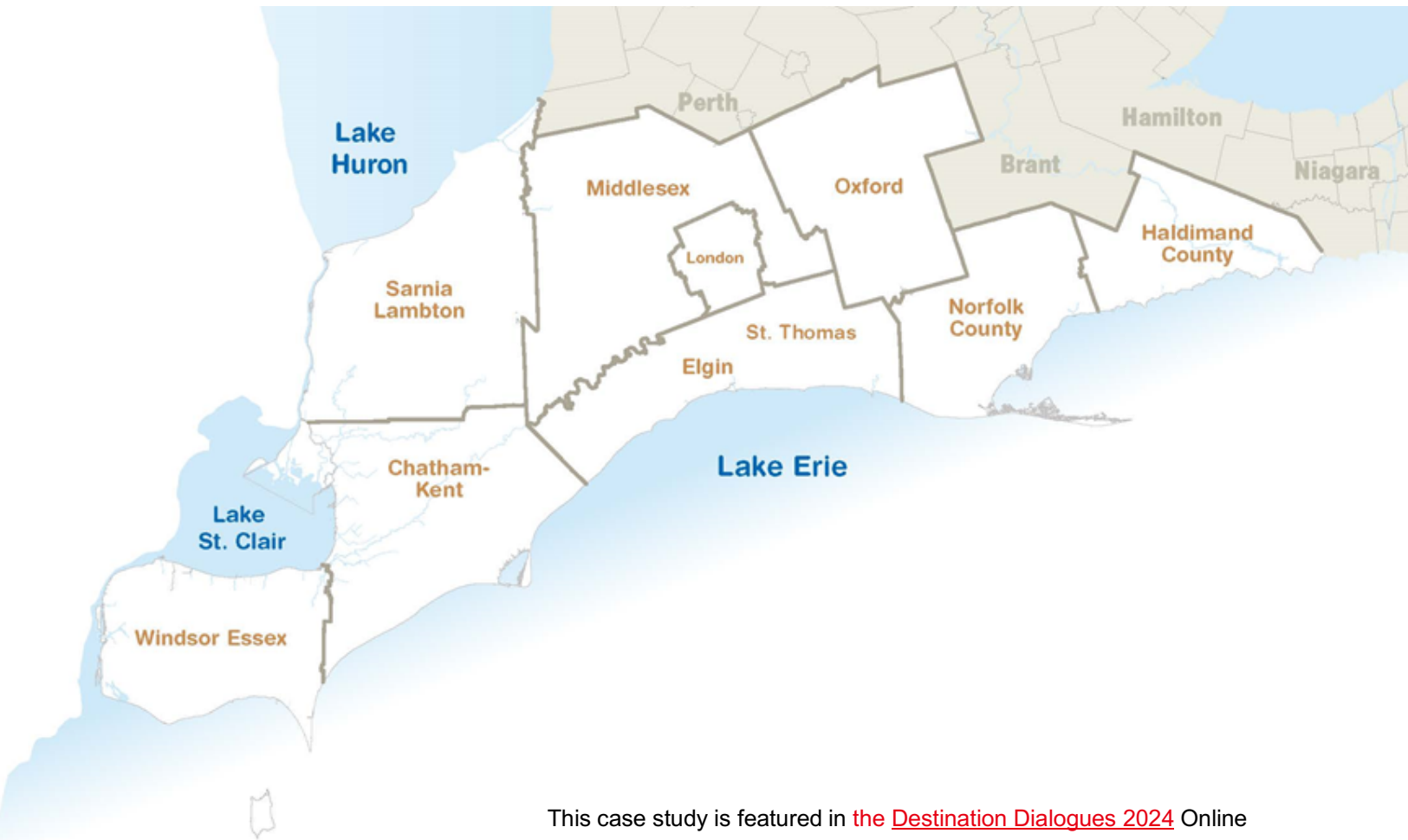


# ONTARIO'S SOUTHWEST Case Study

**Joanne Wolnik, Ontario's Southwest Regional  
Tourism Organization**

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, [Joanne Wolnik](#), Executive Director of Ontario's Southwest (OSW) Regional Tourism Organization (RTO), was featured as a speaker.

More than a decade ago, Ontario's Southwest began conversations about tourism development and investing in the development of maps, trails and packaging. These were helpful and have a role to play in how tourism is delivered and executed. But the team at Ontario's Southwest realized they were using these mechanisms repeatedly or leaning on natural spaces, such as rivers, parks, conservation areas and waterfronts, without the proper programming to host travellers.

So, in 2017, Joanne Wolnik, then Tourism Development Manager at Ontario's Southwest, embarked on a journey, initiating conversations with her regional Ontario colleagues and her own team about how to offer a more relevant way to develop this programming, recognized as a missing piece of the overall tourism development approach.



Initial discussions centred around how to invest in a community-based capacity building initiative that would help deliver the right impacts. What this meant was that the investment in training would need to reflect both financial and environmental sustainability, and that most of the impacts of the development would stay local.

Ontario's Southwest wanted to deliver joy both in support of its tourism stakeholders, but also for visitors. The team began digging deep into "the why of tourism." This theme of "why" continues today, with Joanne constantly inviting tourism businesses and operators, as well as non-traditional new experience hosts, to ask themselves, "**What is your why?**"

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In essence, this question is really a storytelling question. It could be translated further as a self-reflective business question to be, "What is my story? What makes it special? How might I share my story as an experience?"

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# UNLOCKING INSPIRATION



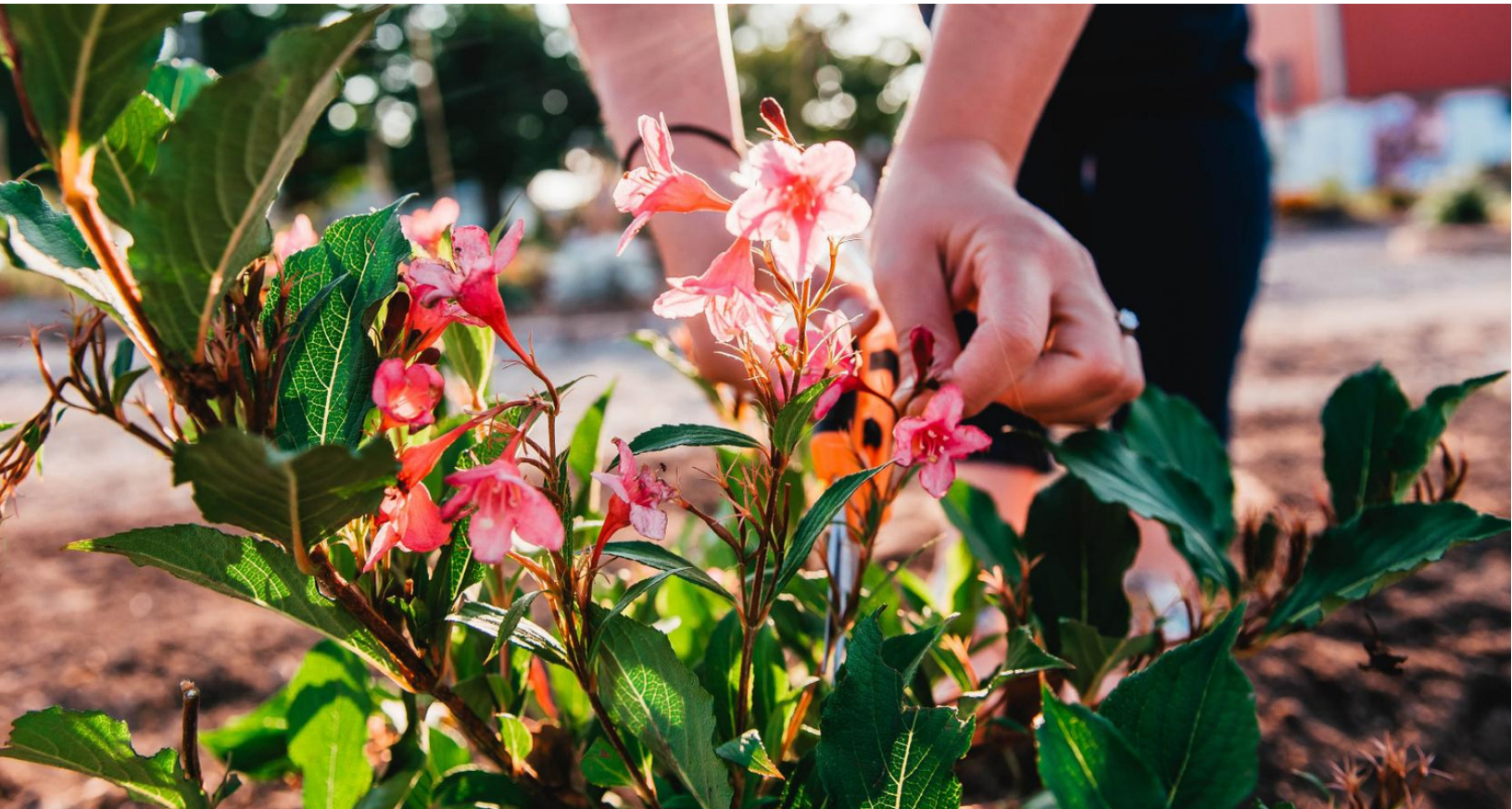
Ontario's Southwest initiated an experiential tourism development program, dubbed "Unlocked and Inspired," with the following key aims:

- Enable Ontario's Southwest staff, the regional destination management/marketing organizations (DMO), tourism partners and a diverse range of stakeholders to learn about experiential and sustainable tourism through a training workshop over two and a half days.
- Deliver this training experientially for all workshop participants, so they could learn through direct experience, with hands-on activities delivered both offsite at local community businesses and indoors with a variety of instructional learning methods.
- Develop skills associated with experience development, coaching, costing, pricing and collaboration with other community businesses.
- Develop new experiences through the training workshop and build out a minimum of 10 new experiences by offering further one-to-one training.



This approach became embedded into a year-over-year investment which evolved each year.





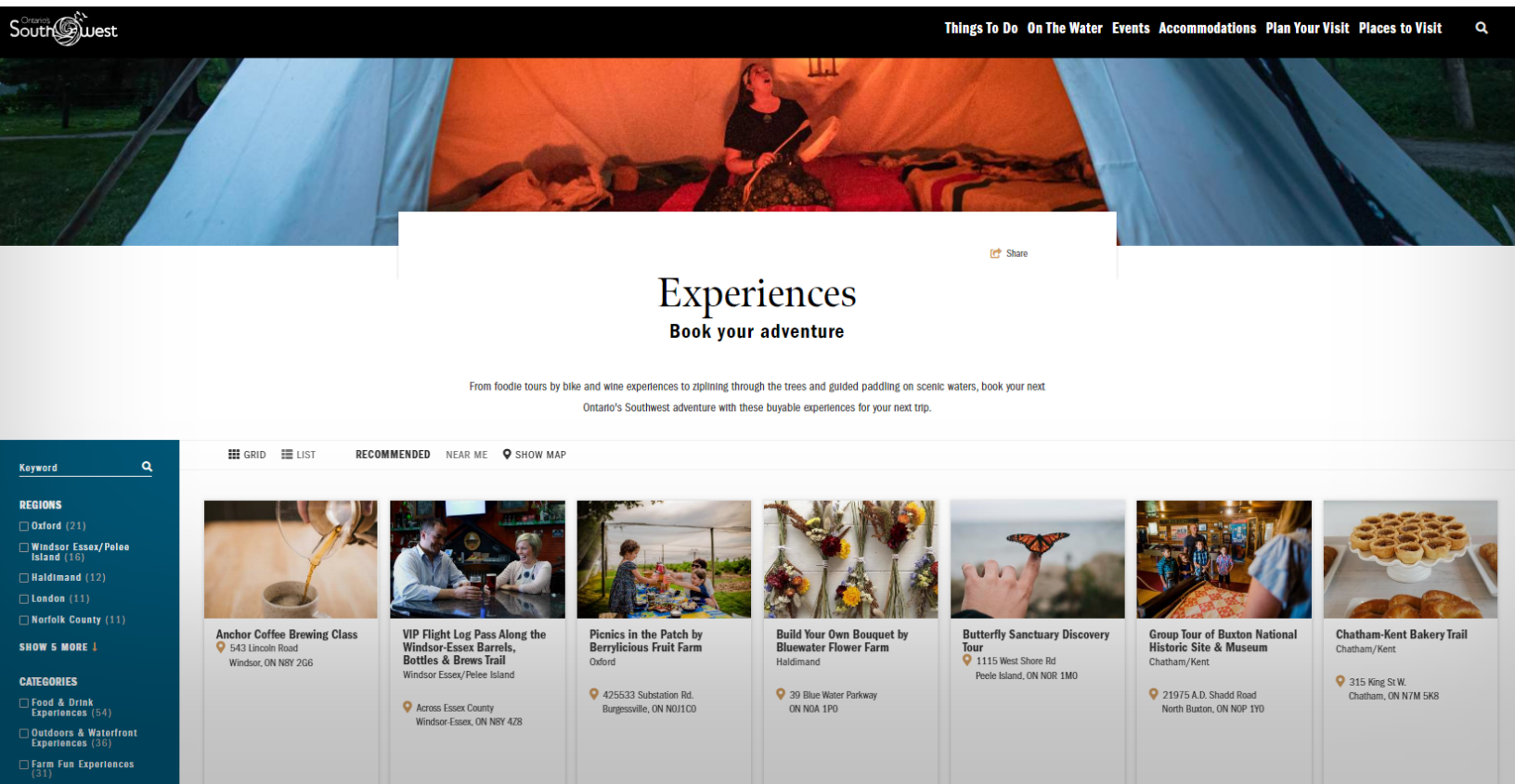
The program was delivered in different communities within the region, helping to build capacity within regional DMOs, creating new experiences as part of each annual training workshop and building out new experiences after each training. Program delivery changed to a hybrid model (online and in person) due to the pandemic, and the development of new experiences through coaching continued.

The model for this training involved a community DMO hosting each annual workshop, investing a lot of staff time and limited financial resources, supported by Ontario's Southwest, who provided the lion's share of the financial investment. One-on-one coaching was instrumental in converting training into actual results and creating in-market experiences.

Pilot testing experiences with new experience hosts was a formative part of the tourism development process. Through the later stages of this seven-year investment, two coach-the-coaches training workshops were also delivered, to boost regional capacity to support more tourism businesses and non-traditional community hosts.

From Joanne's observations, the new non-traditional community hosts fell into one of three main categories: artisans or others with a skillset that they wanted to share, community hosts who provided access to special places, and people who were so passionate about something that they felt it was their purpose to share it with the world.

As this training initiative evolved, Ontario's Southwest realized the need for additional support. Everything was new. The idea of experience hosts, like artisans, chefs, or producers, as non-traditional community hosts was new. The idea of placing storytelling at the heart of the experience development process was new. There were new roles evolving for Ontario's Southwest staff, for DMOs and for the experience hosts. These had to be defined and refined on the fly. The Ontario's Southwest team realized they had to change the way they were supporting tourism development throughout the continuum of this process.



Today, Ontario's Southwest website features more than 100 experiences. Many of them emerged from the "Unlocked and Inspired" workshops and training. All these new experiences feature various elements of experiential and sustainable tourism, some more than others. Regional coaches are now helping new experience hosts to develop more experiences.

Additionally, Ontario's Southwest saw an opportunity to launch a recognition program that captured the gold standard of experiences represented within the region. Ontario's Southwest Signature Experiences program is a criteria-based showcase of transformational visitor experiences. Today, 11 such experiences have been recognized, with more emerging through an annual intake and audit. These Signature Experiences are supported by marketing campaigns, which perform above average. The emphasis is on differentiating what the "gold standard" of an experience is meant to be.

Further, the Ontario's Southwest team began to take their learning about sustainable tourism and apply it. Before asking tourism operators and hosts to be sustainable in their operations, they realized they had to pause and make sure that they, as an RTO, were leading by example. The team did a full carbon audit for their region and worked with GreenStep Solutions on a plan, receiving a Bronze Sustainable Destination designation. They discovered there was an apparent disconnect between traveller intentions and action, so to help close the gap, they created content educating travellers about how to be more sustainable during their visit. As well, they created a sustainable travel pledge for visitors to sign virtually. Ontario's Southwest wants tourism to benefit the local community and environment, rather than come at their expense.

# LESSONS LEARNED



Find partners who can help. Ontario's Southwest invested heavily in capacity building and training for coaches because this is substantial and sustained work, over a long period of time.

Here are some tips from Joanne, now Executive Director of Ontario's Southwest, for when working with local tourism businesses and operators:

- Drill down to their “why”
- Help them see that what they have to offer really is special
- Use examples of Airbnb Experiences reviews as inspiration or proof for experience hosts considering creating experiences
- Repeat and refine—they will learn so much as they listen to their guests and pay attention to what they lean into

This kind of work and investment is about transformation of:

- Tourism product (experience) development processes
- Capacity building that creates results, is sustainable, and transfers capabilities, resources and skills to the local level
- Sustainable business models that demonstrate regenerative practices in action
- Championing authenticity and local stories, shared by local hosts, and beginning to drive changes in how marketing and promotions are done
- Responsible destination management that engages community members better and continuously, disperses tourism to different locations and in different seasons, in line with community capacity
- Tourism itineraries and activities, to put less pressure on natural spaces

# CONTACT INFORMATION

A woman, Joanne Wolnik, is standing in a workshop or studio. She is wearing a red cap, a purple scarf, a blue jacket, and dark pants. She is holding a large bouquet of dried flowers. The room is filled with hanging dried flowers in various colors, including purple, orange, and white. There are wooden tables and chairs in the room, and a wooden bench in the foreground. The lighting is warm and focused on the woman and the flowers.

**Joanne Wolnik,**  
**Executive Director, Ontario's Southwest**  
**Website: <https://www.ontariosouthwest.com/experiences/>**