



TOURISM
BOWEN
ISLAND

2024 Visitor Services Report
Tourism Bowen Island Association
Submitted: September 16 , 2024



2024 Visitor Information Services Report

Summary:

Tourism Bowen Island Association (TBI) has operated the seasonal Visitor Information Centre on behalf of the Bowen Island Municipality since 2016, based on a Fee-for-Service agreement. This report presents our 2024 operations.

TBI is also requesting guidance from Mayor and Council on the future of the service agreement. The service agreement has not been updated or revised since 2016 and the funding level has not changed since 2019, despite increased expenses and BC-mandated minimum wage increases. TBI is a small grant-dependent nonprofit without long-term or core funding. The current Fee-for-Service agreement is no longer viable.

As the population of Metro Vancouver and Bowen Island grows, there's an increasing need for improved visitor and tourism management. Recently, some residents vocalized frustrations and requested improvements. TBI released *A Community-Based Responsible Visitation Plan for Bowen Island* in April 2024. This plan outlines four strategic goals and over fifty initiatives aimed at balancing the values and wellbeing of residents, environment, economy, and visitors. TBI wishes to work collaboratively with Bowen Island Municipality, as well as the community and local businesses, to action initiatives that will improve tourism management. Dedicated funding is required and currently the most feasible annual source is the MRDT and TBI can assist.



Bowen Island Visitor Information Centre Services:

Visitor Services Counsellors provide valuable frontline on-the-street services that facilitate responsible visitations and community economic development. All Counsellors are trained in accordance with industry best practices through Destination BC's educational programs and are given extensive Bowen-specific training. The goal is for each employee to become a "Bowen Island knowledge expert." Fostering community wellbeing and sustainability are foundational values. Counsellors are vital intermediaries, facilitating and managing connections amongst visitors, community, businesses, environment, and government. Responsible management includes, for instance, only directing visitors to public amenities, locations, services, and resources that can adequately accommodate visitors, such as public beaches with outhouses. We're consistent and accurate with the information that we disseminate, communicating municipal bylaws and amplifying safety guidance, such as cougar and fire danger.



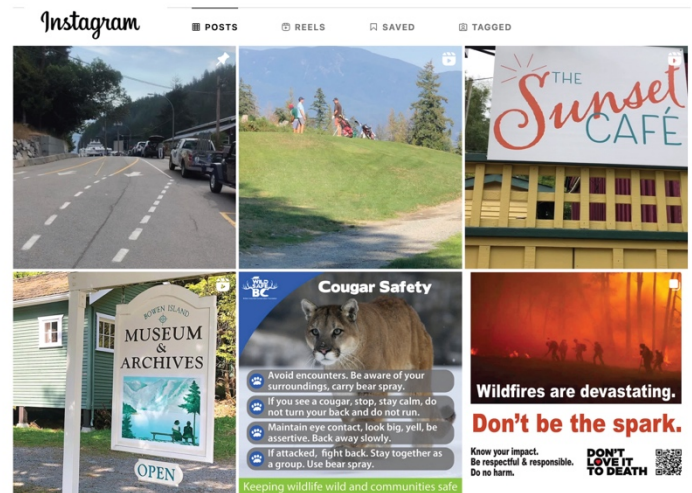
When Visitor Services Counsellors "capture" visitors we inform and educate, sharing valuable information and tips that support responsible, value-added experiences. Visitor services is composed of proactive strategies and practices that touch virtually every aspect of our community: from natural amenities, such as beaches, trails, and parks, to practical how-to-guidance regarding cars, dogs, buses, ferry lineup, and other. Visitor services help to mitigate problems and address issues when they arise, such as the recent bus reservation matter.



Visitor Management Resources:

Informing, educating, and supporting responsible visits requires a variety of carefully-crafted resource materials, policies and management best-practices. It also requires multiple channels of communication to engage individuals in every stage of their visitor journey, from trip-planning to in-the-community. The Visitor Centre and Visitor Services Counsellors are a vital service, but only one part of responsible visitor management. Moreover, people visit Bowen Island 365 days per year.

TBI creates a wide variety of print and digital visitor resources. TBI's website is the #1 return for "Bowen Island" searches and the go-to resource for visitors, providing trip-planning guidance and how-to information. TBI's social channels are another important communication channel, particularly with emergent issues such as wildfire and cougar safety. Though we don't have a static breakdown, we know residents follow and use TBI's communication channels as a source for local information, too.



For the past two years, TBI has created a map and responsible visitor guide that provides valuable information and links, such as Doggie Dos and Don't, washroom locations, ferry schedule, car lineup, and other must-know information. This practical map/guide resource is distributed widely for both trip planning and day-of guidance.

Through TBI's ongoing collaborative work with regional organizations and provincial tourism bodies, TBI advocates for Bowen Island and contributes to tourism planning and management initiatives. One recent example, TBI contributed to the development of the Don't Love it to Death responsible recreation initiative. In addition to digital resources, TBI was able to secure no-charge signage for Bowen Island Municipality's parks and beaches.

There is much more that can be done, of course, and TBI will continue to advocate for and implement visitor management initiatives whenever possible. Unfortunately, limited funding impacts TBI's work and services.

2024 Visitor Services Operations:

For 2024, the Bowen Island Visitor Information Centre was open to the public from Wednesday May 15 through to Labour Day September 2, a total 16 weeks / 110 days. When staffing and funding allowed, the mobile Kiosk operated on weekends and holidays. The combined Visitor Centre & Kiosk total hours of operation were 993, virtually the same as 2023.

Visitor Centre staff included a part-time supervisor who hired and trained employees and managed all operations. In addition to the supervisor, three Visitor Services Counsellors were hired to work full or part time. It takes a significant amount of time and effort to train staff, but one individual was a returning employee, thankfully. The combined total staff hours to operate and manage the Visitor Centre and weekend Kiosk for 2024 was 1,358, a slight 9% increase over 2023.

Visitor Services Counsellors assisted an estimated total of 8,529 parties (groups of visitors), a 2.5% increase over 2023. An estimated total of 23,620 individuals were assisted, which is a -16% decrease from 2023. These statistics suggest that visitors were travelling in smaller groups than in 2023. The chart below shows key statistics and comparisons for the years 2016 – 2024.



It's estimated that approximately 80% of visitors to Bowen Island are Metro Vancouver and BC residents. It's also estimated, based on a 2017 Vancouver, Coast and Mountains study, that a minimum 36% of all visitors to the Sea-to-Sky region are visiting friends and relatives (VFR). As Bowen's population grows, so will visitors to the island. Of note this year, international travel is back. From Argentina to Wales, and many countries from across the globe, Counsellors recorded a truly worldwide list of visitor origins.

Notes:

- *The following data represents an estimated number of people/parties that VIC staff personally assist.*
- *2019 is the year that we had the most funding/staff, resulting in the highest interactions.*
- *Lack of funding/staff results in fewer interactions, as noted in 2022.*
- *The Kiosk's higher interactions is due to its prominent location, but its operation is limited and dependent on funding and staffing.*

• TBI provides visitor services 365 days per year via website, email, and social media. These year-round visitor services are not part of the current Fee-for-Service agreement.

Visitor Information Centre Year-over-Year Comparisons 2016 – 2024											
Year-over-year Comparison	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	% difference 2023 over 2022	2024	% difference 2024 over 2023
VIC Hours							704	869	23%	866	-0.35%
Kiosk Hours							57	155	172%	127	-18.00%
All Staff Hours							1,021	1,240	21.5%	1,358	9.00%
Total VIC Hours*	938.5	1,003.5	1,123	1,049	755	888	761	1024	35%	993	-3.00%
Total VIC Parties	2,928	5,177	6,770	7,438	3,999	4,924	5,591	6,152	10%	6,175	0.04%
Total Kiosk Parties	307	363	1,533	4,099	1,796	1,935	766	2,180	184%	2,354	8.00%
Total Parties (VIC & Kiosk)	3,235	5,540	8,303	11,537	5,795	6,859	6,357	8,332	31%	8,529	2.50%
Total VIC Visitors	7,311	13,329	17,064	19,654	9,867	12,936	14,716	17,058	16%	16,888	-1.00%
Total Visitors Kiosk/roaming	743	1,023	4,075	11,442	4,785	5,604	2,200	8,001	263%	6,732	-16.00%
All Visitors Combined	8,054	14,352	21,139	31,096	14,652	18,540	16,916	25,059	48%	23,620	-6.00%

The above statistics reflect staff interactions only, not all visitors to Bowen Island. July and August are peak visitor months. Currently, we do not have BC Ferries traffic statistics or Experience Card data for 2024. Therefore, we cannot provide any statistics about the total number of visitors to Bowen Island.

Comparison to other communities:

Tourism Bowen Island is part of Destination BC's visitor services network. In 2022, we were asked how Bowen Island's Visitor Information Centre compares to other communities, including operating structure, funding, and statistics. Gabriola Island was suggested as a comparable island community based on population and proximity to a larger metropolitan centre. However, Nanaimo's 100,000 population does not really compare to Metro Vancouver's 2.6 million (2021), as evidenced in the following chart.

This chart presents information for 7 communities in addition to Bowen Island and was originally created in 2022 using 2021 data. This version has been updated to include 2023 visitor centre statistics. For both years, Bowen Island visitor centre

recorded the third highest number of visitors, despite only being a seasonal centre with a small budget.

Community Visitor Services Survey – DBC VIC network statistics and telephone conversations

**This comparison was originally created based on 2021 statistics & information. For 2023, only VIC hours & total visitors have been added.*

Community	Operational structure	Annual base funding municipal/regional	2021 Hours Operation	2021 Total Visitors	2023 Hours Operation	2023 Total Visitors
Gabriola - pop 4,050; Regional District of Nanaimo	chamber	\$23,000 (2021) \$26,000 (2022) estimate based on 35% of Chamber funding \$65,000 (2021) and requesting \$75,000	543	2,199	933	4,180
Gibsons - pop 4,600; municipality, Regional District	DMO - Sunshine Coast Tourism	\$131,000 (2021) to operate both Gibsons and Sechelt	1,122	3,945	1,813	6,587
Sechelt - pop 10,200; Regional District Sunshine Coast	DMO - Sunshine Coast Tourism	\$131,000 (2021) to operate both Gibsons and Sechelt	1,155	3,673	1,821	6,568
Hope - pop 6,200; municipality	CEDC org – AdvantageHope	\$100,000 (2021)	1,636	24,710	2,508	34,289
Oliver - pop 5,000; municipality, Regional District	DMO - Oliver Tourism Association	\$56,000 (2021)	717	1,956	1,326	7,041
Princeton - pop 2,900 ; municipality	Municipal - Ec Dev	\$124,000 (2021)	2,093	12,183	3,013	22,224
Squamish - pop 19,500; municipality	DMO - Tourism Squamish		2,021	58,532	2,409	63,037
Bowen Island - pop 3,700	DMO - Tourism Bowen Island	\$20,000 (2019–2024)	888	18,540	1,024	25,059

Fee-for-Service Agreement:

TBI has operated the Visitor Information Centre on behalf of Bowen Island Municipality since 2016. The Fee-for-Service agreement stipulates brick & mortar services seven days per week from Victoria Day weekend through to Labour Day, a total of 108 days. The agreement does not include any visitor management services for the other 257 days of the year. People visit Bowen Island daily and require information, resources and guidance. The Centre receives visitors every season of the year and TBI has been maintaining the self-serve information displayed on the front porch.



As a small grant-based nonprofit, each year TBI applies for multiple grants to maintain services. Grant funding is important and appreciated, but highly insecure. Moreover, the grant funding TBI receives is project-based not core funding. Thereby, TBI's work and services are limited.

To fulfill the Fee-for-Service agreement, TBI has successfully received a Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) grant each year. The CSJ grant enables TBI to hire staff and improve visitor services. However, the CSJ grant is never guaranteed and since the pandemic the CSJ funding has been significantly less, going from a high of 18,500 in 2019 to \$5,500 in 2024.

Thankfully for 2024, TBI accessed a work integrated learning grant from Tourism HR Canada and was able to hire a university student from UVIC. It's not always easy hiring staff on Bowen who can fulfill grant requirements. Without these two grants, TBI's ability to operate the Visitor Information Centre would have been significantly impacted.

The Fee-for-Service agreement has not been reviewed or revised over the years. The following chart shows the BIM Fee-for-Service agreement from 2016 through to 2024. Using BC's minimum wage as a baseline measurement, this chart shows the value depreciation over the years. TBI is aware and has been respectful of BIM's fiscal constraints. However, the current Fee-for-Service agreement and funding level is not viable for Tourism Bowen Island. TBI is seeking guidance from Mayor and Council on the future of the service agreement.

**Note: Tourism Bowen Island does not pay anyone minimum wage because it's not a living wage and because it's not realistic in comparison to other employment in the community.*

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Fee-for Service	\$15000	\$15000	\$15000	\$20000	\$20000	\$20000	\$20,000	\$20000	\$20000
BC min wage June	\$10.45	\$10.85	\$12.65	\$13.85	\$14.60	\$15.20	\$15.65	\$16.75	\$17.40
% wage increase over prior year		3.8%	16.6%	9.5%	5.4%	4%	2.9%	7%	3.9%
deficit between agreement & minimum wage		-\$570	-\$3,150	\$125	-\$1,080	\$1,880	-\$2,460	\$3,860	\$4,640

Tourism Bowen Island Association:

Tourism Bowen Island Association (TBI) was established in May 2015 out of the municipality's Community Economic Development Committee. TBI is a member-based non-profit organization, with approximately 50 members, and is managed by a volunteer board of directors. TBI operates as the central body for tourism in the community with the goals of facilitating sustainable economic development and responsibly managing all aspects of the tourism ecosystem.

TBI is a small nonprofit with an operating budget primarily composed of grants and service contracts. Memberships total

approximately \$10,000 annually and are the only undesignated funds. During COVID, TBI successfully received funding and a couple of grants that enabled the organization to hire one employee and provide enhanced services and programs. However, those grants and staff have ended. Without new funding or revenue streams on the horizon, TBI must restructure.



Municipal Regional District Tax Program (MRDT):

TBI contributed to and supported BIM's 2020 MRDT application. Jody Lorenz worked with planner Emma Chow to create the 5-year business plan that allocated MRDT revenues to both tourism management and affordable housing. It's unfortunate the necessary approval was not obtained in February 2020, then COVID hit causing uncertainty and delays.

As per TBI's letter, attached to Emma Chow's April 27, 2020, council report, TBI wishes to advance the 2020 business plan. Moreover, TBI can consult with tourism stakeholders and assist the reapplication process.

The MRDT is currently the only feasible revenue stream to support tourism management on Bowen Island. The MRDT was established by the BC Government in 1987 to raise revenue for local tourism programs and projects. Affordable housing was added as a permissible use of online accommodation platform funds in 2018.

Conclusion:

Tourism Bowen Island Association has been pleased to provide visitor services, support the community, and facilitate economic development since 2016. Tourism has been and will continue to be a key social and economic driver on Bowen. It's imperative to plan and implement initiatives to improve tourism management and support community wellbeing. We welcome opportunities to advance collaborative efforts with BIM and the community.

With this report and presentation, we seek Mayor and Council's guidance on 1) the future of the Fee-for-Service agreement and 2) the MRDT to support tourism management and affordable housing.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



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