

Growth of Tourism in the NWT

Mr. Speaker, the numbers are in and I'm pleased to say that the Northwest Territories tourism sector continues to lead our territory's march to a more diverse economy. Even on the heels of what was an extraordinary year of growth, in 2017-2018, we have, once again, seen our tourism numbers climb.

For the first time, over 110,000 visitors travelled to the NWT, spending over \$203 million in the process. Overall, visitation to the Northwest Territories increased by four percent last year. While modest for the 2017-2018 fiscal year, it supports the much broader and steeper five-year trend of improvements that we are seeing in our tourism numbers.

Since 2013, visitation has increased by 19 percent. Spending has increased by nearly 50 percent and we are well on the way to achieving our target of \$207 million annually identified in our Tourism 2020 plan.

Mr. Speaker, the most notable increase in our new numbers is found in Aurora viewing. Thirty-five thousand visitors came to our territory last year to see our northern lights, a 17 percent increase over 2016-2017. Those visitors spent almost \$57 million, also a 17 percent jump.

Telling our story has been essential in getting us to this point. It will become even more important as we continue to grow our share of the international travel market. Central to these efforts is our partner, NWT Tourism whose staff represent the Spectacular NWT brand and work hard to showcase our territory and all it has to offer to potential visitors, across the country and around the globe.

2018 was a good year for us. The NWT's participation in the Canada-China Year of Tourism realized an unprecedented exchange of information between our jurisdiction and the world's fastest growing tourist market. This included the federally-led trade mission to China during which NWT Tourism solidified a partnership with Flow Creative Marketing Limited. The partnership gives the Spectacular NWT brand a consistent, locally-relevant presence in the Chinese market. It was an important step and opportunity to attract even more visitors to our spectacular territory.

The mission also highlighted Alipay as an important tool to encourage Chinese travelers to consider the NWT as their destination, purchase their tourism experiences and spend money once they got here. At a follow up event earlier this month, Yellowknife business owners got an opportunity to learn first-hand how this third-party mobile and online payment platform can benefit and grow tourism-based businesses in the NWT.

Mr. Speaker, in September, Industry, Tourism and Investment, along with NWT Tourism ushered in a partnership with the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada that will leverage investment in Indigenous cultural tourism for the NWT. This is a popular and unique element of our territory's tourism offering that give our territory an edge in the competitive global tourism marketplace.

Next week, I look forward to attending NWT Tourism's Annual Tourism Conference, an event which will bring together the NWT's local industry, international tourism and travel experts, and government support networks to exchange ideas, learn and celebrate tourism success across the NWT. The theme for this year's event is Change, Challenge, Opportunity. It is a timely and fitting theme given the position of our industry today.

There is no doubt that the surge of tourism that we have seen in the past five years has brought unprecedented change to our business landscape. We're sharing the NWT with more people than ever before. Tourism has brought a great deal of opportunity for businesses; from charter fishing businesses to Indigenous tourism outfitters to Aurora operators. The Department's Facebook pages are full of stories about NWT residents and entrepreneurs using programs and supports to advance their part in our ever-expanding tourism sector.

While new products and services mean new opportunities, we are also experiencing growing pains. Our capacity to respond to increased infrastructure demands, enforcement and administrative challenges is being stretched.

In the North our new highway has opened a new era of tourism. Preliminary numbers indicate that the number of park permits issued in the Beaufort Delta appears to have doubled. Visits to the Western Arctic Visitors Centre in Inuvik have increased by more than half. Meanwhile, three-times more people popped in to the new visitors-information center in Tuktoyaktuk than there are residents in the community.

Mr. Speaker, we are working with the Hamlet, local entrepreneurs and funding sources like CanNor to catch up with the many needs and opportunities that are being identified daily.

Here in Yellowknife, we have added staff to facilitate the winter use of our parks by commercial tourism operators. We have also invested in staff and resources to address concerns about the administration and enforcement of tourism licenses.

Across the Northwest Territories, we have instituted safety planning for tourism operators as a condition of their tourism license. We're continuing our investments of more than \$5 million annually in tourism-related businesses, infrastructure, and training under our Tourism 2020 strategy to ensure all tourism operators and their businesses are positioned to grow and benefit alongside our booming industry.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize the contributions that this sector can make to our overall objective of greater economic development and diversity. The numbers that we are seeing, and even the challenges that we are addressing, are evidence to the fact that our approach is working; and that our investments are paying off. Industry, Tourism and Investment is committed to ensuring that the right programs and supports are in place to capitalize on the growing demand that we are seeing for our spectacular Northwest Territories. I look forward to seeing even more growth in our territory's second-largest industry in the years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.