmental education/outdoor recreation theme; and an arts/culture/heritage theme.*
- ⇒ Appointment of a Squamish Learning Destination coordinator to take responsibility for moving the strategy forward.

*Wherever local businesses and organizations can identify ways to be part of, or complement, these distinguishing characteristics, the authenticity of this unique learning destination package will be reinforced. It creates a win-win for operator and visitor.*



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