

Explorers' Edge presented to South Algonquin's tourism businesses at Camp Bongopix]



By **Mike Riley**

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Explorers' Edge/RTO12 visited South Algonquin Township on April 18. CEO James Murphy and Kate Monk, vice president of strategy and corporate programs, did a presentation at Camp Bongopix Tavern to the local tourism business community outlining their new initiatives for the regional tourism industry in 2023 and going forward. Andrea Kalimin from Camp Bongopix, Andrew Michel from Algonquin Accommodations, and Angela Pollak, the chair of the South Algonquin Business Alliance comment on the event.

One of thirteen regional tourism organizations, Explorers' Edge was established in 2010 to represent stakeholders in the Algonquin Park, Algonquin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka, Parry Sound and South Algonquin geographic areas. The region is located within the traditional lands of the Anishinabek, Algonquin, Metis, and Mohawk peoples and is part of the Robinson Huron (1850) and Williams Treaties (1923) territory.

Murphy and Monk were at Camp Bongopix Tavern on April 18 to present the Explorers' Edge plan to the regional tourism industry going forward into 2023 and beyond. They said that although the regional tourism industry continues to face challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the "great Canadian wilderness just north of Toronto" continues to be in demand for travellers and rural destinations increased in popularity, which is good news for most of Explorers' Edge regional tourism businesses.

After Murphy did the introductions of the attendees and the Explorers' Edge personnel there at Camp Bongopix that day, he turned the floor over to Monk.

After giving a brief rundown of the evolution of their competitive strategy, from industry-centric (from 2011 to 2014) to consumer-centric (from 2015 to 2020), Monk told the attendees about the RTO12's region-centric regenerative tourism approach they currently employ, to create innovative solutions for industry sustainability, wider community development and organizational sustainability. The key pillars of this approach are; to work to make sure the economic, social, cultural and environmental resilience of the region through tourism development, consider and weigh the needs of all community stakeholders in this process, increase regional self-reliance to solve local challenges and increase revenue to stabilize and develop the tourism industry, solve community development and industry sustainability challenges through creative solutions, innovation and strategic partnerships, develop timely research and attract digital and technological innovation for the industry, develop KPIs to reflect improvement in the tourism

industry in relation to economic, social, cultural and environmental objectives, concentrate on developing higher yield visitation versus mass tourism, build a robust communications plan to promote the ongoing development of the regional tourism business ecosystem, and position Explorers' Edge as a destination development organization that champions tourism as a catalyst for thriving communities.

Through the use of a soon to be built Regional Data Hub, Explorers' Edge will be able to provide up to date and timely intelligence on the state of the local tourism industry. This RDH will also establish KPIs and track performance of regenerative tourism programs developed by RTO12.

One of the initiatives RTO12 is spearheading is the multi-year Sustainable Tourism Pilot Project, which encourages tourism businesses to adopt sustainable practices.

According to Monk, they are also working on micro-credential training to attract workers up to the RTO12 area, called the Rural Tourism Certificate, launched in March, 2022. Online modules educate prospective workers on the region and why working up here would be so enticing.

RTO12 is also working on an innovative housing model called the Catalyst Housing Project, to attract workers and develop professionals by leveraging housing, and employment and training opportunities in one place. Funding will include a combination of public, private and impact investors.

Monk said that a regional tourism job bank is something else that RTO12 created in 2021, which was housed on a branded consumer website and marketed using display advertising.

A travel agency is also being worked on by RTO12 as they look to acquire their Tourism Industry Council of Ontario licence, which will allow for the development of itineraries and packages to target high yield visitors, who stay longer and spend more money. A percentage of revenue from the sale of these travel packages will go towards sustainability programs across the region.

RTO12 also worked with Porter Airlines to attract high yield visitors to the region from international markets. As well as marketing for the service, they also provide a shuttle service across the region.

Indigenous outreach and tourism development is also a priority for RTO12, as they work with an economic development specialist with a background in First Nations outreach, grant development and tourism development as they work to develop mutually respectful relations with First Nations and Metis stakeholders in the Robinson Huron and Williams Treaties territory.

For more information on these initiatives, go to www.explorersedge.ca or contact Murphy at james@explorersedge.ca or Monk at kate@explorersedge.ca.

Murphy also discussed the Explorers' Edge Partnership Program. Murphy said that in ten years, they'd never rejected working with a local tourism business in this program. It is an opportunity for industry and community partners to collaborate with Explorers' Edge on mutually beneficial and strategic initiatives. The South Algonquin Business Alliance and Waaseyaa Consulting had benefitted from this program in the past. Another local business that wanted to partner with RTO12 was Michel with Algonquin Accommodations on an accessibility initiative. While they had already outfitted nine of their accommodations to be fully accessible, they also wanted to reach out to people in wheelchairs or who are handicapped to let them know they have specially outfitted wheelchairs for them to get out into the forest or out onto the water.

?I was talking to Kate [Monk] about collaborating to reach that market so they know the wilderness is now accessible for them as well,? he says.

Kalimin is the co-owner of Camp Bongopix with her husband Bongo, and says that it was great for them to host so many other tourism operators at their tavern on April 18.

?We're all usually so busy that we rarely get a chance to congregate together and catch up, so it was nice to be able to have an opportunity to do that. There is so much growth in our business community lately and it was nice to be able to be here to encourage and share ideas with others,? she says.

Kalimin says that she and Bongo loved the presentation and were especially interested in the local tourism aspect, which they found had the biggest impact on their business.

?We love the idea to incentive locals to get out and support local businesses and we were happy to hear that the local coupon program was received so well. We'd love to see that stay, especially in the shoulder and off seasons when the local tourism sector needs a bit of a boost,? she says.

Pollak says they were all really excited about Explorers' Edge coming back to the township, as they'd had a visit planned right before COVID-19 hit that they had to postpone for obvious reasons, and with a two-year gap there was lots of catching up to do.

?We were all eager to hear about the work that's been going on at Explorers' Edge and with the ?Great Canadian Wilderness (just north of Toronto)? marketing, and how that might impact the tourism economy in our subregion,? she says.

Pollak says that networking is always a challenge in their area and that communication is difficult due to the distances people have to travel, poor connectivity and people being so busy over the summertime. She says that SABA tries to fill this gap with their semi-coordinated bulletins and local board meetings to get information out there. She says that connecting with outside organizations is also difficult, so they rely on Explorers' Edge to connect them with the rest of Ontario, and they appreciate that they're always there when needed and she sees their April 18 visit as a continuation of that commitment.

?[Camp] Bongopix and the Mad Musher rolled out the red carpet for everyone! The food was delicious and it was really nice to be able to talk to each other and see each other face to face again. These two businesses are leaders in our community in so many ways,? she says. ?They had a really good turnout and we're looking forward to more opportunities like this in the future!?