



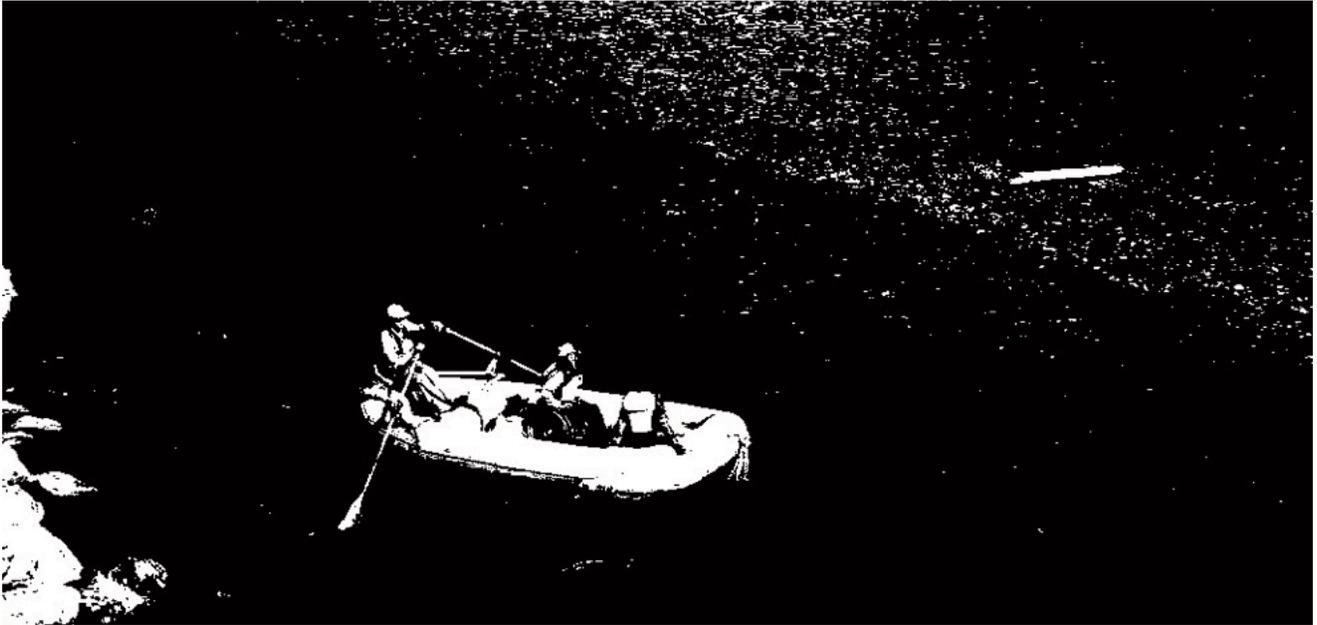
ELK RIVER ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS:

A BLUEPRINT FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

A River Runs Through It— And Why It Matters

Picture this: the morning mist lifting off the Elk River as fly-fishers cast their lines, paddlers push off into calm waters, and wildlife stirs along the banks. For decades, this pristine river has drawn adventurers and outdoor lovers from across the globe. But until recently, many of its most-used access points were informal, lacking infrastructure, signage, and official recognition.

That's where Kootenay Rockies Tourism and a coalition of passionate partners stepped in. At the heart of the groundwork was Tourism Fernie. Fernie is nestled along the Elk River that travels through neighbouring communities throughout the Elk Valley. What followed was a multi-year, multi-phase initiative that not only improved access to the Elk River but set a new standard for sustainable tourism development and long-term stewardship.



THE VISION: MORE THAN JUST A BOAT LAUNCH

In 2020, Kootenay Rockies Tourism received \$2.3 million to support the recovery of the tourism sector as part of the Province of BC's StrongerBC Plan Targeted Regional Tourism Development Initiative (TRTDI) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kootenay Rockies Tourism identified a set of high-impact infrastructure projects that could help accelerate destination development, create jobs, and strengthen the tourism economy using this funding stream. Among other projects throughout the region, the Elk River rose to the top of the list.

Tourism Fernie stepped up to lead much of the project management. From coordinating with landowners and navigating land-use agreements to working with contractors and guiding environmental assessments, they were the boots on the ground ensuring the vision became a reality.

BIG WINS: WHAT THIS PROJECT ACCOMPLISHED

Formalizing River Access

Before the project began, access points like Morrissey, Olsen Pit, Hosmer, Coal Creek, and Elko were heavily used without proper approvals or infrastructure. That posed risks —not just for safety, but for the long-term health of the river and the economy that depends on it.

Thanks to formal land-use agreements and designated site upgrades, river-based tourism, like fly fishing and rafting, now has a stronger, more sustainable foundation. These activities contribute over \$3 million in annual tourism spending, putting the Elk River on par with Montana’s top fly-fishing destinations.



SCAN FOR MAP



Enhancing Infrastructure for Safety and Experience

Every access point saw improvements tailored to local conditions. Highlights include:

-  New formal boat ramps at Morrissey and Elko (Elko pending funding)
-  Parking and access road improvements at all key sites
-  New signage and interpretation kiosks
-  Picnic tables at Olsen Pit and Elko
-  New toilet at Elko
-  Environmental and hazardous tree assessments

These enhancements improve safety, accessibility, and visitor experience while ensuring better management of river tourism.

Economic Impact and Job Creation

From construction crews to environmental consultants, the project spurred local employment. But the bigger impact is in the long-term economic opportunities it unlocks:

- Guiding outfits and rental businesses can now operate with confidence, knowing that access points are secure and sustainable.
 - Hotels, restaurants, and retail businesses in the region benefit from increased overnight stays and extended visitor spending.
 - The project generates additional revenue streams, including fishing license sales, tax revenue generation, and seasonal employment opportunities tied to outdoor recreation and tourism services.
 - The initiative paves the way for future investment and tourism diversification, making the Elk River an even stronger draw for domestic and international travelers.
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Tourism Fernie: Leading With Excellence



One of the most critical factors in the success of this project was the leadership and persistence of Tourism Fernie. Their advocacy helped move the project forward at key stages—working with municipalities, the province, and other stakeholders to keep momentum going.

Their dedication did not go unnoticed. In March 2025, at the BC Tourism Industry Conference, Tourism Fernie was recognized with the Professional Excellence Award for a DMO or Sector Association. It's a well-earned honour that speaks to their role not just in this project, but as leaders in destination development across BC.

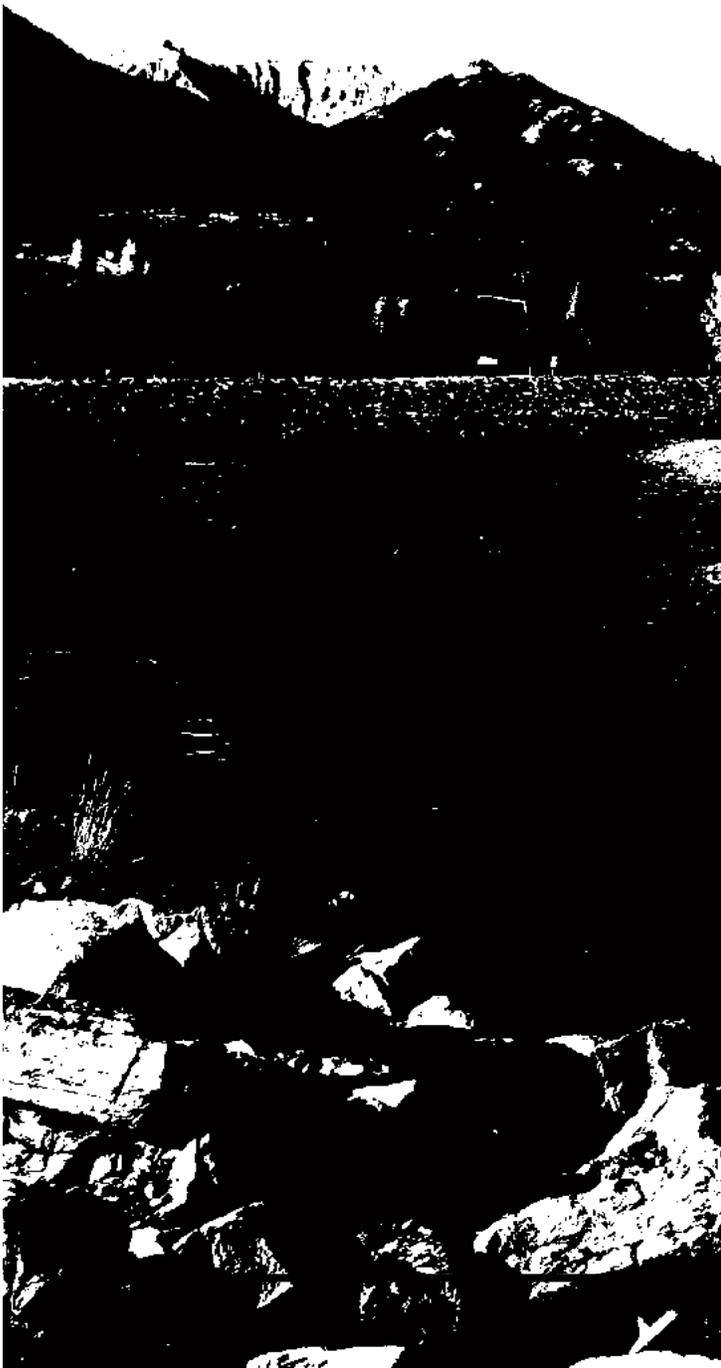
Sustainable Tourism in Action

Protecting what makes the Elk River special has been a core focus.

Environmental assessments, alignment with federal fisheries regulations, and strong partnerships with conservation organizations have ensured minimal ecological disruption while enhancing visitor management.

An integral part of that work is the The AmbassadorWILD Program, a boots-on-the-ground initiative that supports Elk River infrastructure by addressing the human side of sustainable tourism.

Managed by Tourism Fernie, and developed in partnership with RDEK Area A, the Elk River Alliance (ERA), and College of the Rockies' MAST Program, the program is backed by funding from RDEK Area A, Elk Valley Resources (EVR), the Freshwater Fisheries Society of BC, the BC Government's Targeted Regional Tourism Development Initiative, Tourism Fernie, and the Government of Canada's Summer Jobs Program.



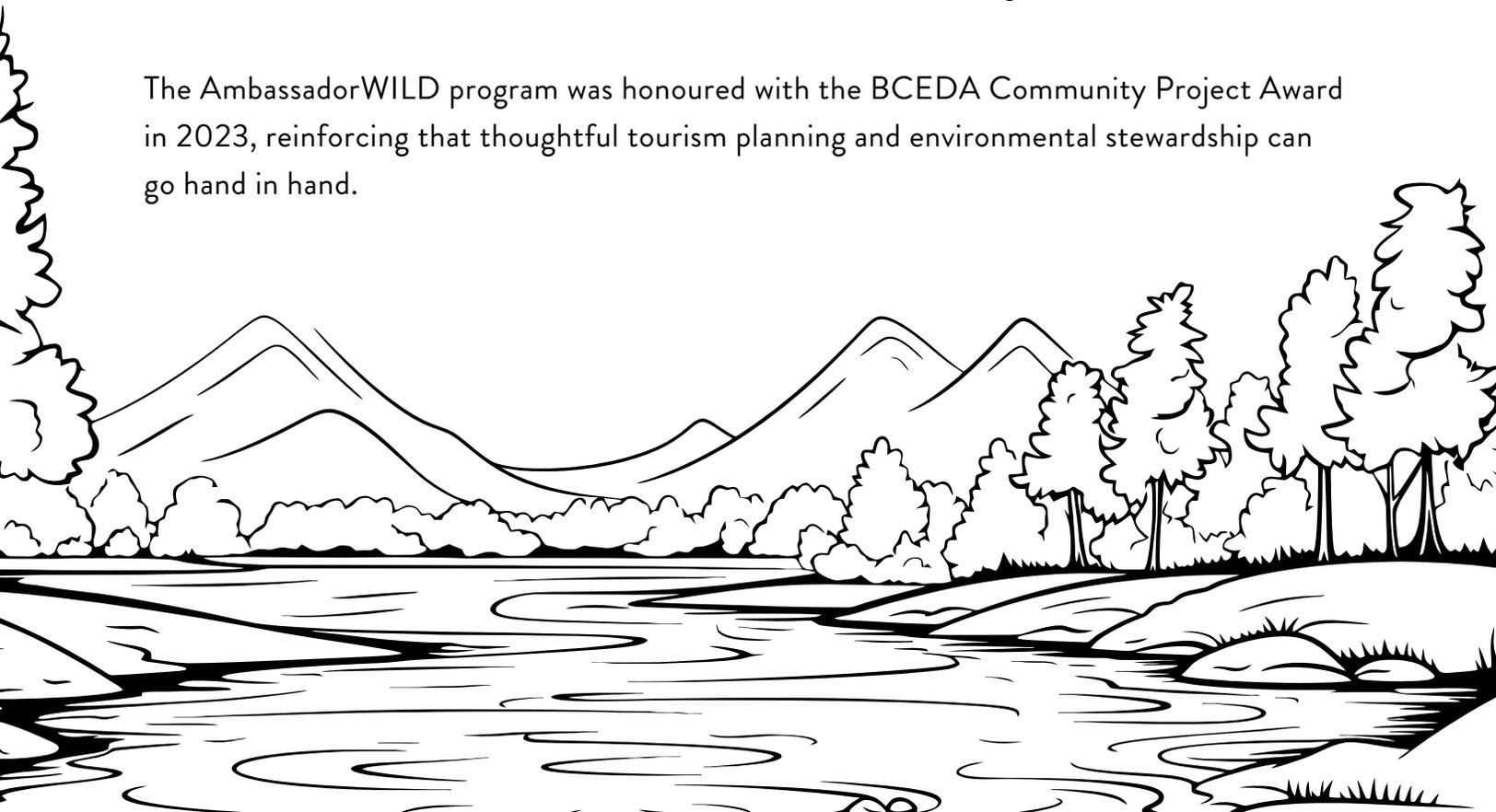
AmbassadorWILD helps protect long-term river access by:



Its broader goal is to support sustainable tourism and recreation throughout the Elk Valley by:

- Educating river users on responsible recreation
- Monitoring environmental impacts and wildlife movement
- Collecting data to guide future river management
- Cleaning up litter and maintaining public toilets
- Completing the river take-out ramp (critical due to the dam below) and preparing for additional amenities at the Elko boat launch, south of Fernie
- Taking care of high-use, nature-based locations
- Promoting safe and sustainable front- and backcountry recreation
- Providing data to support informed decision-making

The AmbassadorWILD program was honoured with the BCEDA Community Project Award in 2023, reinforcing that thoughtful tourism planning and environmental stewardship can go hand in hand.



What's Next? The Road (or River) Ahead

While key milestones have been reached, destination development is never “done.” Future phases include:

- Finalizing signage content installations at all locations in spring 2024.
- Completing the river take-out ramp (critical with dam below) and supporting amenities pending additional funding at the Elko boat launch, south of Fernie.
- Expanding parking and amenities at Morrissey through partnerships with the Regional District of East Kootenay.
- Working with more partners to determine new river access projects for the future.

The river access points in the community of Elko, south of Fernie, along the Elk River, is fully permitted and shovel-ready. However, securing the remaining funds for construction remains a priority. Additional investment will ensure that all planned infrastructure improvements, such as an improved boat launch and picnic tables are completed, maximizing the economic and recreational benefits of the project.

This initiative also sets the stage for future tourism planning along the Highway 3 Corridor Destination Development Strategy, reinforcing the Elk Valley as a premier recreation destination. The project supports long-term visitor dispersion, encourages off-peak season tourism, and strengthens the region's positioning as a world-class nature-based experience year-round.



A MODEL FOR DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

The Elk River Access Improvements initiative aligns with BC's strategic tourism goals by:

- Strengthening sustainable tourism as outlined in the Strategic Framework for Tourism in BC.
- Enhancing a core demand generator as identified in the Kootenay Rockies Destination Development Strategy.
- Improving visitor infrastructure and stewardship in line with Destination BC's Invest in Iconics Strategy.

By improving infrastructure, ensuring sustainable visitor management, and preserving the river's natural beauty, this initiative serves as a blueprint for how smart, collaborative destination development can support communities, visitors, and the environment all at once.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Elk River project is proof that with the right partnerships, vision, and funding, tourism infrastructure can be more than just an investment in amenities—it's an investment in people, local economies, and the places we cherish.

As this project continues, one thing is clear: the Elk River is ready to welcome the next generation of adventurers while ensuring it remains pristine and accessible for decades to come.



Ministry of Environment and Parks

