

Going Nowhere



By Nate Smelle

WHEN I FIRST HEARD of the Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization's (OHTO) latest campaign to promote tourism in the area it really grabbed my attention like an effective advertisement sometimes does. Designed to entice urbanites to leave the concrete confines of the city and go 'nowhere,' the controversial commercial asks people to 'find their nowhere moment in the Ontario's Highlands.'

Not sure if it is the explorer or the existentialist in me, but the idea of getting out into the middle of nowhere has always appealed to me. This campaign on the other hand does not. Having spent a substantial amount of time some of Canada's largest cities I understand the allure of the idea of wilderness to someone living in a neighbourhood lacking green space and biodiversity. Suggesting that the Ontario Highlands is 'nowhere' however, does not really place much value on places like Bancroft, Barry's Bay, Haliburton, Minden, etc. as distinct communities with their own unique value.

As communities everywhere strive to define their own unique identity and become a desirable destination for tourists to visit, it is counterproductive to lump so many different communities together and label them as 'nowhere.' Looking at different angles from which this campaign may have originated I found more questions than answers. As mentioned there appears to be an attempt to encourage city dwellers to leave their traffic jams and manicured lawns behind and head out into the middle of the wilderness. That I get. I also understand that the mandate of the OHTO is to promote tourism throughout the entire region, which means it is somewhat necessary for the organization to use a wide brush when painting a picture of the highlands to attract new visitors. What I do not understand though is why such a culturally rich and biologically diverse region one of the most stunningly gorgeous places in the world, would want to sell itself short by identifying itself as 'nowhere.'

Was it meant to appeal to the tree hugging traveller as a little slice of paradise; or to the investor as an empty space, an opportunity for them to develop or exploit in any way that they please?

The many ways in which this campaign can be interpreted indicate that the controversy and confusion it has created, was either: a) a cleverly designed marketing strategy to be discussed by those passionately invested in the Ontario Highlands; or, b) an accidentally offensive mistake born of insensitivity to local culture.

To be be nowhere implies nothing. Existing in such a void leaves us with no sense of space or time, no social or cultural context to appreciate. Neglecting to assign a single valuable defining quality to a region overflowing with an abundance of natural beauty and cultural heritage is disrespectful to the people who live here now and even more so to the way of life of the Algonquin people who have existed in the highlands of Ontario since time immemorial.