

# MEEWASIN VALLEY AUTHORITY Case Study

**Magel Sutherland, Meewasin Valley Authority**

December 2024





This case study is featured in the [Destination Dialogues 2024](#) Online Workshop Report: *Crafting Legendary Visitor Experiences* by [Celes Davar](#). The report delves into the key concepts and learnings presented in the online workshop, a virtual event organized by Destination Canada, to inspire, inform and empower rural destination development professionals. While Celes facilitated the virtual event, [Magel Sutherland](#), Education & Experiences Manager with the Meewasin Valley Authority, was featured as a speaker.

The word Meewasin comes from a Cree word meaning beautiful and the Meewasin Valley, in and around Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is located on Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the Métis People. The Meewasin Valley Authority, known simply as Meewasin, is a not-for-profit born out of a study conducted in and around the Saskatoon area in 1978, led by famous Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama. The result of the study was a 100-year concept plan, the Meewasin Valley Project, which proposed a balance between human use and conservation for the benefit of present

and future generations. In 1979, Meewasin was established through an act of provincial legislation. Today, Meewasin is still guided by the 100-year concept plan and is jointly governed by three participating parties, the Government of Saskatchewan, the City of Saskatoon and the University of Saskatchewan.

The Meewasin Valley covers more than 6,700 hectares in the Saskatoon region, and is considered one of the largest urban conservation zones in Canada. Meewasin is guided by a three-part mandate to conserve and educate on the natural and cultural history of the area, and balance development with a focus on public access. One of the Valley's best-known features is the Meewasin Trail, which covers more than 107 kilometres and sees approximately two million visits per year in all seasons.

Magel Sutherland explains how and why a non-traditional tourism operator like Meewasin has chosen to pursue sustainable tourism, and specifically experience development.



“

Meewasin has been part of the tourism economy since its inception in a quiet way—through the conservation and development of public spaces, and free or low-cost educational programming.

”

Prior to the pandemic in 2020, there had been some recognition that, as a not-for-profit, Meewasin needed to start focusing on revenue-generation to find additional ways support its work into the future. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, work had already begun on the development of a tourism portfolio for Meewasin. While the pandemic caused some delays in this work, it also brought a few key realizations to light.

First of all, people wanted to be outside because it was a safe place to gather. Visits at Meewasin’s main public-facing site, Beaver Creek Conservation Area, were immediately twice what they had been in 2019—and over the course of the pandemic, Meewasin Trail visits doubled too. Secondly, Meewasin found themselves with a new audience of interested visitors who were different from those who traditionally interfaced with the organization.

In 2021, Meewasin was selected to participate in an experience development workshop offered through the destination marketing organization (DMO), Discover Saskatoon (then Tourism Saskatoon), and its first experience, Naughty by Nature, was born.

# NAUGHTY BY NATURE



Naughty by Nature is a three-hour experience that takes place at one of Meewasin's unique conservation areas, to which guests are given exclusive after-hours access. The focus of the experience is essentially the adult version of the "birds and the bees" (guests are required to bring a sense of humour!). Inclusion of local food and beverage partners was really important to the Meewasin team for this experience—and continues to be throughout all their experiences.

Naughty by Nature starts with a hands-on activity where guests make a cocktail using local plant ingredients, hand-made syrup and locally distilled gin from Meewasin's partners Black Fox Farm & Distillery. It ends with a specially curated charcuterie picnic featuring locally sourced ingredients from Saskatoon company Style and Graze.

What was pivotal to the development of this experience was Meewasin's participation in an experience development workshop supported by Discover Saskatoon and facilitated by Celes Davar, president and owner of Earth Rhythms, and an experiential and regenerative tourism coach.

Participating in the workshop was a really important step, because the coaching, with outside support,

helped the Meewasin team focus their ideas and put together the right ingredients to move Naughty by Nature from a program to an "experience".

The Naughty by Nature concept wasn't a new idea. One of Meewasin's staff members had wanted to do a program like this for a long time, but didn't think it would be supported due to the content focus. Development of this experience did require trust, because the first version was pretty "spicy." Credit to Meewasin's CEO, Andrea Lafond, who has encouraged the team to run with new experience concepts and trusted them enough to let Naughty by Nature develop into the light-hearted offering it is today. Courage and support are necessary elements needed for excellent innovation and storytelling to become embedded into experience offerings.

Naughty by Nature continues to be successful, with an audience that tends to skew younger, and increasing numbers of private groups requesting the experience. At the time of writing, the price of \$61.50 plus tax, per person, makes this a fairly accessible experience.

Since 2021, 20 events have taken place welcoming 250 guests and generating approximately \$21,000 in gross revenues.

# MEEWASIN GRAZING DINNER



After Naughty by Nature, the second experience that was developed was the Meewasin Grazing Dinner.

Meewasin has used conservation grazing to manage lands in the Valley for many years and as part of this work, often do free public grazing demonstrations. What they observed is that people always wanted to hang around afterwards, to talk to the two people who facilitate these grazing demonstrations—shepherd Jared Epp (and his sheepdogs) and Meewasin’s Resource Management Officer, Renny Grilz. Both are sought-after experts in their fields and as a bonus, are true Saskatchewan characters!

The Grazing Dinner is Meewasin’s most highly-priced experience, at the time of writing \$225 plus tax, per person, and perhaps the one that makes Magel most proud, because it really showcases the beauty of Saskatchewan’s people and landscape.



We figured, if people want to stick around and talk to them anyway, why don’t we feed them a farm-to-table dinner while they do it?

- Magel Sutherland





his four-hour experience takes place at one of Meewasin's conservation areas, to which guests are given exclusive after-hours access. It starts with a hike through native prairie with Renny Grilz, and guests learn about the prairie in a hands-on way—getting right down in the dirt! After the hike, they are treated to an outdoor, three-course dinner prepared tableside by chef Scott Dicks and the team from Odlá in Saskatoon.

Odlá is a farm-to-table restaurant that sources beautiful local ingredients from within 2 hours of Saskatoon. While dinner is being served, Chef Scott talks about the suppliers, where they are located and what they have provided for the meal. After dinner, guests get to watch a sheep and stock dog demo with shepherd Jared Epp while they enjoy dessert.

The idea for the Grazing Dinner emerged early in the coaching process, but it has taken a lot of patience to get it right. When the Meewasin team did the initial trial run with a different food provider, they received kind, but honest feedback from their pilot audience which sent them back to the drawing board.

They ended up doing a second pilot with Odlá later that fall and found what they were looking for.

This experience was officially launched in 2023 and has been gaining a lot of traction.

Over the course of 2022 and 2023, eight Grazing Dinner experiences were offered to 155 guests, generating \$10,000 in gross revenues.

# A SUITE OF EXPERIENCES



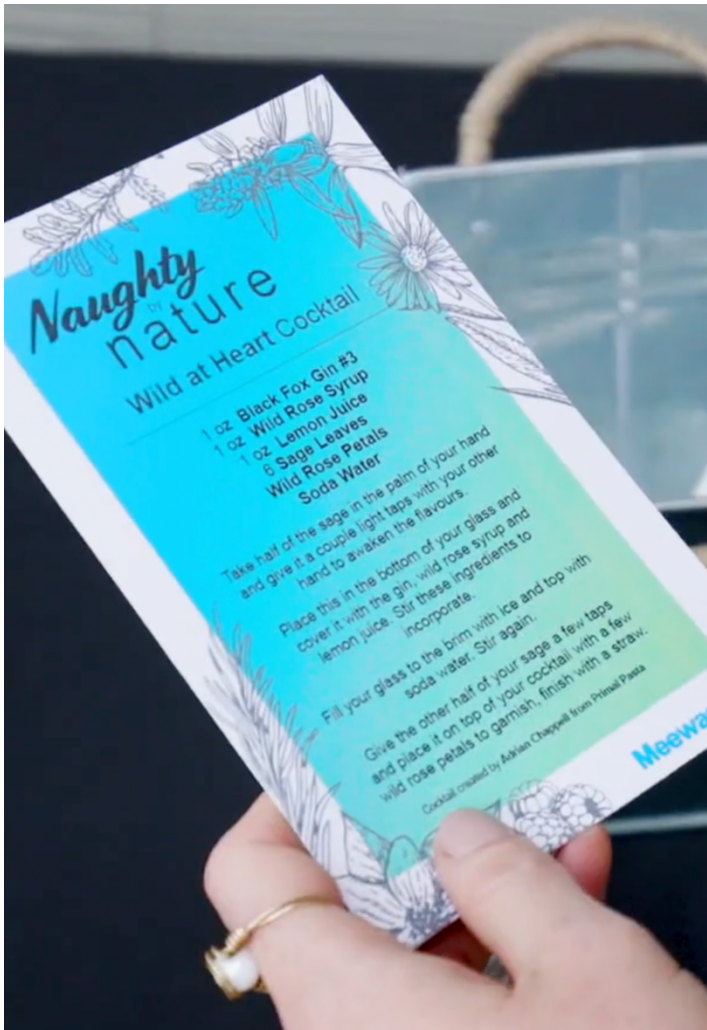
“

Since initiating this experience development work in 2021, Meewasin has gone on to develop a suite of seven unique tourism experiences offered at different times of the year, and at a range of price points. These include Birding Breakfasts, Downtown Walking Tours, Wildflowers Walks, Dark Skies experiences, and winter Sip & Skate events, as well as Naughty by Nature and the Grazing Dinner, each of which has their own experiential components.

As Magel says: “The best part for me is that the proceeds from these programs support Meewasin’s education and conservation efforts. While I consider most of these programs still in a three-year pilot phase, they have helped us develop great new partnerships and become a more active partner in our regional tourism landscape.”

”

# LESSONS LEARNED



## The Meewasin team learned many lessons along the way.

Magel shares the following insights:

- There is no cheat code—to create a compelling experience you have to do the work.
- Authenticity matters. It's become really apparent to the team, in the short time they have been doing this, that what they are actually “selling” is their people and their stories. Passion and enthusiasm for a topic can't be faked and it's contagious!
- The team follows the mantra that “everything is a pilot.” They give themselves permission to try things and then adapt them!
- They highly recommend that every experience be piloted. Gather a group that will provide friendly, honest feedback and try it out. The Meewasin Grazing Dinner has become a marquee experience, but it had several stops and starts, including changing the initial food provider, having the first tour group show up to hike the prairie in high heels and cocktail dresses, then getting ready to launch and being subject to a marketing blackout due to a local by-election.
- It is not essential to be known as a tourism business to create tourism experiences or participate in regional tourism activities. Everyone has a compelling story and there is an audience for every story.
- One of the biggest cultural shifts the Meewasin team has had to make is getting comfortable with pricing. They have a long history of free programming, and it has been a huge shift to be comfortable creating experiences and tours that are focused on revenue generation.
- Have fun developing experiences! Working on the experiential tourism portfolio was an unexpected part of Magel's role at Meewasin. With a degree in Environmental Science she did not anticipate doing this work, but is unbelievably proud to promote the people and beauty of her home province.

“

All of these things have helped us “fail forward” and put out a product we are ultimately very proud of.

- Magel Sutherland

”



“

There is a market for high value experiences that leave an impact on your guest—don't be afraid to charge accordingly. And make sure to cost in your development and delivery time – it has value!

- Magel Sutherland, Meewasin Valley Authority

”



# CONTACT INFORMATION

**Magel Sutherland**  
**Manager of Education and Experiences,**  
**Meewasin Valley Authority**  
**Website: <https://meewasin.com>**