

SASKATCHEWAN TOURISM AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE RECIPIENTS

The winners of the Saskatchewan Tourism Awards of Excellence for 2019 are:

**Business of the Year Award
(Over 20 Full-Time Employees)
*Wanuskewin, Saskatoon***

Wanuskewin has a proud legacy as a centre of excellence. The national historic site has earned widespread recognition for achievements driven by a mandate to share Indigenous culture through educational programming, immersive experiences, and culinary and visual arts. Sights are set on being a top destination in Canada for Indigenous cultural experiences. Wanuskewin recently completed an ambitious fundraising campaign that doubled its original goal and brought in \$40 million. This success has enabled major site improvements, including the expansion of galleries, a new learning centre and upgrades to the gift shop and restaurant. Wanuskewin reclaimed 40 acres of farmland and planted it to natural grassland for the return of Plains bison to the area. The effort is an important project in grasslands restoration and balancing the ecosystem.

**Business of the Year Award
(Under 20 Full-Time Employees)
*The Happy Nun Café, Forget***

The Happy Nun Café creates an intimate dining and cultural experience for up to 1,100 guests each month. The owners handcrafted a visitor experience with a unique blend of local food ingredients, live music and art. The café staff, known as the “Happy Nun Family,” are highly knowledgeable about the cuisine, as well as local history and the deep cultural roots of the tiny Forget community. Effective marketing is a critical part of the café’s incredible success, especially considering the remote location of the venue. The Happy Nun Café also collaborates with local businesses to create cultural experiential packages for overnight stays. Social media marketing and a subscription newsletter, combined with traditional marketing, are the perfect blend for its target audience. Plans to capitalize on the location include camping and an outdoor gathering space for music festivals and events.

**Community Event of the Year Award
*The Boomtown Cup, Shaunavon***

A highlight of Shaunavon’s Boomtown Days and Stampede, the 2019 Boomtown Cup attracted over 1,200 spectators – an increase from 800 the previous year – to watch riding lawnmowers race with surprising speed. Visitors, racers and pit crews gathered for a full day of fun at the annual event. Enthusiastic residents, businesses and even RCMP officers raced jacked-up riding lawnmowers at speeds up to 70 km per hour for the \$1,000 grand prize and trophy. After the race, visitors gathered to an evening meal catered by Harvest Eatery’s award-winning chef, Rusty Thienes, followed by a cabaret. Improvements to the event included bleachers, a Calcutta auction and additional entertainment for all ages.

Backgrounder

Fred Heal Tourism Ambassador Award

Mane Productions, Saskatoon

Through marketing and public relations, Mane Productions promotes Saskatchewan as a travel destination. Owner Mandy Pravda has contributed to the tourism industry for over 10 years. As a marketing, social media and event specialist, Pravda has worked with almost every major public event in Saskatchewan, including the Canadian Country Music Awards, SaskTel Saskatchewan Jazz Festival and Ness Creek Music Festival. In 2019, the Waskesiu Chamber of Commerce and local accommodation properties contracted Pravda to create a strategic overhaul on branding and content building for the Waskesiu destination area, followed by the execution of a two-year international marketing plan. One of the main goals of the plan was to improve and expand offerings and increase travel to the area in the shoulder season. The plan's digital strategy included a revamp of six websites and expansion of social media platforms that promote the offerings of the Waskesiu Lake area in Prince Albert National Park throughout Canada and the United States.

Gil Carduner Marketing Award

Wanuskewin, Saskatoon

In 2019, Wanuskewin was in the spotlight at the Canadian Tourism Awards, receiving the Indigenous Tourism Award for the second time. While site upgrades and renovations were underway, activities proceeded and the park recorded a five per cent increase in visitation and sales. Wanuskewin attributes its success in 2019 to sustaining momentum, "marketing to the hearts of guests" and earning media attention for a host of activities, programs and new developments at the site. The second annual Kona Winter Festival welcomed more than 2,000 attendees and saw record-setting sales in the gift shop and restaurant. Han Wi Moon Dinners were a resounding, sold-out success. These evening dinners, held outdoors, present an enriching, immersive guest experience through the enjoyment of Indigenous cuisine, performing arts and storytelling.

Indigenous Tourism Experience Award

Aski Holistic Adventures, Cumberland House

Aski Holistic Adventures is located on the Saskatchewan River Delta, 60 km northwest of Cumberland House. The company offers remote, nature-based tourism experiences that embrace holistic living, herbal medicine and eco-therapy. Owner Michela Carrière launched the venture in 2018, working alongside of her family's outfitting business. She is an experienced outdoor guide and herbalist, and teaches living *Mino-pimatisiwin*, the Cree way of life that includes being healthy in mind, body, spirit and emotions. Cree culture and traditions influence every aspect of the business. Visitors are treated to adventures that explore the natural wonders of the Saskatchewan River Delta and foster meaningful connections to the area, its history and people. Carrière is a role model for Indigenous youth and leads school presentations that promote entrepreneurship and tourism.

Marquee Event of the Year Award

2019 Tim Hortons NHL Heritage Classic, Regina

The 2019 Tim Hortons NHL Heritage Classic was a chance for hockey fans to see an outdoor NHL game played at Mosaic Stadium – a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Young hockey players and fans attended

Backgrounder

the event featuring the Winnipeg Jets and Calgary Flames. It was the first regular season outdoor NHL game played in Canada in a province without an NHL team. The free outdoor festival included the Stanley Cup on display, Hockey Hall of Fame exhibits, trading card events, live concerts, and autograph signings. The event drew about 20,000 visitors and helped to generate \$20 million of overall economic activity in Saskatchewan.

Rookie of the Year Award

Nutrien Wonderhub, Saskatoon

The Nutrien Wonderhub children's museum entertains families with fun exhibits and inspirational programming. The museum's mission is to foster creativity, curiosity, and a lifelong love of learning in children and their adults. Exhibits reflect the diversity of Saskatchewan communities and the unique local heritage, culture and landscape. It took five years of hard work and perseverance for volunteers, Board members, staff, design and construction teams to make the vision a reality. The completed space is now a state-of-the-art facility with 25,000 sq. ft. of galleries and 11 permanent interactive exhibits. Between June and December 2019, Nutrien Wonderhub welcomed over 104,000 guests. Its Facebook following tripled during this timeframe, from 3,000 to almost 9,000. Future growth plans include working with members to continue providing an exceptional visitor experience. Outreach exhibits will visit underserved communities throughout Saskatchewan.

Service Excellence Award

Northern Lights Vintage Spa, Maple Creek

Northern Lights Vintage Spa offers holistic wellness services in an old world setting with vintage décor. The spa offers a growing selection of services that are considered the cutting-edge of wellness. Treatments are customized for the unique needs of each client. Therapeutic services include homeopathic medicine, thermography, counselling services, acupuncture, advanced foot treatments and aesthetic services. A beautiful reception area, themed treatment rooms, calming music and the scent of essential oils create the start of an immersive spa experience. Every room is welcoming and the team is dedicated to ensuring that each client leaves feeling centered, relaxed and pampered. A small boutique offers a selection of Canadian-made wellness products. The spa's commitment to attentive and generous service resulted in the business doubling year over year, despite a number of challenges that included a devastating fire.

Tourism Employee of the Year Award

Arnold McKenzie, Legislative Assembly Service of Saskatchewan, Regina

In 2019, Arnold McKenzie celebrated his 35th year of service as an Information Officer at the Legislative Assembly Service of Saskatchewan (LAS). Over his 35 years, McKenzie dedicated himself to developing tours and programming, and providing visitors with memorable experiences. He was a fount of knowledge about the history of the Legislative Building and the province of Saskatchewan, and well known by tourists and school groups alike. His good humour and love of people saw him requested by many booking tours of the Legislative Building. In his time with the LAS, McKenzie developed an excellent rapport with the public and displayed a phenomenal ability to make people feel at ease and

Backgrounder

engaged on his tours. He trained two generations of Visitor Services staff and passed on a wealth of experience and information. McKenzie retired in mid-2019.

Tourism Employer of the Year Award

CAA Saskatchewan

Established in Saskatchewan in 1917, CAA is an internationally recognized brand with a presence in every province in Canada, representing 5.2 million members, and an affiliation with the 50-million-member American Automobile Association (AAA) in the United States. In May 2019, CAA was named the most trusted brand in Canada by Gustavson Brand Trust Index. Over the past 10 years, CAA Saskatchewan's goal has been to provide excellence in customer service, which has proven to translate to higher engagement and satisfaction for its employees and customers. Two knowledgeable and experienced staff members lead training for new and existing employees, and are in-house facilitators for Service Best Customer Service and Selling is Service training. As an Employer of Choice, CAA Saskatchewan strives to attract and retain staff through a mix of incentives, opportunities for advancement in the tourism industry and a respectful, dynamic workplace.

Travel Media Award

Jenn Sharp, Saskatoon

Jenn Sharp's entertaining culinary stories promote Saskatchewan as a savoury travel destination. Sharp has been a journalist, food writer and editor in the province for over a decade. She was the editor of *Bridges* at the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* and *QC* at the *Regina Leader-Post* from 2011-2015, where she told stories that connected people to their communities and promoted Saskatchewan on a larger scale. Currently, Sharp is a freelance journalist for Postmedia Network, where she writes the weekly Flat Out Food column. Her culinary writing has also appeared on CBC Saskatchewan and Eat North. Her first book, a food-focused travelogue called *Flat Out Delicious: Your Definitive Guide to Saskatchewan's Food Artisans*, was published in April by TouchWood Editions. During her research for the book, Sharp started social media accounts on several platforms that publicize food artisans, sustainable agriculture, Saskatchewan's abundant natural beauty and its robust local food system.

Tourism Builder Award

Brad Muir, Anglin Lake

Brad Muir has left an indelible imprint on Saskatchewan's tourism industry during almost 40 years of involvement and leadership. He is a proud ambassador for the province and credited with promoting its natural beauty and stewarding ecological health of the lands and waters, while expanding visitors' knowledge. Inspired by the province's northern lakes and boreal forest, he has shaped memorable experiences for travellers from near and far. His work has furthered understanding of the relationship between delicate ecosystems and human activities. Muir was a nature/heritage interpreter in Prince Albert National Park for 30 years. He helped lay the groundwork for experiential, nature-based tourism in Saskatchewan. In 1997, he launched Sundogs Excursions, which offers dogsledding experiences and fosters appreciation of the animals, the boreal forest ecology and the guest's place in the ecosystem. Sundogs Excursions became an award-winning company and a Canadian Signature Experience. Muir wears many hats – host, interpreter, teacher, mentor, photographer, as well as author of numerous

Backgrounder

articles about national parks, nature and dogsledding. Through his volunteer work, he helped develop Heritage Interpreter certification standards, train interpreters and mentor operators. He is widely admired for his intelligent and affable way of promoting ideas for tourism and encouraging others to develop and implement their passions.

Gordon Olson, Big River

Gordon Olson has been a tourism champion and leader for more than 30 years. His commitment to the Ness Creek Site, near Big River, has transformed part of the boreal forest into a popular, year-round destination where music, art, culture and recreation are celebrated. Olson has a gift for forging partnerships and encouraging people to dream big and take risks. His drive for overcoming obstacles and getting the job done is unyielding. He recognized that an open meadow in the forest, which once pastured cattle, could take on a new life. The Ness Creek site today hosts four annual music festivals, a biennial international artists collaboration, art and music camps, fall faire and annual winter festival. With 20 km of cross-country ski trails, snowshoe trails, cabin rentals and other features, the site is a popular winter getaway. Olson always sees the “big picture” and his vision has inspired enhancements, such as a permaculture forest garden and 4,000-sq. ft. event facility. He is described as “an alchemist in bringing the right people and resources together, and imbuing them with his passion and child-like wonder at the beauty of this space. That’s what creates the magic of Ness Creek.”

Dr. Ernie Walker, Saskatoon

Dr. Ernie Walker, O.C. is a driving force behind Wanuskewin, a national historic site and one of Saskatchewan’s flagship attractions. His connections to the area run deep, stretching back to his youth. In the 1980s, he worked with Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders to develop the concept for Wanuskewin. He set in motion partnerships with the Province of Saskatchewan, City of Saskatoon, Meewasin Valley Authority and University of Saskatchewan. Walker has led archaeological excavation in the Opimihaw Valley for over 40 years, making it the longest continually operating dig site in Canada. His work confirms that for over 6,400 years, Wanuskewin has been a gathering place visited by every cultural group indigenous to the Northern Plains. He has worked tirelessly on the campaign to expand Wanuskewin and seek designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As a place where the arts, science, ecology, Indigenous history and culture, and the environment all come into focus, Wanuskewin has made a strong case. Walker’s vision has driven an ambitious renewal plan with goals for expanding the land base and returning pure Plains bison to the area. In December, Wanuskewin introduced its new residents – six bison calves from Grasslands National Park and five adults from the United States, with ancestral ties to Yellowstone National Park.