

Outdoor career pathways survey



background

In early 2025, The OCC and Tourism HR Canada conducted a survey with outdoor guiding professionals – past, current, and aspiring – about their career paths in the industry. This overview presents the findings from the survey. A total of 175 participants responded to the survey, with 165 valid responses retained for analysis after data screening

findings

Profiles

Respondent Profile: Most respondents are based in Western and Central Canada, with 85.7% residing in Alberta (29.7%), Ontario (29.7%), and British Columbia (26.3%). Participation from the Atlantic provinces is lower, and no respondents are from the territories. The most guided non-motorized outdoor activities include hiking, overnight expeditions, and flat-water activities, with strong representation from both current and past guides.

Training: Most respondents (71.5%) hold industry-recognized certifications, with most (69.1%) having two to five. Nearly all (93.3%) are nationally recognized, and 48.7% hold certifications with international recognition.



Attraction and careers

Attraction: Most respondents developed a passion for the outdoors early, often through family outings (75.2%). The main draws to guiding are working outdoors (85.5%), a love for specific activities (84.9%), adventure (75.8%), and working with people (69.1%). The majority (67.9%) are currently guiding or will be within the year, while 10.3% are in training, and 21.8% are former guides.

Attraction – Students: In this report, respondents currently enrolled in a training program or working toward certification for outdoor guiding or tourism (17 respondents) are referred to as “students”. Among them, nearly half (47.1%) are already working as outdoor guides, primarily seasonally (62.5%) or part-time (25%). Almost all (94.1%) plan to continue guiding after their studies, with most (68.8%) intending to guide seasonally while working in another industry.

Many aspire to teach outdoor skills (43.8%) or run an outdoor business (37.5%). Top destinations for guiding include the Northwest Territories (62.5%), Newfoundland and Labrador (56.3%), and British Columbia (50%), while 56.3% are also interested in international work. Recertification requirements have little impact on most students' career plans.

Attraction – Current Workers: In this report, respondents who are actively working as outdoor guides or will be within the year (112 respondents) are referred to as “current workers”. Among them, nearly half (47.3%) have over 15 years of experience, while 33.0% have been guiding for 6 to 14 years. A smaller group has 3 to 5 years of experience (13.4%), and fewer than 7% are newer to the field with less than three years of experience.

Early-career guides: Current workers with fewer than three years of experience (7 respondents) are categorized as “early-career guides”. Among them, 42.9% work part-time year-round, while another 42.9% guide full-time for part of the year. Half take on other jobs during the off-season, while 25% are unemployed and 25% engage in other activities. Most (71.4%) plan to guide seasonally while working in a different industry or switching between guiding activities year-round. Many (71.4%) are interested in working internationally, with British Columbia and the Yukon as the top domestic preferences. Recertification requirements have neutral impact on their career plans.

Experienced Guides: Current workers with three to five years of experience (15 respondents) are categorized as “experienced guides”. Among them, 60% focus on teaching outdoor skills, while 46.7% guide part-time year-round or as part of another profession.

Running an outdoor business is also common (40%). Half take on other jobs during the off-season, while 25% are unemployed and 25% are pursuing higher education. Long-term goals include teaching outdoor skills (73.3%), guiding year-round (60%), or starting an outdoor business (46.7%). Many (53.3%) are interested in working in Newfoundland and Labrador or the Northwest Territories, while 46.7% want to work internationally. Recertification requirements have not restricted their mobility.

Established and Veteran Guides: Current workers with more than five years of experience (90 respondents) are classified as “established and veteran guides”. Among them, 23.3% run their own outdoor business, and 17.8% teach outdoor guiding. During the off season, 61% work in other industries, while 7.7% are unemployed and 7.7% are pursuing an MBA. Long-term goals include teaching outdoor skills (42.2%). Popular work locations include the Yukon (34.4%), Newfoundland and Labrador (31.1%), and the Northwest Territories (26.7%). A significant number of them expressed concerns about physical health, age, industry demands, work-life balance, and low pay affecting how long they can continue guiding. Factors like family obligations, burnout, and the lack of year-round work were also highlighted. To support retention, established guides advocate for increased pay, benefits, job stability, improved access to certification, and better work-life balance. Additionally, they call for national competency frameworks, better career pathways, professional development opportunities, and greater industry recognition.

Attraction – Exiters: Respondents who no longer work as outdoor guides (36 respondents) are referred to as "exiters". Among them, most (41.7%) left five to ten years ago and 33.3% worked as guides for five to ten years before leaving. Many exiters transitioned to teaching outdoor skills (50%) or non-outdoor subjects (38.9%). Reasons for leaving include low pay, job instability, and the seasonal nature of the work. Others cited the need for more financial security, better work-life balance, physical limitations, or burnout. Exiters suggest improving pay, benefits, job stability, and offering year-round opportunities to retain talent. They advocate for more accessible training, affordable certifications, and greater societal recognition of guiding as a legitimate career. Support for systemic barriers, such as high certification costs and inadequate insurance, is also essential. Government subsidies for insurance and grants for skill improvement could provide guides with more stability, helping them balance work and personal life while ensuring long-term success in the field.

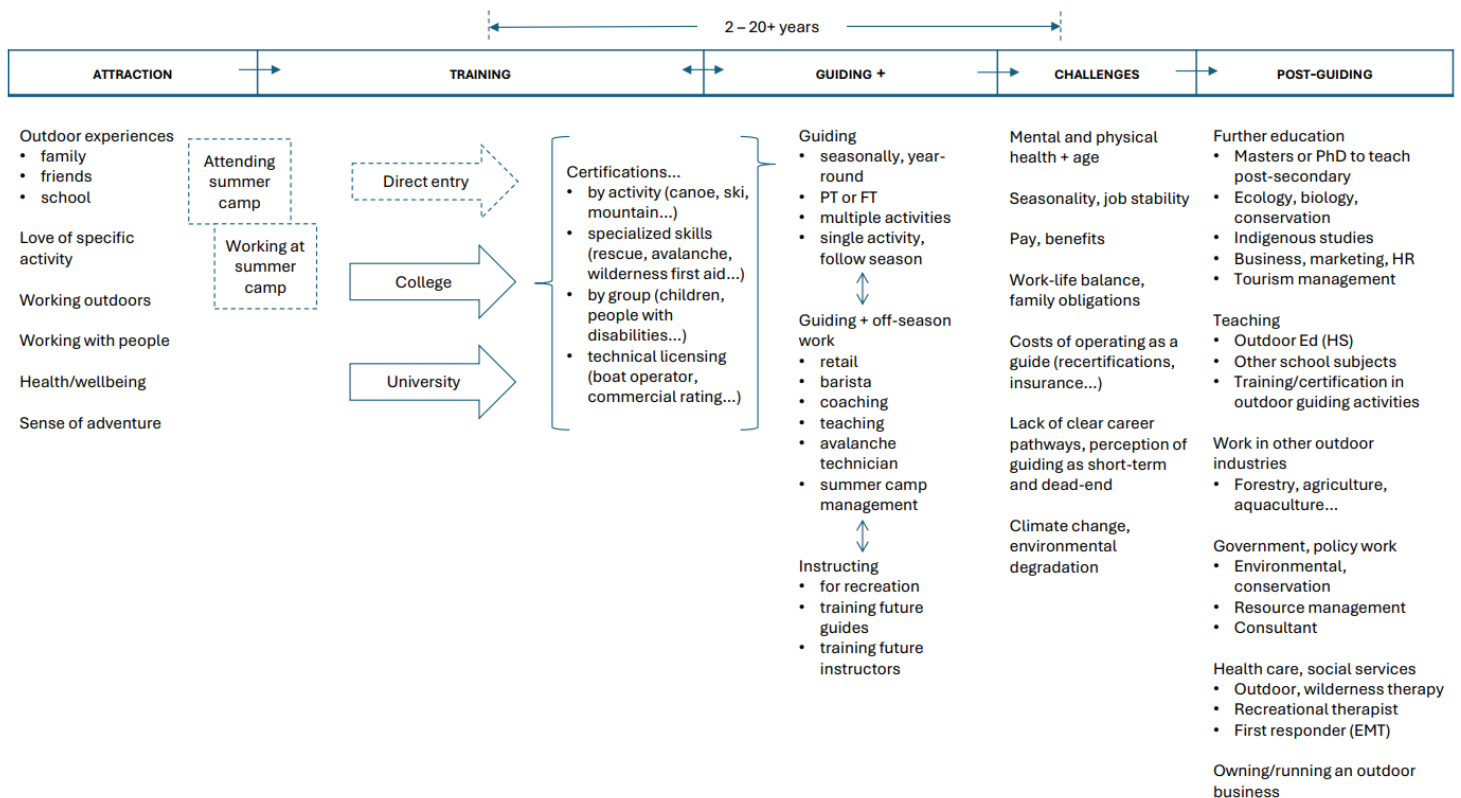
Further Training: Many respondents are pursuing certifications for general wilderness skills and specialized technical skills (e.g., swift water rescue, avalanche training, rock climbing; See Table 2 for a complete list). There is also interest in certifications for specific groups, like children or individuals with disabilities.

Many guides aspire to further education, with 28.7% aiming for a Master's or PhD to teach at the university level and 23.3% considering studies in ecology, biology, or conservation.

Over half of respondents (58.1%) anticipate a shortage of qualified outdoor guides in the next five to ten years.

Career map

A visual representation of the survey results was created in an attempt to depict how an outdoor guide enters and moves through the occupation. This analysis identified five distinct phases, although it is important to note that there is no singular, linear path through these phases, and no set schedule by which people move through them. Some respondents had spent a relatively short period of time working as a guide in the field, while others had spent more than two decades. Of those who were no longer actively guiding, a small number had moved onto entirely unrelated career tracks, but most had transitioned their skills and passion into a new direction that extended or broadened their experience rather than making a clean break.



Through this lens, it may make sense to reframe outdoor guiding as one stage in an outdoor career, rather than seeing the guiding phase as a distinct career in and of itself. This approach may help redirect narratives of outdoor work, which may help address some of the challenges that the sector is facing around attraction and retention. Understanding these five phases, and how they interact, will be key to this exercise of re-narrativization.



Attraction

There are a number of paths into the outdoor industry, many of which start in childhood. Trips with friends and family and outdoor experiences organized by schools are two of the most common sparks that can ignite a lifelong sense of adventure. Summer camp is another early exposure to outdoor activities, either as a camper or as a counsellor. A focus on health and wellbeing, as well as a passion for working with others, can steer people towards an outdoors career.

Training

Training in outdoor leadership can begin very early, particularly for those who attend or work at a summer camp, which can act as a bridge into to the industry. Training in specific activities – and ultimately certification – is a prerequisite for most outdoor guides in Canada, and can be accessed via different routes. Targeted training courses can be accessed directly via dedicated training organizations, and may be dependent on having already accrued a lot of experience in that activity. There are also a number of college and university programs across Canada, many of which offer technical training and certification alongside leadership, business, and other more generalized skills.

Guiding +

Guiding year-round is possible, with the right combination of technical certifications to enable work in different seasons. Alternatively, it is also possible to specialize in one activity, and work internationally to follow the seasons. More common is a combination of guiding and other work in off seasons. This can include outdoor-oriented work, including instructing and working in search and rescue, as well as working in retail or teaching in schools. Many guides will continue to pursue further certifications throughout their guiding life, expanding the range activities in which they are proficient, or adding extra qualifications such as technical licensing to operate a boat commercially, or specialized skills in working with specific populations. Guides may return to further education in one form or another throughout their active guiding phase.

Challenges

While the outdoor lifestyle appeals to many people, it does come with many challenges. The inherent job instability of seasonal activities can create conflict with family obligations or with a desire for a more financially stable footing, and the costs of recertification can disincentivize people from staying in the field. As outdoor guides age, they may also find it more difficult to continue working in extreme conditions. Unawareness of the career possibilities, and a

longstanding narrative of guiding as a part-time gig for the young and adventurous, can also persuade people to leave the occupation.

Post-guiding

The decision to stop guiding may be an abrupt change in career, but more often follows a related trajectory of some sort. Teaching – in school, or in colleges and universities following graduate studies – is not uncommon, nor is opening and running an outdoor business. Work in other outdoor industries, in government and policy, or in health care and social services are also not uncommon and allow people to continue to stay engaged with the outdoors even though they have stopped guiding professionally.