

# Nature-Positive Economic Development for Southwest Alberta

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | JULY 2022



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# Why?

Nestled between the Rocky Mountains and the prairies and sustained by abundant natural resources, majestic wildlife, and caring people, southwest Alberta is a natural corridor for people, energy, goods and services, and animals.

The intent of this initiative, led by Y2Y, in southwest Alberta is to identify opportunities for economic development that also support a healthy environment—also known as ‘nature-positive.’ Residents have expressed a desire for their community to thrive, recognizing that requires both meaningful income opportunities and access to the outdoors. The two are interrelated and each is required for a flourishing future.

Each community would likely define success for this work in different terms. Considering its broad scope, every community will likely find something that resonates with

them, but is unlikely to see themselves in every corner of this report. Nor do they need to. Success for this work is about a trajectory of change and growth, with the region collectively moving towards a future that aligns economic development with increased health for the environment.

Success will not be imposed from outside the region, it will grow and be nurtured from within. Local initiatives and local champions will create the most sustainable path forward. This report shares an array of ideas, some of which may be familiar. The timing of its release aligns with a global momentum that will help with actions at the local level.

# How?

To identify the current situation and potential for nature-positive economic development, the project was conducted in three phases.

## PHASE 1

A socio-economic review of the region quantified areas of growth, potential, and concern.

## PHASE 2

A summary of forecast plans and activities identified the good work already being done in the region.

## PHASE 3

A qualitative perspective gathering process with southwest Alberta communities and Indigenous groups sought to understand the region.

This work was supported by the advice of members of two advisory panels — one comprised of economists and one comprised of community members. Input from members of these panels was integral to and directly informed this report.





Photo credit: Alberta SouthWest, David JF Thomas

## What We Heard

Not everyone agrees that both economic and environmental prosperity are achievable: many believe there must be trade-offs and concessions. We heard that either the land is protected or there are high-paying jobs in the region, but not both. Economic challenges are significant, and demand urgent attention. People are passionate about staying in the place where their families have thrived, and yet young people are leaving. There is a strong desire to ensure economic opportunities to which young people can return.

We heard that there are good opportunities for cross-sector and cross-community cooperation and problem-solving. There are opportunities for leaders in tourism, economy, extractive industry, and agriculture to collectively explore land management. Communication could be opened up between different groups, such as those who pursue outdoor recreation in natural areas and those who pursue the extraction of natural resources. To gain traction for lasting impact, proposed solutions for balancing both environment and economy must acknowledge and rely on the interdependence of all the actors.

Those involved in this work primarily viewed land management options through one of three perspectives: protection, management, or resource. The protected perspective focuses on the benefits of parks development and making the land largely inaccessible to industry. However, most participants in the qualitative research felt this approach was unrealistic and believed it to be an agenda led by conservation groups. The managed perspective is the most widely shared: with careful management, the environment can be sufficiently protected. This perspective seeks the most balanced approach to economic and

environmental sustainability. The resource perspective values the land for the resources it provides and focuses on how value can be extracted. Preservation of land and resources is important to sustaining lives and communities as long as it has only an acceptable limit on the economic value.

A nature-positive approach, which promotes both economic prosperity and environmental sustainability, requires the economy and the environment be incorporated as equal, interrelated components in decision-making processes. Initiatives must be evaluated against clearly articulated desired outcomes as well as potentially negative impacts, for both economy and environment in tandem.

This project also includes a parallel and ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities and community members about nature-positive development, including responsibility to community, tourism, economic development, education and genuine inclusion in decision-making.

Tourism was a key theme in the qualitative research; however, the community is not unanimous in its perceptions. There is tension among the desire for the benefits tourism can provide (from jobs to improved services), concerns about the negative impacts of increased visitation, and lack of requisite (or funded) infrastructure.

Tourism is often the first consideration when historically resource-driven communities consider diversification. It leverages the natural, beautiful landscapes, is aligned with the recreational activities that locals value highly, and builds upon nearby attractions.

But quality of life is an essential aspect of life in southwest Alberta, and tourism is only valued insofar as it enhances residents' lives. Locals are leery of crowds over-visiting the trails and landscapes, and skeptical of tourism's ability to bring meaningful employment.

However, comparable communities have shown that tourism dollars can, when focused appropriately, lead to positive outcomes well beyond the tourist sector itself: attracting a growth in population in areas closer to town centres, encouraging additional entrepreneurialism, tax dollars, business development, and manufacturing.

Equally important, nature-positive economic development must include the housing, industrial development, agriculture, and renewable energy sectors;

tourism alone, indeed no single sector or industry, will foster economic resilience.

The qualitative research identified that a new narrative is required — one that builds on the strength of the communities, the opportunities of new business development, existing park land, and the emerging recreation and tourism opportunities. The new narrative might also focus on how the community is breaking ground, leading a new approach to developing the land and the economy responsibly.

**There is an opportunity to develop an overarching and collaborative vision for southwest Alberta as a whole. This would dispel the tension between individuals and groups pursuing their own interests at the expense of the collective. Research participants weren't clear about what the region stands for or how their particular community fits under a regional umbrella. Southwest Alberta is a large and diverse area, so an overarching vision for the region must recognize the distinct needs, personalities and ambitions of each local community. A singular approach for all southwest Alberta is less likely to succeed.**





Photo credit: Shutterstock

## Paths Forward

Many existing initiatives are underway in southwest Alberta to support nature-positive economies. In addition, this research and analysis has identified new, realistic strategies to move forward. The paths forward are derived exclusively through a third-party analysis of the feedback obtained from all of the communities engaged in this work.

Recommended strategies, whether proposed or existing, have been chosen based on these guiding principles:

- Creates net new jobs
- Creates both economic and environmental benefits
- Supports truth and reconciliation
- Engages youth or multiple generations
- Amplifies community initiatives wherever possible



## **TOURISM**

Support existing initiatives—such as the South Canadian Rockies Destination Tourism Management Organization—and regional and municipal efforts in parks and trails creation and the support that can be provided through the Alberta Government.

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Create new initiatives, such as increasing interface with technology like travel apps and guides, a regional wayfinding program or industry incubator programs.

## **RENEWABLE ENERGY**

Support existing initiatives, such as the Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership and Energy Futures Lab events to foster the development of solar, wind, and bioenergy in the region, and Opportunity Development Cooperatives for community-owned renewable energy.

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Continue to work with provincial and federal governments to find program synergies.

## **AGRICULTURE**

Support existing initiatives that connect land-use planning with relevant organizations to identify natural areas for consideration and those initiatives which improve access to innovation, trends, and succession plans.

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Continue to work with the Government of Alberta to identify synergies and amplify their initiatives associated with this work.

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Develop approaches for agricultural Land Reserves and youth curriculum for best sustainable agriculture practices.

## **LAND-USE & HOUSING**

Promote such practices as conservation design, preservation development, and smart growth as appropriate in land-use planning. Underpin these with ecosystem service assessments at the community level and utilize localized land-use zoning, tax structures and planning maps to manage growth sustainably.

## **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT**

Identify and share best practices in value-add business development including siting, licensing, infrastructure, technology application and supporting entrepreneurs.

## **BROADBAND**

Support the Alberta SW and local government needs for 'last mile' broadband connectivity with providers and the federal and Alberta Government broadband strategies.

## **EDUCATION**

Support regional planning and collaboration on the incentivization of post-secondary institutions to create satellite campuses and distributed learning in the area, and support fledgling regional initiatives in health care, renewable energies and heritage building conservation.

# **Inspiring Local Action**

**This report points towards a future where nature-positive development helps local communities thrive. It identifies many existing initiatives that are moving in this direction.**

More than food for thought, we hope this report encourages local action. Use the nature-positive lens for all land-based decision-making. Help sustain local initiatives. Be a leader and inspire your communities to action. Nature-positive development is an idea gaining both local and global traction that can help conserve all that we love, while sustaining thriving communities in perpetuity.

## **PROJECT FUNDING**

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**Read the full report at [y2y.net/NaturePositiveAB](https://y2y.net/NaturePositiveAB)**