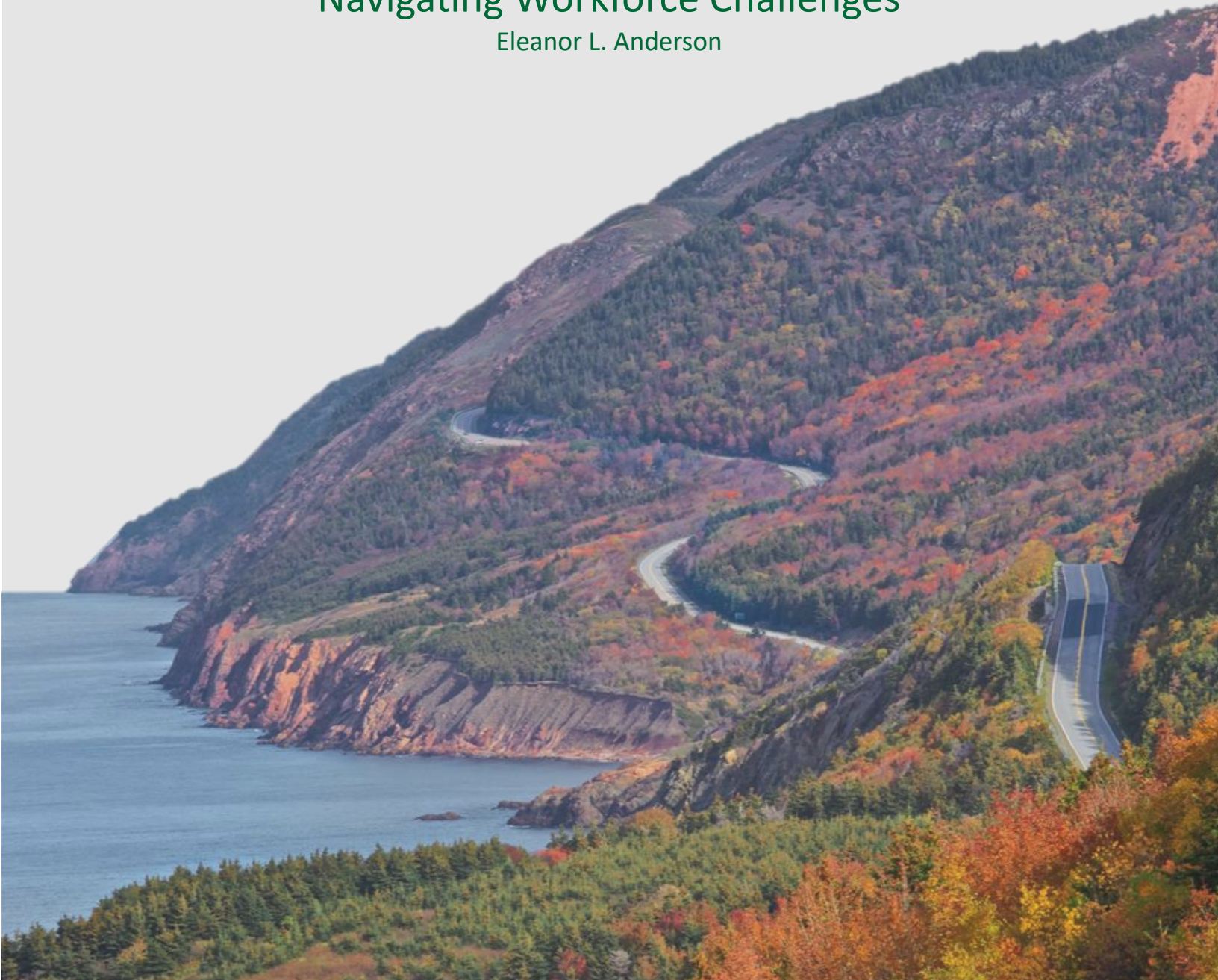




## Unama'ki - Cape Breton Island Tourism Case Studies

### The Baile nan Gàidheal | Highland Village Navigating Workforce Challenges

Eleanor L. Anderson



Cape Breton Island has long been lauded as one of the most beautiful Islands in the world. Cape Breton University has delivered well-established tourism and hospitality training for decades and is a leader in the field of such undergraduate training in Canada. The World Tourism Institute (WTI) at CBU is perfectly positioned and timed to leverage, support, and enhance, a growing tourism industry at home and globally.

**The World Tourism Institute (WTI)** was founded at Cape Breton University (CBU) in 2018 with a strong foundation rooted in the depth and diversity of the Cape Breton Island Tourism Sector, the long history of Tourism and Hospitality programming at CBU and the established industry and community relationships.

In 2022, the WTI secured \$2.24 million, 3 year project running February 2022 to 2025, for training and research funding from the Canadian government to stimulate post-pandemic recovery, build capacity and grow opportunities for Cape Breton Island's Tourism Sector. This project is called the **Cape Breton Island Tourism Training Network (CBITTN)**.

#### **CBITTN Objectives:**

- Ensure inclusivity in all development activities.
- Work with Mi'kmaw partners to explore, design and implement community-based credit programs in Indigenous tourism.
- Develop a foundation of accessible, timely and credible research which will support decision-making by the industry and act as a catalyst in innovation and entrepreneurialism in tourism.
- Identify training gaps and needs associated with labour shortages.
- Promote education and professional certifications for the tourism industry, including the development of micro-credentials and customized training programs.

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Please note that the accuracy of these case studies is subject to change due since the publication date. The individuals interviewed may no longer be affiliated with the respective tourism operations or businesses. Changes in business practices, ownership, and other relevant details may have occurred since the time of writing.



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## HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Baile nan Gàidheal | Highland Village is a key cultural and tourist attraction for Cape Breton Island. Highland Village is an outdoor living history museum and Gaelic folklife centre that illustrates the story, culture, and identity of Nova Scotia Gaels. Most Gaels are descended from individuals who immigrated from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to Nova Scotia between 1773 and 1850 bringing with them their language, culture, and traditions. Highland village employs a team of historic costumed animators to recreate historical periods, share Gaelic culture and identity, and demonstrate traditional skills. There are 11 historic buildings located on a picturesque 43-acre property overlooking the scenic Bras d'Or Lake in Iona, Nova Scotia, in the center of Cape Breton Island.

For decades, the Highland Village was owned and operated by a non-profit community organization, but it has been a part of the Nova Scotia Museum since 2000, although it is still operated locally by the Nova Scotia Highland Village Society. Following an ambitious multi-year fundraising project, the Highland Village opened a new Visitors Centre in 2023. An Taigh Fàilteachais | The Welcome House Cultural Centre is a modern 7,700 square-foot facility which is now the first point of contact for visitors arriving at the Museum. This new year-round facility features a visitor orientation space, a permanent exhibit area for telling the contemporary Gaelic Nova Scotia story, a multipurpose space for community and educational programming, a library/archives, as well as reception and gift shop areas. The new visitor center also has space dedicated to various education and community programming, management, and administration. The facilities also include a full-size commercial kitchen, allowing for public events and functions. ([highlandvillage.novascotia.ca](http://highlandvillage.novascotia.ca))

The museum offers numerous special events and programs throughout the year, a highlight of which is the annual Highland Village Day Concert each August which has been hosted on site for more than 60 years. In addition to the special events, living history museum, modern visitor centre, and gift shop, the Highland Village is home to a fabulous and unique resource called the “Roots Cape Breton Genealogy & Family History Centre” where people can search their own Cape Breton connections. There is also a major collection of many early books of Scottish music and hand noted music of some of Cape Breton’s best fiddlers. ([highlandvillage.novascotia.ca](http://highlandvillage.novascotia.ca))

## MISSION AND DIRECTION

The vision of the Nova Scotia Highland Village is to be the leading Gaelic folklife centre, recognized in Nova Scotia, nationally and internationally as an essential institution for continuing development and representation of a vital and sustainable Gaelic community. To achieve this vision, the Highland Village provides Nova Scotia with an engaging, modern, and



high-quality environment dedicated to the preservation, communication, and celebration of Gaelic folklife and the heritage and cultural identity of Nova Scotia's Gaelic community.

The Executive Director of Baile nan Gàidheal, Rodney Chaisson, reports to the Board of Trustees of the Nova Scotia Highland Village Society which has a management agreement with the Nova Scotia Museum. Chaisson asserts that the primary goal of the museum is to create an immersive visitor experience sharing the language, culture, traditions, and stories of the Scottish settlers who arrived in Unama'ki Cape Breton in the 1800's. Chaisson also stresses that museum management recognizes the importance of community capacity building through the promotion of Gaelic culture and language.

### **WORKFORCE CHALLENGES**

Rodney Chaisson has been with the Highland Village since 1993 and has witnessed many changes over the years. Chaisson says that they do their best to stay on top of tourism industry trends. One way they do this is with a focus on interpretation and curating an immersive experience. "It is important that we design and deliver purposeful experiences, and that we continually enhance our visitor services." The main tourism season at the Highland Village runs from May to October with September and October now the busiest months due to consistently increasing cruise ship excursions from the Port of Sydney.

To date, the Museum has not faced serious challenges attracting staff although there are issues emerging. The Highland Village has a staff contingent of approximately 42 employees at the height of the season, with five full-time year-round staff and two part-time. Most of the staff are rooted in, or descendants of, the Scottish Gaels who settled on Cape Breton Island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the current staff have been with the operation for decades and while the turnover of animators has been low over the years, the site must be prepared for inevitable workforce changes that may be on the horizon. However, individuals with local Scottish Gael traditional skill sets are getting harder to find.

Reasons for the scarcity of appropriate labour for the Highland Village include Cape Breton's ageing population with many potential staff and animators with the appropriate knowledge and background already approaching retirement age. Additionally, the pool of potential younger workers who have the background and skills to effectively continue the Highland Village mission is small. One cause for the small pool of potential younger workers is that knowledge including language, history, and culture, as well as traditional skills are not being passed effectively between generations. Furthermore, potential younger workers who grow up on Cape Breton Island within Gaelic communities often find more lucrative work in other parts of the province

or country. Finally, all full-time staffing positions, apart from five, are seasonal work and do not provide a year-round income and therefore are not attractive to younger workers.

Highland Village's labour challenges can be summarized into three broad categories:

1. **Attracting skilled talent** (People) – to provide an immersive experience for visitors, the interpreters/ animators and all staff play a vital role in sharing the proverbs and wisdom of the early Scottish Gaelic settlers. These roles require employees who are welcoming, energetic and skilled communicators.
2. **Training** (Knowledge and Skills) – immersive experiences and storytelling require specialized skills that all employees may not have or for which they may need to have refresher training. Chaisson mentioned that Drama and Interpretation Specialists have been hired in the past to enable and empower the employees to bring this living history site to life for the visitors.
3. **Resources** (Money) – In addition to ensuring that the Museum can provide workers with a decent living wage, finding the funds for continuous training of seasonal staff is a challenge for the Museum but an increasingly important necessity.

In addition to labour challenges, Chaisson notes that the market demand for immersive experiences has changed the way the story of the NS Highland village is told. For years visitors expected the buildings and artifacts to bear much of the role of historical interpretation and then they looked to the storytelling skills and enthusiasm of the animators, while now the trend is moving toward developing and delivering experiences that involve the visitors. The visitors want to be a part of the story in some way – making memories they can keep and, of course, share on their social channels. Adapting to this shifting market demand will require additional shifts in resources and labour requirements. Additionally, fundamental shifts in the visitor experience will require shifts in Highland Village's strategic plan which could include the development of new partnerships, the acquisition of new resources, and a shift in the skills required for employees.

Chaisson recognizes the importance of recruiting and retaining skilled and passionate staff and they have had some success in this area by cultivating a local and partner network, by hiring and training non-Gaelic speaking staff, and by offering a unique, safe and enjoyable work environment. Their awareness of workforce challenges and the changing visitor expectations challenge has helped them build a sound approach to staffing.

## CONCLUSION

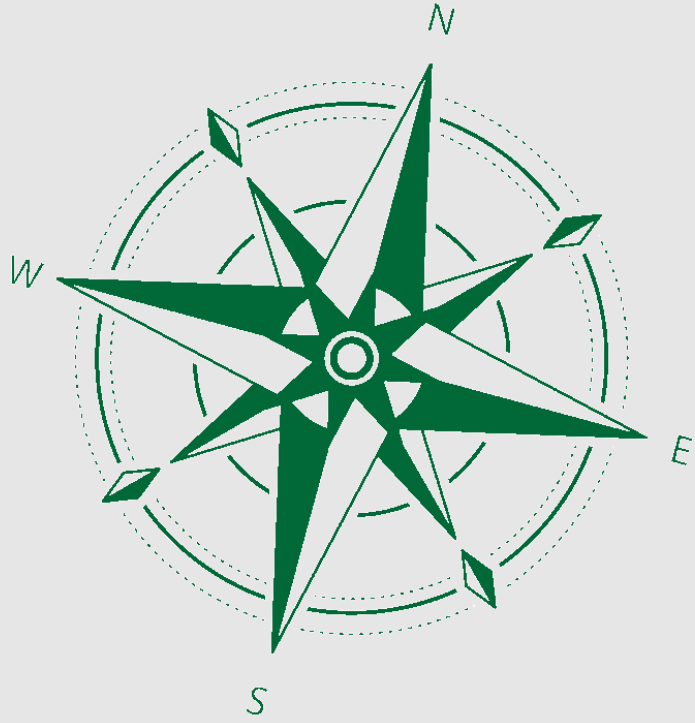
The Highland Village is a key cultural attraction on Cape Breton Island. It has maintained its Vision and Mission which are rooted in heritage interpretation of the Scottish Gaels settling on Cape Breton Island, while updating the facilities and services to meet the expectations of visitors to the site. Both labour issues and changing visitor expectations are challenges that Highland Village are attempting to address.

## ALTERNATIVE DECISIONS

1. The management of the Highland Village should focus less effort on continuing development and representation of a vital and sustainable Gaelic community and increase their efforts on shaping their telling of the Gaelic folklife story in ways that meet and exceed visitor expectations.
2. The Highland Village should explore and invest in developing the site as a four-season destination which is in line with Destination Cape Breton's strategic planning.
3. The NS Highland Village Society and Nova Scotia Museum have focused recently on much needed capital improvements, however they could have balanced that investment with digital interpretation and expanding immersive programming experiences for guests.

## INSTRUCTOR GUIDE: STUDY CASE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. Workforce shortages have inflicted the tourism sector on Cape Breton Island and across the country. What actions should management take to be ready in anticipation of a changing tourism labour force?
2. If buildings and artifacts are no longer the first appeal for tourists, how can the Highland Village bring the story of the Scottish Gaels to life in an authentic, interesting, and immersive way?
3. Is the NS Highland Village too dependent on cruise ship traffic? What if the cruise ship excursion boom that has been felt over the past few years takes a downturn?



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