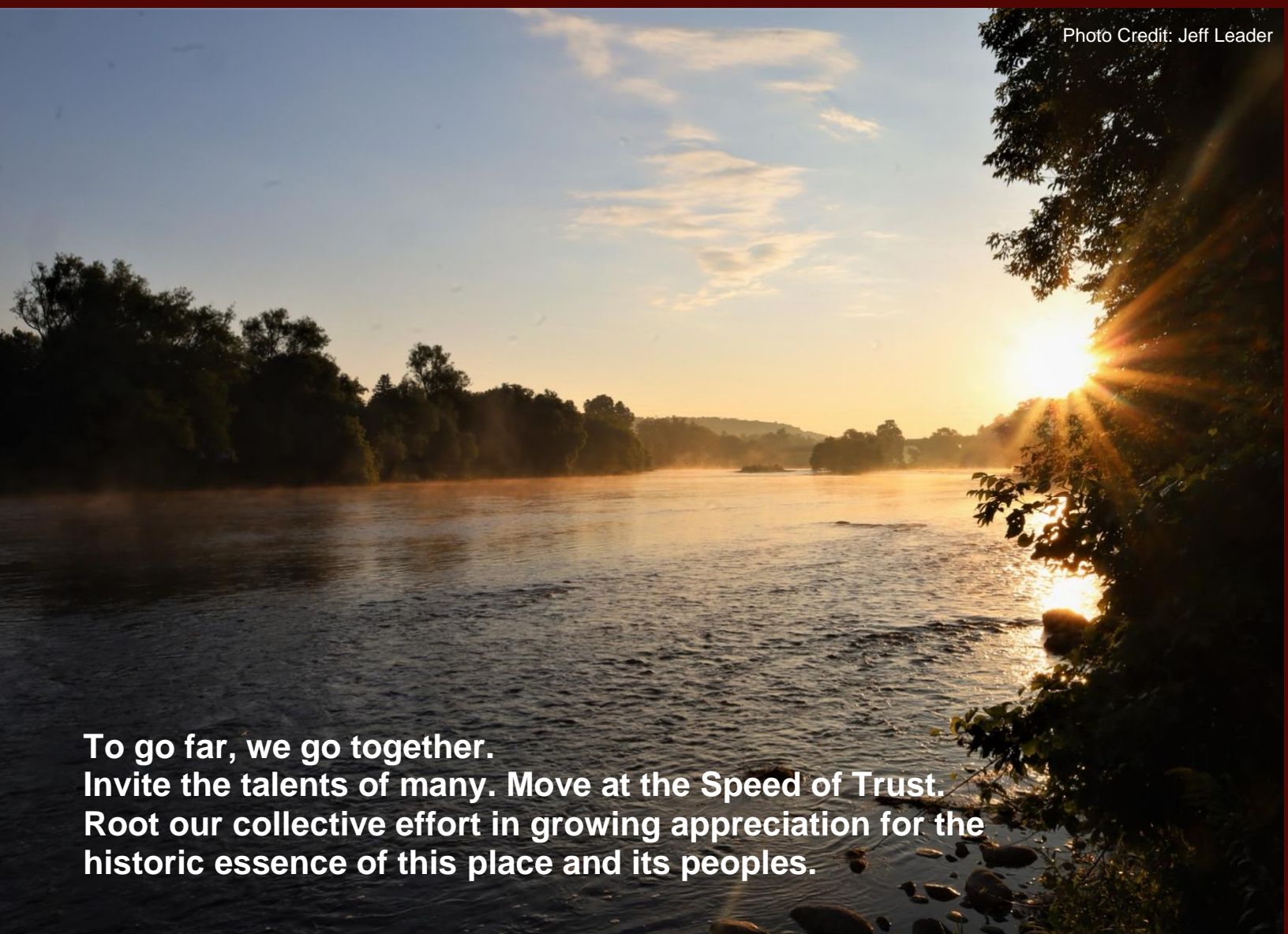


THE GRAND RIVER COMMUNITY PLAY PROJECT Case Study

Grand River, Ontario

Photo Credit: Jeff Leader



**To go far, we go together.
Invite the talents of many. Move at the Speed of Trust.
Root our collective effort in growing appreciation for the
historic essence of this place and its peoples.**

INTRODUCTION

O:se Kenhionhata:tie (Willow River), now known as the Grand River, is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations of the Grand River (Six Nations) in the Haldimand Treaty of 1784. This land belongs to the Onöndowága' (Seneca), the Gayogohono (Cayuga), the Onyota'a:ka (Oneida), Kanyen'kehaka (Mohawk), Onönda'gega (Onondaga), and the Skaru:reh (Tuscarora) Nations. On October 25th, 1784, Sir Fredrick Haldimand granted this tract of land to the Haudenosaunee peoples for their role in stifling the American Revolution. This treaty declared the land "Six Miles deep from each side of the River beginning at Lake Erie and extending in the proportion to the Head of said River, which Them and Their Posterity are to enjoy forever." The Grand River is approximately 310-kilometers long and stretches from its starting point in Dundalk before emptying into the mouth of the river in Port Maitland, feeding into Lake Erie. In its entirety, the Haldimand Tract includes 950,000 acres of land of which only 48,000 acres remain under Six Nations control.



The Grand River, including its major tributaries – the Conestogo, Eramosa, Nith, and Speed Rivers were designated Canadian Heritage Rivers in 1994. The designation recognizes the outstanding human heritage values and excellent recreational opportunities of the river. The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) manages the watershed that crosses through 34 municipalities. A complex history exists with First Nations land ownership and colonial settlement along the river.

By sharing the history of the Grand River watershed, a background on regenerative tourism practices, and the intricacies of planning a 310-kilometer-long play, we bring clarity to how a community play project as described here, may promote co-created futures and reconciliation in Southern Ontario, Canada. Just imagine a caravan of travellers made up of settlers, Indigenous folks, and a 15-foot puppet flowing down the Grand River, stopping in vibrant communities for a night or maybe two. Neighbours, friends, and strangers gathering on a warm summer's evening as local talent shines under starlit skies, sharing stories of community with passion and intensity designed for future generations to reimagine and enjoy themselves. We suspect this may be how the Grand River community play project will unfold.

Our collective work is supported by the University of Waterloo, and partner Regional Tourism Organization 4 (RTO4) through the Mitacs Accelerate Grant Program.

History of the Grand River Watershed

From a colonial scientific lens, the geological and ecological formation of what we know today as the Grand River watershed dates back to the retreat of the Laurentide ice sheet some 20,000 years ago. There are at least 12,000 years of First Nations peoples living on the landscape (Huronian, Neutrals, Iroquoian). First Nations used the land for hunting, foraging, fishing, farming, fighting, and forming alliances. Eventually, First Nations peoples were uprooted from their land, colonized, placed on reserves, and forced to attend residential schools.

Settlement of the land by settlers led to colonization, then commerce, before empires were built. By the 1930s and 1940s, the Grand River water system struggled to cope with the demand put on it. This once pristine waterway, formerly known by the steam wheelers running upstream as far as Brantford and the inspiration for 19th-century landscape artist Homer Watson's idyllic *The Flood Gate*, that hangs in the National Gallery of Canada, was now being described as an *open-sewer* following decades of environmental and industrial abuse.

In 1934, The Grand River Conservation Commission was established to address problems resulting from industrialization. Since then, millions

of dollars have been spent to clean up the river. Farmers have adopted new technologies, storm sewer systems have been designed to reduce the impact of urban runoff, a network of dams and reservoirs were built, and the GRCA has implemented a carrying capacity monitoring program. Such actions are designed to protect the environmental integrity of the watershed; however, ensuring the integrity of the river's water quality is on-going, specifically given the increasing demands on the Grand River due to growth and urbanization.

Before 1975, recreational activities along the watershed were limited, mainly due to the health of the river. Since successful efforts to preserve the river, outdoor recreation activities have significantly changed, with more services offered annually.

Inventories of recreational services along the watershed were integral in receiving the designation of a Canadian Heritage River, among other criteria. Awareness of offerings for outdoor recreation grew as Covid-19 restrictions on indoor recreation drove people to seek 'safe' outdoor activities. The Grand River continues to be an attraction for locals and visitors alike which is why it is important to protect this resource for generations to come.

Background

What if tourism could serve as a *catalyst* for reconnecting us with the essence of the places and communities we inhabit? What if we could learn to appreciate how intra-dependent we are across time and space? Regenerative tourism involves bringing people together around what they care about (and *could* care about) in their place and then putting that care into action. To make it so, a collection of organizations in Southwestern Ontario are working together to do just that. In inviting locals from communities across the Grand River watershed to reacquaint themselves with the diverse and complex histories of place, by bringing those stories to life so they can be shared amongst neighbours and then integrating them into authentic experiences, we present a unique community-focused tourism offering for guests near and far.

Regional Tourism Organization 4 (RTO4)

RTO4 is a not-for-profit that reports to Ontario's Ministry of Tourism, Sport, and Culture. They promote responsible tourism development in Huron, Perth, Waterloo, and Wellington counties. RTO4 focuses on building healthy communities through positive product development with legacy value for the region and its destinations. With a focus on sustainability, regeneration, and storytelling RTO4's projects emerge. The Grand River Histories Project (GRHP), led by Tristin Vogel, RTO4's Destination Project Manager for Waterloo Region and the Grand River, is one such project from which the Grand River Community Play Project (GRCPP) emerged.

The Grand River Histories Project (GRHP)

Most tourism development along the river had focused on physical assets such as paddling, access points, and recreational infrastructure. RTO4 recognized the need to animate the river by sharing the story of it with its users. The GRHP was developed in October 2021 to bring together experts from across the watershed such as historians, storytellers, and scholars, who have a passion for telling a piece of the Grand River's story, with creatives and organizational supports to develop animation projects to share the story in more interactive ways. The purpose of this group was to create a comprehensive, authentic, and accurate anthology of stories of the Grand River from all cultural perspectives. This compilation of stories could then be used to animate the river in sustainable and educational ways for future generations to experience. A Grand River Destination Animation Program organized by RTO4 in the Spring of 2022 supported seed funding to catalyze some of the new animation ideas, including the submission of the GRCPP proposal. The GRCPP took the GRHP from a needs-based approach to recognizing the rivers inherent assets.

The Grand River Community Play Project (GRCPP)

The GRCPP was born out of the imagination of playwright Peter Smith and expanded with connections to members of the GRHP and his connections through theatre. The *Grand River Play Project: The Voice of a River* will spend a couple of weeks in August of 2025, travelling the length of the river, sharing pieces of the communities and culture along the river through performance and storytelling. The GRCPP draws on several art forms to reconnect the community and its visitors with the essence of place. By animating the stories that emerge and authentically sharing them with the community who call the watershed home, it may inspire guests from further away to re-create this process in their own communities.

Most importantly, by moving at the **speed of trust** and prioritizing First Nations worldviews; First Nations community members were willing to work side-by-side in the co-creation of two prologues. Uplifting First Nations rights to sovereignty and resurgence are not only goals of the 94 Calls to Action in the Truth & Reconciliation Report (2015), but they also embody regenerative tourism practices. In November 2022, the project held two prologue performances as a proof of concept. The prologues served as a tool to engage the audience, establish the mood, and offer essential details that enriched the audience's understanding of the GRCPP.

The Prologues

On November 12th & 13th, 2022, the first prologue took place at Chiefswood Park in Ohsweken, a community within Six Nations of the Grand River. On November 19th & 20th, 2022, the second prologue performance took place at the historical Abe & Erb Grist Mill in the city of Waterloo. The prologues were much more than a proof of concept, they brought together community members who may never have interacted otherwise and created excitement and enthusiasm for the GR CPP.

The first prologue started with a somber Thanksgiving address by a Six Nations Knowledge Keeper, Faith Keeper, and community Elder, which was followed by an overview of the Community Play.



The remainder of the prologue saw guests meander thoughtfully through Chiefswood Park. Poetry was recited outside of Pauline Johnston's house. Emily Pauline Johnston, also known by her Mohawk stage name Tekahionwake, was an accomplished poet, author, and performer who contributed greatly to Indigenous and Canadian oral and written culture. Her father was a hereditary Mohawk chief of mixed ancestry, and her mother was an English immigrant.

One could feel human, non-human, and more-than-human all around. From there, guests were led to the banks of the Grand River, where a fire illuminated a Haudenosaunee dancer, singing their songs, banging their drum. The group was invited to dance and sing with him. In the background, as dusk takes its place, two canoes floated downstream with songs from the shore reverberating in the water. The canoes represented the importance of the Two Row Wampum, a treaty recognized between the Haudenosaunee and Dutch settlers. Each canoe stays in its row. The two vessels are close enough to assist the other when needed and far enough apart so as not to interfere.

The audience turned around and was guided toward the Six Nations Tourism Office, while the group carefully listened to a Turtle Clan and Mohawk Nation author reading from a children's book she wrote with her children by her side. The group moved to where they were greeted by the founders of the Two Row on the Grand, a ten-day canoe trip down the Grand River with Haudenosaunee and settler participants. They engaged in a brief but salient discussion about the Two Row and what it represents. Back at the Six Nations Tourism Office, a small gathering was organized to reveal a Dragon Fly art installation – an animated piece of art and technology designed to share and record stories of the river. The event ends with a final Thanksgiving address before the group departs. To watch a short YouTube video of the first prologue [click here](#).

The second prologue commenced with a water ceremony on the banks of the Laurel Creek, a tributary of the Grand River in Uptown Waterloo. An Ojibway-Anishinaabeg, Water-Walker, Knowledge Keeper, artist, and educator began the ceremony. The group participated in a smudging ceremony to stimulate a positive mindset for those involved in the day's activities. Next, the group was offered tobacco; they received it with their left hand because it's closest to one's heart. The tobacco was given to the river as each guest shares a prayer with the water. In Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee knowledge systems, the power that water has to heal is held sacred. Once the sacred water ceremony ended, the group is guided by a trio of settler musicians into the Abe & Erb Grist Mill, where stories were shared through song, poetry, and instrumental interludes promoting group participation. The group engages in a reflexive activity where they are asked to consider their relationship with the river by answering two questions: *What does the Grand River mean to you? And What do you mean to the Grand River?*



These inclusive and carefully choreographed prologues saw First Nations working alongside settlers to promote a community play project serving to be much more than a play. The gravity of being invited onto First Nations land to share in sacred ceremonies of culture juxtaposed against the knowledge of violence Indigenous people have faced in Canada due to settler colonization, was not lost on many of the settlers who attended these events. The prologue at Six Nations was First Nations-led and promoted First Nations resurgence and sovereignty. The prologues revealed the community's willingness to work with settlers on the GRCPP. Similarly, the prologue at the Grist Mill offered the opportunity to engage in an Ojibway-led sacred water ceremony while blending settler ideas of reflexivity and relationality. Both prologues offered hope for more inclusive futures.

WHY NOW?



Photo Credit: Jeff Leader

The GRHC and the GRCPP emerged at a critical time in Canada's responses to the 94 Calls to Action emerging from the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Report, the discovery of unmarked graves at residential school sites, and reflexive engagement necessitated by the pandemic regarding how we may plan and offer a more conscious, relational, and responsible form of tourism in support of regenerative futures. The recent discoveries of unmarked children's graves on properties of former residential schools serve as a revealing reminder of our national turmoil and contribute to the contemporary crisis landscape despite efforts toward reconciliation. The GRCPP offers the opportunity to educate others on the history of our First Nations partners.

The GRCPP invites all communities along the Grand River to connect, build relationships, and engage in community place-making. The project has regeneration and reconciliation at its core and provides a unique case study of regenerative tourism that is not currently reflected in Canada, given the Grand River flows through several communities. Typically, case studies on regenerative tourism reflect the impacts on individual communities. Additionally, this case addresses the need for more regenerative tourism analysis in a Canadian context and provides an example on how to implement regenerative tourism practices.

Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism is considered a “place-based” process. Tourism researchers studying regenerative tourism advise that those who work with regenerative practices must take into consideration each “place and its unique geography, human history, culture, local environment, and changing human [and non-human] needs” (Becken & Kaur, 2021, p. 55). Similarly, Reed and Holliday, co-authors of Destination Canada’s framework document A Regenerative Approach to Tourism in Canada, share five broad **Principles of a Regenerative Practice**, which are intended as **Guides to Action**:

1. Understand and work at the scale of place;
2. Think about your place as a living system;
3. Cultivate a field of relationships;
4. Invite the gifts and contributions of individuals (people and organizations);
5. Practice stewardship and co-creation.

The GRCPP exudes regenerative practices as is illustrated in Peter Smith’s description of the Project. Smith shares that the Grand River Community Play Project: The Voice of a River is,

“***An inclusive project that is constantly evolving, bringing communities together that might not have ever crossed paths. It is a celebration, and a holler, something that leaves the campsite better than found. By bringing people together in creativity, in celebration, a mutual dependence begins to grow, and in that environment, ideas flourish. We begin to see each anew, and a deeper understanding that the Grand River is a relation of ours, a community member, who deserves our respect, emerges.***”

The GRCPP is the story of the river, created and developed by the people of the river, and ultimately told to those who are engaged and impacted by the river. It is a coming together of stories and, importantly, a coming together of people along the length of the Grand River. Notions of place, relationality, connectedness, and trust are the glue that holds the play together. Learned through teachings from our First Nations partners, guiding the actions of the GRCPP is the Two Row Wampum and the Seventh Generation Principle. Based on Haudenosaunee philosophy, the Seventh Generation Principle informs us that decisions we make today should result in regenerative futures for the seven generations to come.

The play is intentionally designed to undergo a metamorphosis as future generations reimagine it and its possibilities. It is intended that communities will continue to come together in a non-violent way to connect through creativity and art for generations to come.

Lesson Learned

When seeking to do research promoting reconciliation, we must first learn about decolonial research practices and Indigenous worldviews that can then be embedded into practice. We take this step because perpetuating Western discourses on Indigenous peoples contributes to the ongoing dispossession of their culture and rights, forces Imperial ways of knowing, and re-enforces white supremacy.

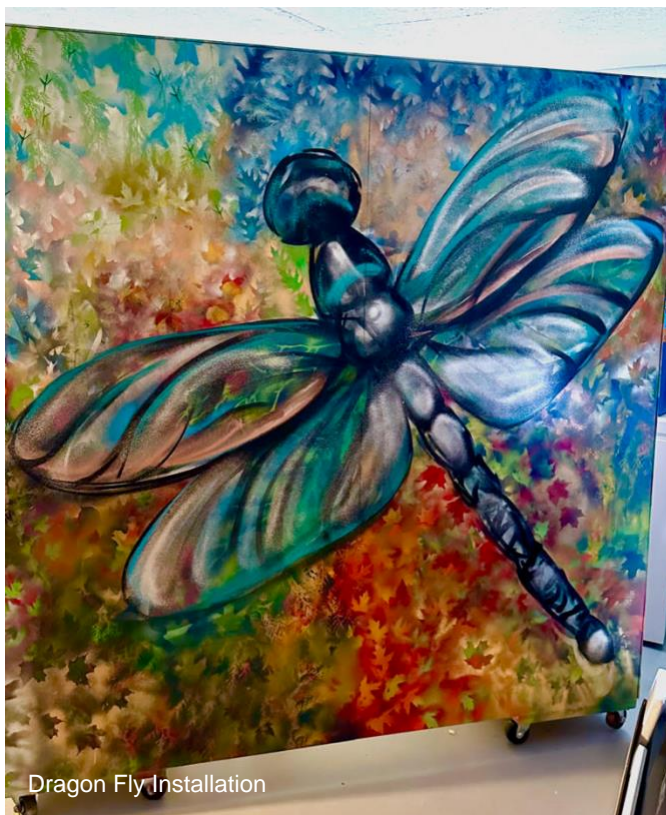
Our inability in the past, to act in relation with Indigenous peoples in Canada provides an example of why it is imperative to challenge our capitalist order. Capitalism does not support sustainability, regenerative practices, or reveal we are capable of leading with care and acting in relation with one another. We recognize what is needed, is the recentering of human beings is needed which is starting to gain attention in the scholarship. As settlers ourselves, in these intricate research cases, we can only **travel at the speed of trust**.

The funding from the partnership with the University of Waterloo and RTO4 via our Mitacs Grant has allowed the research team to do just that. As we **travel at the speed of trust**, we move slowly and carefully to foster relationships and build trust with First Nations partners by attending community cultural events and hosting Indigenous scholars at the University of Waterloo. We seek guidance from the Faculty of Health's Indigenous Knowledge Keeper at the University of Waterloo, who acts as a mentor, offering direction on appropriate next steps. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the funding allows the researchers to share the message of the core values of the GRCPP to diverse audiences far and wide.

Photo Credit: Jeff Leader



NEXT STEPS



Dragon Fly Installation



Artist: Irene Hanuta

Currently, the GRCPP is working out the logistics to carry out a travelling play that runs 310-kilometers along the river and securing the funding to make it happen. To date, the GRCPP has relied heavily on the assistance of volunteers. Those contributing to the prologues volunteered their time and efforts for each production. The spaces where sharing circles and other creative activities take place are hosted by communities up and down the river, offering in-kind support. The GRCPP has hired an experienced fundraiser to secure future revenue streams for the project. They have applied for funding with the Canadian Council Grant for the Arts, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and the Ontario Arts Council while seeking other innovative opportunities to raise funds for the project.

In the meantime, the GRCPP plans to hold four-story circles/workshops a month at different community spaces along the river. The play is designing a 15-foot puppet that will represent the voice of the river herself. With the assistance of Shadowland Theatre in Toronto, the puppet will be designed collaboratively with an art class from a local university and youth participating in a theatrical class at Six Nations. A winter prologue performance is under construction to further promote and support the GRCPP. Additionally, there are several legacy projects: these include a quilt of the river inspired by the Quilt of Belonging, a photo-mapping project that will be used in educational settings, and the Dragon Fly installations that will travel up and down the river sharing stories recorded from different sharing circles and offering others the opportunity to record their stories.

Eventually, a caravan of community members will put political tensions to the side for a moment in time, and together they will travel up and down the river, sharing the stories of First Nations on one side, settler stories on the other side, and the voice of the river herself in between. This story will continue to grow as communities come together for generations to follow.

CONCLUSION



Photo Credit: Jeff Leader

Regenerative tourism is meant to improve the communities where it takes place. The metaphor of water flowing and people across generations interacting with this incredible community resource is important and may be in stark contrast against a backdrop of pandemic restrictions, which recently enforced lockdowns, shutdowns, and promoted hunker downs. By exploring the nuance behind the GRCPP, we may better understand how we might build relationships, make meaningful connections, and engage in reconciliatory practices to co-create and co-design our stories and connection to places in our proximity. Moreover, by embracing the philosophy of the Two Row Wampum, that settlers and First Nations will assist each other when needed but do not interfere, and the Seventh Generation Principle, that decisions today should result in regenerative futures for the seven generations to come, along with its alignment with regenerative tourism development practices, we come to realize that we must all be in this together for generations to come.

This case study serves as an example for other communities looking to create regenerative tourism products promoting reconciliation through decolonizing practices. To learn more about RTO4 and the projects they support, please visit their website – <https://rto4.ca>. To learn more about the GRCPP, become involved, or donate, please visit their website – <https://www.ruralcreativity.org/>.