

RUGGED APPRENTICES PROGRAM— EMPOWERING YUKON COMMUNITIES THROUGH TOURISM PLANNING

Case Study

Whitehorse, Yukon



INTRODUCTION



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Rural municipalities in the Yukon deal with limited resources and seasonal visitor traffic, which can make it challenging to complete tourism related projects. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, communities were especially eager to rebuild tourism in ways that supported local values, cultural integrity, and infrastructure improvements. Municipal planners faced pressure to revitalize local destinations without overburdening existing staff or straying from community priorities.

RUGGED APPRENTICES PROGRAM

In 2022, the Yukon Department of Tourism and Culture introduced the Rugged Apprentices program. This initiative brought volunteers from across Canada to participate in tourism infrastructure projects, working alongside local governments and organizations. In 2023, the program has expanded and refined to include Rugged Journey people—volunteer leaders—and new partnerships with Indigenous communities and educational organizations.

Projects included clearing wildfire-prone areas in Mayo to upgrading disc golf courses in Teslin and Dawson City and aligned and prioritized what communities needed most. Volunteers not only contributed physically, but also engaged in cultural programming, including language classes, traditional workshops, and community dinners, creating a lasting impression of the region and its people.





RESULTS

The Rugged Apprentices program delivered results that exceed expectations:

- Over 350 applications were received within 10 days in 2022, showing strong demand for immersive travel.
- The 2022 social media campaign reached over 800,000 impressions and 10,000 clicks in nine days.
- In 2023, 47 volunteers worked across five communities: Teslin, Tagish, Carmacks, Dawson City, and Mayo.
- Volunteers made lasting improvements to infrastructure, including campground beautification, park landscaping, and FireSmarting community homes.
- Over 80% of participants said they would recommend the experience; nearly 90% stayed longer in the Yukon, boosting the local economy.
- Critically, a large number of volunteers expressed interest in relocating. Two returned to work in the tourism industry in Dawson City, and many more indicated they were exploring seasonal or permanent moves.



I got to experience the people, life, culture, and food in a whirlwind few days I can't fully describe. I made friends I'll keep, experiences I'll share, and memories I'll relive forever. The people behind the program and the communities believe in it, and no one could ask for a better team to support so many people from around Canada wanting to experience the Yukon for themselves.

— **Connor N**

CONCLUSION

For municipal planners, Rugged Apprentices offers a replicable model of how tourism programs can support community development, infrastructure renewal, and economic resilience. By prioritizing locally-driven projects and authentic engagement, the program not only improved public spaces but also attracted potential new residents and champions of the region.

The case demonstrates that when municipalities embed tourism into strategic planning, they can create lasting benefits for their community. Rugged Apprentices is a compelling example of how tourism can become a vehicle for regeneration and rural revitalization.

Caribou Wild Mountain Tours, Yukon

