

Cultural Tourism

For Rural Alaska

“Our culture is the basis of our entire lives. Our culture is sacred. We are proud of our culture. It is good to want to share our rich culture with others. And some parts of our culture may be good for sharing.

But other parts may be too sacred and we don't want to share them.

We must grapple with these issues if we want to consider culturally-based tourism. Especially in our villages, we could destroy what makes the village our home.

But we might also create good jobs for many of our people. And if we control tourism, we can fit it in around the lives we want to lead.

We must do things that fit the community we are and the one we want to be.”

— Jack Dalton, Yup'ik storyteller,
writer and teacher



©John Hyde, ADF&G, Alaska Division of Tourism

Planning is a Must!

Are you considering a cultural tourism venture for your rural town or village?

If so, then make a good assessment of your culture and your community. You must decide what is sacred and what can be shared. Also, it's time to take a look at the history of your region.

To be ready for visitors, you will have to be an expert at answering questions about yourself, your culture and your region.

Does your area have roots in Russian Alaska or the Gold Rush? Is there an old

fish cannery nearby? These areas can be simultaneously explored, along with Native culture.

Native dancing and storytelling are on every cultural tourist's Top 10 list. Visitors may also be interested in learning Native cooking or craft work. You will find yourself marketing what you do every day. As long as they are welcome guests, tourists would love to come along with you to fish camp or for berry picking.

After you have determined you want to go forward, you must do economic planning.

You have to make sure local people get a share of the jobs and profits.

Be prepared for some new twists. To invite people into your village and ask them to pay for it invites issues of worth. Young people may ask, "Is my culture so interesting that people want to learn about it?"

Take Inventory

As with any tourism venture, you have to make sure your guests have a comfortable place to stay, food to eat and activities to entertain them. But they might be comfortable in a snug tent or on an old couch. Tourists might be asked to bring their own food.

Once people start paying for your time and hospitality, they will begin to make requests. Be certain, from the beginning, to be honest about what the tourists will receive. And be ready to assume responsibility for your visitors' health and safety.

If there are not flush toilets or approved drinking water, that should be said right up front.

Tourism is different from other industries. Many businesses make a product and then ship it to their customers. With tourism, the customers come to you for your product. And then you are stuck with them and they with you!

If you take good care of your visitors, they will tell others about their adventures. The same goes for a bad experience.

Strengths and Weaknesses

If you are serious about tourism, now is the time to take a hard look at the services and infrastructure available in your village or town.

Does your village have places for people to stay? To eat? To fill their time?

You will want to study the existing tourism market to see what tourists want to see and experience.

The Alaska Tourism Office can help with many questions for new tourism businesses. Call (907)465-2017 or www.dced.state.ak.us/tad/toubus. If you know people who are in business now, call or visit them.

Ask yourself:

How many people can the village accommodate in a summer? How many people do I/we want to accommodate?

Do I/we want to entertain tourists for the whole summer, or for just a small portion? You may need to leave time for personal and family obligations

Ask: What sort of gain am I/we looking for?

Ask: 1. How can the village make sure our community controls tourism and not vice versa? 2. How can we make sure local people benefit?

Define Cultural Tourism

Many middle-aged Baby Boomers – those born between 1946 and 1963 – are a large and financially secure part of the population now in their "traveling" years – near or after retirement. Like a good number of other generations, this group enjoys unique experiences and learning adventures as vacations. And they will pay top dollar.

Native-owned and operated businesses are of interest to those tourists who desire a closer connection to the land, but have forgotten how to achieve this. Natives can help them to learn.

Put together a strategic plan that asks:

1. What are the effects on the community?

Who benefits from the enterprise?

Your first goal is to maintain community health

A person from the Lower 48 could have a vacation experience at fish camp or out berry picking they would remember the rest of their lives!

Honesty: Best Policy

Your must be realistic and not promise what you cannot deliver.

That is especially important with the independent travelers you hope to attract to your village or town. Independent travelers like to experience things one-on-one or in very small groups. They will not hesitate to say what they expect for their money. But they are also very quick to tell you what they like about visiting you. And — they will likely tell other independent travelers

Two Examples

A village was interested in developing cultural tourism. They knew that a charter company brought tourists in from all over the world to go fishing. But the airstrip was a half mile from town. The charter company just whisked people away to their private lodge. So the village erected a good tent right near the airstrip and offered dancing and storytelling to the tourists, before they went to the private lodge. The tourists loved it and made many favorable comments to the management. "Why didn't you tell us about this before?" the tourists said. The experience actually enhanced business for the lodge, as well as the village.



© Alaska Division of Tourism



© Alaska Div. of Community and Business Development

A village wanted to explore cultural tourism, but they didn't want a lot of strangers in the village all summer. In June only, the village hosted a Solstice Festival, a celebration of the long days of summer and activities from that time of year. The visitors were invited to partake in traditional chores, as well as traditional celebrations. Meals featured tastes of Native and locally-produced foods. Villagers showed visitors their artwork — including both pieces for sale and pieces that would remain in the village. At the end of the week, the visitors were gone and the village could return to normal.

Tourism could become the best way for Alaska Natives to continue our cultural practices and be a part of the greater world economy. After all, tourism combines the best philosophies and traditions of our cultures with the exploration by and education of people from different cultures. But getting it to work in your village will require a great deal of work on your part and the commitment of the whole village. It is something none of us should jump into lightly. Almost everyone in your village should agree first on wanting visitors in or around the village, and second, on the kinds of cultural information and interaction visitors will experience. And even though you are in control of what visitors will expect, you still need to ensure you can accommodate those expectations. Like any endeavor, tourism can have many pitfalls. Done right, however, tourism could be the best thing to happen in your village in a long time.”



©Eric Luse, Alaska Division of Tourism



Photo provided by Jack Dalton

— Jack Dalton, Yup'ik storyteller, writer and teacher

of their experience – good or bad. Make sure their experience is good!

Being a good host means deciding who you want to try and make happy — and then doing your best to do so. If most of your guests are happy, you are doing a good job.

If a few complain, that is normal. Cruise ship companies, for instance, receive plenty of complaints each year.

Thank your guests for their suggestions on how to improve!

Bob Gorman, Resource Development Agent Will Swagel, Writing/Editing
Amy Sweeney, Graphic Design

Photos courtesy of Alaska Dept. of Community and Economic Development,
Alaska Photo Library website



The University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service programs are available to all, without regard to race, color, age, sex, creed, national origin, or disability and in accordance with all applicable federal laws. Provided in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation

with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Anthony T. Nakazawa, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Alaska Fairbanks.



This material is based upon work supported by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service. U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number 00-45046-0990. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.