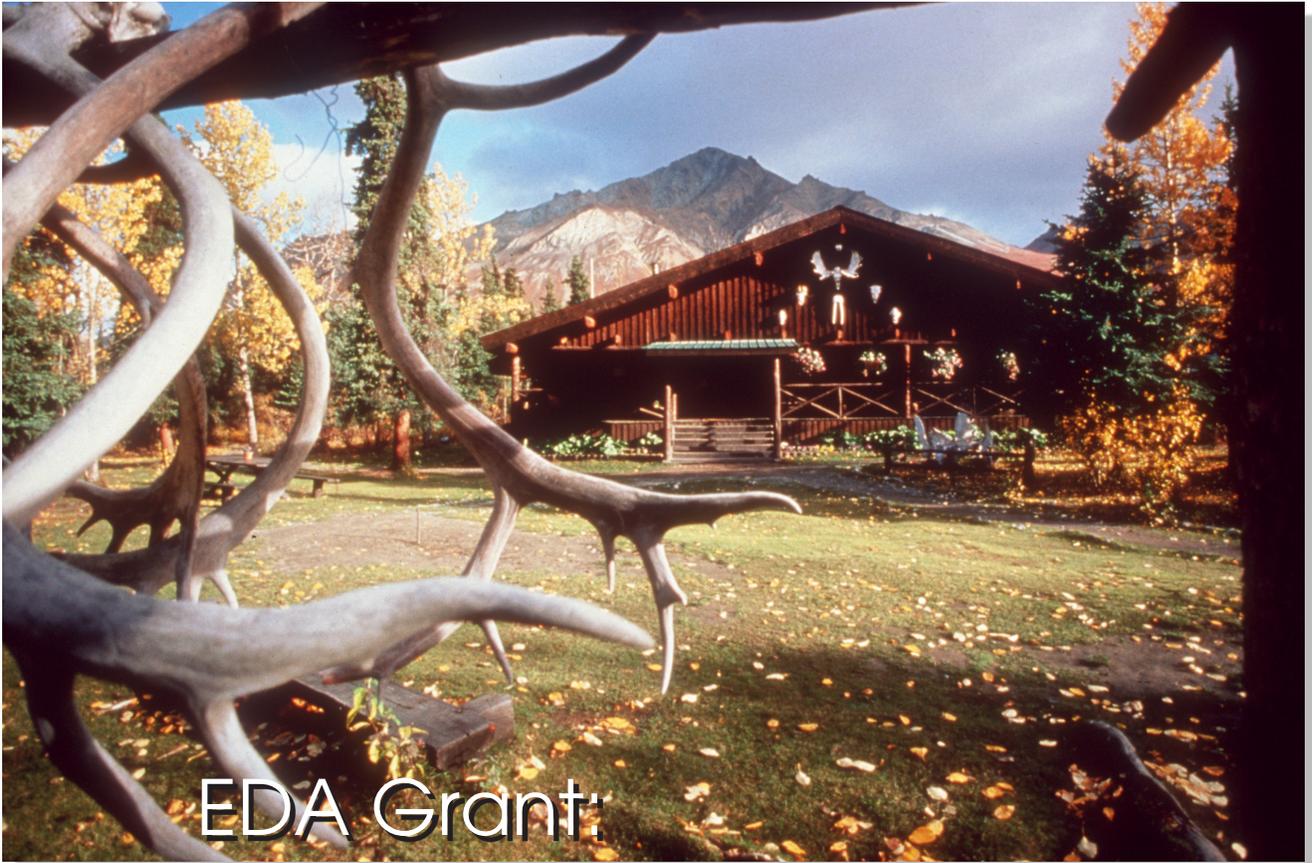


Final Report



Alaska Rural Visitor Industry Product Development Project

Grant No: 07-79-05590



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Alaska Rural Visitor Industry Product Development Project

Final Report to EDA

Project Dates

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Abstract

There are dozens of rural Alaska communities who have identified tourism as an important source of economic activity and jobs within their communities. In 2004, the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, Office of Economic Development (OED) teamed up with the Economic Development Administration (EDA) to initiate the Alaska Rural Visitor Industry Product Development Project, which has been called DART (Developing Alaska Rural Tourism) on the project website, and in this report. DART centered on economically distressed communities that want to develop tourism and have compelling attractions and experiences that visitors will enjoy. With proper training, planning, and marketing, these attractions and activities, or “products”, can be brought to market and local jobs created. Through the DART project we supported job development by helping startup businesses with visitor industry-specific business planning and skills training, we established public-private partnerships to address visitor industry infrastructure improvements, we developed regionally-based marketing strategies to attract visitors and visitor industry investment, and we helped communities tap into new funding sources that will help them achieve their long-term visitor industry development goals.

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Executive Summary

Developing Alaska Rural Tourism (DART) represents a partnership between the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development (Commerce), the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), the Alaska Regional Economic Development Organizations (ARDORs), the University of Alaska system, and Americorps VISTA program.

In the fall of 2004, EDA Project No. 07-79-05590, Alaska Rural Visitor Industry Product Development, was approved. In December 2004 the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development – Office of Economic Development (OED) put out a “call for projects” to regional Native corporations, ARDORs, boroughs, and local governments, announcing that we had limited resources available to help interested regions in advancing rural tourism projects that can demonstrate a high potential for success. We received eight proposals. Project staffing (OED) and the resources available (OED and EDA) allowed us to select four “Tier I” projects to which we could devote most of our time and attention over the course of 18 months to 2 years. We also selected several “Tier II” areas that could easily benefit from the workshops, branding, and grant writing efforts we were already devoting to the Tier I areas.

The overall goals of the DART project when we set out were to

- Identify products or activities that will generate economic activity from the visitor industry in the local and regional economies,
- Develop regionally based marketing strategies to attract the industry and local businesses,
- Support job development by helping startup businesses with business planning, and visitor industry and business skills training,
- Encourage public-private partnerships to address visitor industry infrastructure improvements, and to
- Assist communities in identifying potential funding sources that would achieve long-term visitor industry development goals.

These goals remained in effect throughout the project and we were able to make progress towards each of these goals in all of the Tier I and Tier II regions. Even though the work has been completed under this EDA grant, the funding and the efforts devoted to this project by OED and EDA have created partnerships or entities that will be sustained for some time to come in each of these regions. The “Alaska’s Rainforest Islands” partnership in Southeast Alaska, for example, and the Copper River Country collaboration in the interior, which were both initiated under this project, have new projects and marketing programs, websites, or business development efforts now underway.

To sum up the methods used in this project, it is worth talking here about the name of the project, Alaska Rural Visitor Industry “Product Development.” In tourism there are four essential elements that make up a “product”

- The asset or the attraction(s),
- The infrastructure or the access to the attractions,
- The services and the “value added” activities that allow you to enjoy the attraction, and
- The marketing or the bringing of the product “to market.”

In the DART project we looked at all of these elements. Depending on the particular region, some elements require more work than others. For Central Southeast Alaska, the attractions, access and services are largely in place already, and we focused on branding and marketing the assets as

“new and exciting product.” We then took this product to the International Powwow travel industry tradeshow. For the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, on the other hand, there are many compelling attractions, and there exists a pretty sophisticated (not inexpensive) system of access by way of jets and small airplanes. However, services such as guiding businesses, food, and lodging are a limiting factor on the Delta. We focused on training (business and marketing), and laying a foundation in Alaska’s statewide marketing programs for this unique and dispersed region of Alaska.

As the testimonials in this report bear out, the networks and associations formed in this project are significant. When neighboring communities team up to promote efficient travel to and within their region, everyone comes out ahead. The workshops and trainings strengthened the abilities of local residents to go into business providing the basic services. The initial “branding” work laid foundations for long-term marketing relationships. In many cases, the training and the stakeholder meetings resulted directly in new business starting up, like Chevak Bird & Culture tours in Chevak.

The following Table 1.0 presents a summary of the activities and products from this DART project, according to the specific performance measures set out in the EDA grant and the Alaska Rural Visitor Industry Product Development Project.

Measure	Result	Number
1. Number of <u>new products</u> or attractions planned or developed - itineraries, activities, etc.	New DVD to promote Port of Nome as small cruise ship destination	1
	Alaska’s Rainforest Island - Central Southeast Alaska Itinerary	1
	Chevak Bird and Culture Tours	1
	Total	3 new products
2. Number of <u>participants trained</u> in customer service, wildlife guiding skills, other	20 Students completed the <i>Tourism in Alaska</i> semester-long program at Prince William Sound Community College	20
	AlaskaHost Train the Trainer courses - 7 new trainers went through our “train the trainer” course in customer service for the visitor industry. Nome, Bethel, Juneau, Sitka	7
	Alaska Host – Customer Service Training. Haines, Skagway, Bethel, Glennallen, Sitka, Juneau	150
	Wildlife Guiding Skills. 10 students completed the Native Guide training in Copper Center	10
	Website development and Internet Marketing Workshops. Glennallen and Nome	25
	Business Plan Workshops in Bethel, Chevak, Glennallen (Small Business Development Center)	28
	Intensive Tourism Business Development Workshops in Bethel, Emmonak, and Quinhagak (UAF Kuskokwim Campus in Bethel)	35
	International Tourism Marketing Workshops (MDCP)	85
	Starting and Operating a B&B - Workshops	20
	Total	380 trained

3. Number of <u>businesses planned, started or expanded</u>	B&B started in Barrow, B&B started in Bethel	2
	7 new businesses planned for Copper River Country, 1 in Nome/Bering Strait	8
	4 businesses expanded in Copper River Country, including the McCarthy Lodge	4
	Chevak Bird & Culture Tours started	1
	Total	15 businesses
4. Number and type of <u>jobs</u> or employees established in viable business plans	7 jobs in new Copper River Country business plans - including fishing guide business, B&B, lodges, RV Park	7
	1 job in B&B business plan in Bethel	1
	3 jobs in Chevak Bird & Culture Tours (1 guide, 1 assistant guide, 1 assistant)	3
	Total	11 new jobs
5. Increased percentage of <u>local hire</u>	2 locals hired through PWSCC <i>Tourism in Alaska</i> course	2
	3 Chevak residents working for Chevak Bird & Culture Tours	3
	Total	5 local hires
6. Completion of viable regional <u>tourism marketing strategies</u>	Copper River Country – Regional tourism marketing strategy completed by Agnew/Beck consultants	1
	Bristol Bay - Regional tourism marketing strategy completed by Agnew/Beck consultants	1
	Central Southeast Alaska – Marketing and Business Plan. Agnew/Beck consultants	1
	Total	3 regional marketing strategies
7. Amount of public and private sector <u>investment</u>	Alaska Rainforest Islands – Participating communities have contributed to the regional marketing strategy (brochure, powwow, mini-grant)	\$33,500
	City of Nome Port Marketing CD for tourism	\$76,000
	Total	\$109,500 marketing investment
8. Increase local tax revenues	(information not yet available)	
9. Increase in numbers and duration of <u>visitor stays</u>	Established baseline data for our 4 Tier I regions. This data can be compared to future data to measure any additional increases over the next few years.	

Introduction

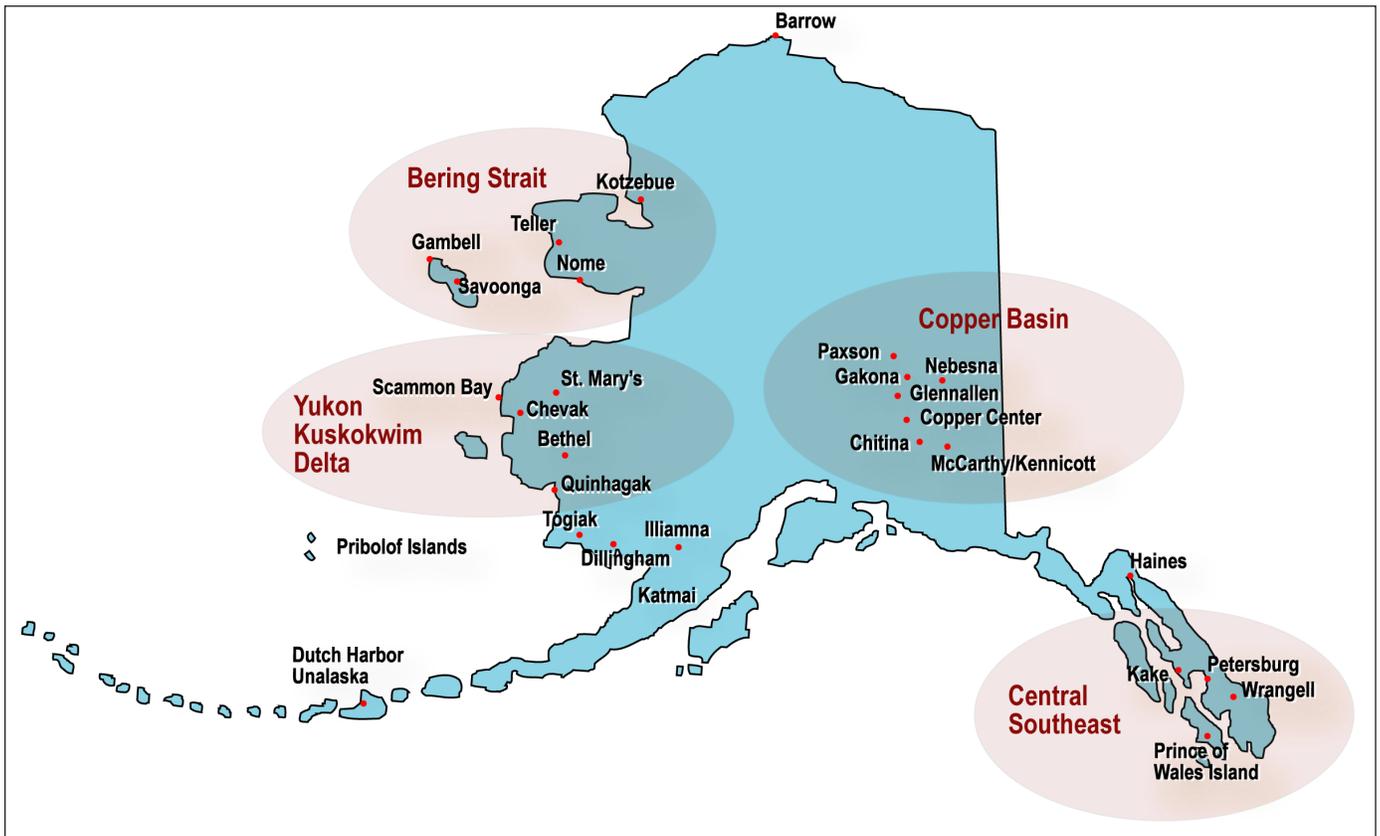
The Alaska Rural Visitor Industry Product Development Project represents a partnership between the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development Office of Economic Development (OED), the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), the Alaska Regional Economic Development Organizations (ARDORs), the University of Alaska system, and Americorps VISTA program. During the course of the project, several other organizations have stepped up to the plate as significant partners, including the Bed & Breakfast Association of Alaska (BBAA), the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, and the Alaska SeaGrant Marine Advisory Program. For the purposes of the final report to EDA, this program will be called "Developing Alaska Rural Tourism" (DART).

The timeline for the DART project extended from December 1, 2004 through June 30, 2007. The project has provided targeted technical assistance to selected communities for the development of the local visitor industry. Regions targeted for technical assistance are located in rural, economically distressed geographical areas that have identified tourism development as an important piece of their regional economic development strategy. Regions selected for assistance demonstrated the existence or initial development of a high potential product, attraction, or "itinerary" of things to do. Rather than creating new attractions and products, the emphasis was on helping get businesses started based on these attractions, and to help communities or regions market these experiences and itineraries.

Funding for the project totaled \$600,000. \$300,000 (50%) came from this EDA grant, and the other \$300,000 (50%) from the Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development OED. Two OED staff worked nearly full time on the DART project from January, 2005 until December, 2006. One ADFG staff person worked about half time on the project. Project staffing and resources allowed us to select up to four "Tier I" regional projects, involving a broad range of local government, visitor industry, and economic development interests. Four Tier I regions were selected where we expected to have some positive impact within 18 to 24 months. In addition, we worked with three "Tier II" areas that also benefited from the workshops, branding, and grant writing efforts that were part of the Tier I projects.

The overall goals of the DART project were to

- Identify products or activities that would generate economic activity from the visitor industry in the local and regional economies,
- Develop regionally based marketing strategies to attract the industry and local businesses,
- Support job development by helping startup businesses with business planning, and visitor industry and business skills training,
- Encourage public-private partnerships to address visitor industry infrastructure improvements,
- Assist communities in identifying potential funding sources that would achieve long-term visitor industry development goals.



Primary DART Regions

Project Sites:

“Tier I” DART regions. The 4 Tier I DART regions are shaded on the map.

- Copper River Basin, or “Copper River Country”
- Central Southeast Alaska, or “Alaska’s Rainforest Islands”
- Bering Strait Region
- Yukon Kuskokwim Delta

Secondary or “Tier II” Sites. Under the DART project, we worked in these additional areas:

- Haines Borough
- Barrow
- Dillingham and the Bristol Bay Borough

Developing Alaska Rural Tourism (DART)

Project Strategy

The DART project provided assistance to communities, at their request, to develop local visitor industries. The project consisted of five overlapping phases.

Phase I

Project selection. In the fall of 2004, OED called for projects from ARDORs, mayors, Native organizations, and other organizations. Four Tier I regional efforts and three smaller regional or community tourism efforts were selected in December, 2004. Regions, or community clusters were selected based on the strength of their tourism proposal, the organizational capacity of the proponents, and the level of community support.

Phase II

Phase II was the assessment and inventory phase, in which site visits were conducted to assess assets, attractions, infrastructure, and services. OED compiled comprehensive listings of the visitor industry businesses, services, and attractions for each of the four Tier I DART regions. These inventories are posted on the DART website. These assessments or inventories provide a snapshot of the tourism infrastructure and services that are now available in each region. To provide a profile of the people now visiting these regions and survey visitors about their experience in the region, OED contracted the Juneau-based McDowell group in 2006 to compile visitor profiles and market data for the targeted regions. The Birding Assessment tours in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta are a good "hands-on" example of how we helped communities assess their tourism (i.e. birding) resources.

Phase III

Phase III involved conducting regional stakeholder meetings in hub communities. Throughout 2005, stakeholder meetings were held in Nome, Bethel, Glennallen, and Wrangell. The primary purpose of the stakeholder meetings were to set priorities and "work plans" for each of the regions, to determine where our resources are best spent under this project. Additionally, in 2005 and 2006, OED held business-oriented workshops in these communities that expanded our stakeholder involvement opportunities.

Phase IV

Phase IV involved numerous technical assistance activities for development, training and marketing. The State's AlaskaHost (customer service training for the visitor industry) curriculum was updated and delivered to numerous communities. We trained new trainers to teach AlaskaHost under the DART project. We conducted targeted market research and workshops for business training, marketing plans, and business plans. OED and contractors also offered workshops on strategic planning, website development, and international tourism marketing.

Phase V

Project evaluation. Throughout the project, OED has generated evaluations from participants in workshops as well as stakeholders meetings (see Evaluation on page 30). Technical assistance has been targeted to address specific needs, based on these surveys. The evaluations have helped us build on the strengths of our staff and contractors services. They are also helping us to track the success and progress stemming from the training and the development of business plans that are part of the DART project.

Tier 1 Region Reports

In the following sections, we describe in some detail the accomplishments and products from each of the Tier I regions. Working with our many partners and entrepreneurs in the process, these are some of the products we delivered in the DART project:

- We developed regional marketing strategies
- We conducted targeted technical workshops
- We delivered customer service training for the visitor industry
- We developed individual business plans for new or expanding businesses
- We developed new business and regional tourism websites
- We conducted new market research and visitor profile information
- We applied for marketing grants.

The Tier I regions are:

- Copper River Basin
- Nome/Bering Strait Region
- Central southeast Alaska (Petersburg, Wrangell, and Prince of Wales Island)
- The Yukon-Kuskowim Delta

Copper River Basin Regional Case Study

Location

The Copper River Valley is a 3.5 million-acre ancient lakebed located in the eastern portion of Southcentral Alaska. Traversed by the Copper River and surrounded by mountain ranges on all sides, the area provides countless opportunities for outdoor recreation activities, wildlife viewing and cultural/historical education. The Copper River Valley is located in the center of many of Alaska's prime destinations: 189 miles northwest of Anchorage, 250 miles south of Fairbanks, and 115 miles north of Valdez. One of the Copper Basin's major strengths is its accessibility; the Glenn, Edgerton and Richardson Highways all cross the valley and connect most of the communities with each other and to the rest of the state.

Community information

The main economic activities in the Copper Basin region include service industries, state and federal agencies, tribal government, the Alyeska pipeline, and seasonal construction and highway tourism-related activities. The main communities within the Copper Basin region that participated in this project included Mentasta, Chistochina, Gulkana, Gakona, Glennallen, Tazlina, Copper Center, McCarthy, Kenny Lake and Chitina.

Project Background

The Copper Valley Development Association (CVDA) submitted a proposal for the DART project for a comprehensive tourism survey and inventory and for educational outreach. The Copper Valley has become an area of interest to the Alaska Travel Industry Association, the National Park Service, multi-national businesses such as Princess Tours, and local entrepreneurs who want to see the area grow as a 'destination.' However, the residents and regional entities have not promoted it in this way, and may be unprepared for the results of such promotion by others. This project was designed to help residents prepare for this and use it to their advantage if they so choose.

The DART Project Partners are

- The CVDA
- The Prince William Sound Community College (PWSCC)
- The Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce (CVCC).

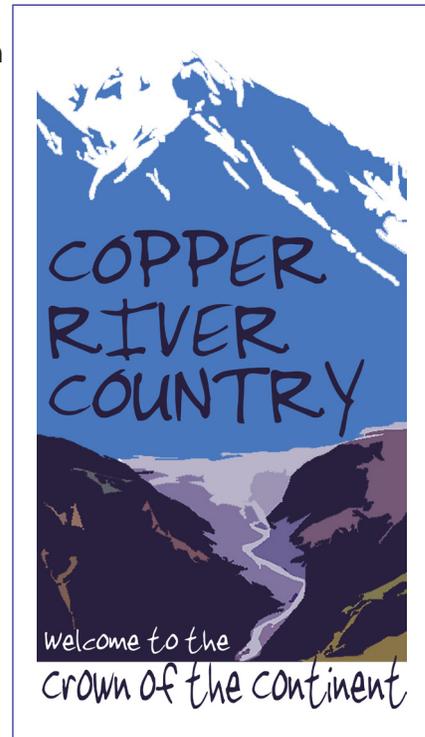
Project Objectives for the Copper River Valley include

- Teaching 2 semester-long Tourism in Rural Alaska courses through PWSCC,
- Updating the Tourism in Rural Alaska curriculum for the college,
- Offering in-depth tourism-related workshops to business owners and employees,
- Providing visitor industry customer service training,
- Identifying and developing a regional "brand" and regional tourism marketing plan,
- Consolidating information for a regional tourism website, and
- Creating tourism business models for the region.

Project Accomplishments

The following activities represent the primary accomplishments for this region.

- **Tourism Course.** We provided sponsorships for 18 students to attend the *Tourism in Rural Alaska* class offered through Prince William Sound Community College in Glennallen.
- **AlaskaHost.** We conducted AlaskaHost Customer Service training seminars in Glennallen and we trained three new AlaskaHost trainers to teach classes in the Copper Valley. In 2006, and again in 2007, 10 people went through the Alaska Host training.
- **Business Website Development.** We conducted a 2-day website development workshop for tourism business owners. Several businesses have since developed an initial website.
 - ◆ Sour Dough Joes Flys
www.sourdoughjoesflys.com
 - ◆ Tonsina River Lodge
www.tonsinariverlodge.com
 - ◆ Copper Moose Bed & Breakfast
www.coppermoosebb.com
 - ◆ Scripture in Photography
<http://www.aks scripturephotos.com/pages/contact-us/php>
- **Regional Tourism Website.** We revitalized and improved the Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce website to provide regional visitor information and information on regional activities and attractions. www.traveltoalaska.com
- **Regional Tourism Branding.** We developed the “Copper River Country” brand, and a new marketing strategy for the region. The marketing plan is posted on our website: http://www.dced.state.ak.us/oed/dart/pub/CRVBusinessPlan_final.pdf
- **Internet Marketing.** We presented an in-depth workshop on internet marketing in Glennallen. This workshop focuses on effective ways to get your product out there and known.
- **Native Corporation Participation.** Both Ahtna, Incorporated and the Ahtna Heritage Foundation participated in the workshops and trainings, sending interested members in order to strengthen the knowledge and skill base of prospective Native employees in the visitor industry, including possible ventures by Ahtna, Inc.
- **Business Plan Workshops.** We partnered with the University of Alaska Small Business Development Center, the Prince William Sound Community College, and the Copper Valley Development Association to offer a business plan workshop in which 20 people attended.
- **Statewide Tourism Marketing.** We awarded a scholarship Tracy Ansell, Director of the Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce, to attend the 2005 Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) annual convention. She represented the Copper River Valley DART project and partnership at Alaska’s largest annual tourism convention.



- **Statewide and International Recognition.** Katrina Church-Chmielowski, the instructor of the PWSCC Tourism in Rural Alaska course, was invited to Russia to speak about the EDA/OED DART project and its successes in Copper Valley (to serve as a model for tourism development activities in rural Russia). She also made a presentation about the Copper River Valley DART project at Northern Forum conference in Seward, Alaska in February, 2006.
- **International Marketing Experience.** The Copper River Country Partnership was represented by the McCarthy Lodge in the ATIA German Speaking Europe trade missions in March, 2006. Also, from the nearby Matanuska-Susitna area, Vern Halter with Dream a Dream Dog Farms attended Powwow, the largest international travel and trade show in the U.S. Funding for this Powwow scholarship came from a grant from the Western States Tourism Policy Council(WSTPC) under the Market Development Cooperators Program of the U.S. Department of Commerce.
- **Bed & Breakfast Mentorship and Training.** Jerry Scholand, President of the Bed and Breakfast Association of Alaska (BBAA) made site visits to prospective B&B businesses in the Copper River area. Two individuals from the region received scholarships under the DART program to attend the annual BBAA conference in Fairbanks.

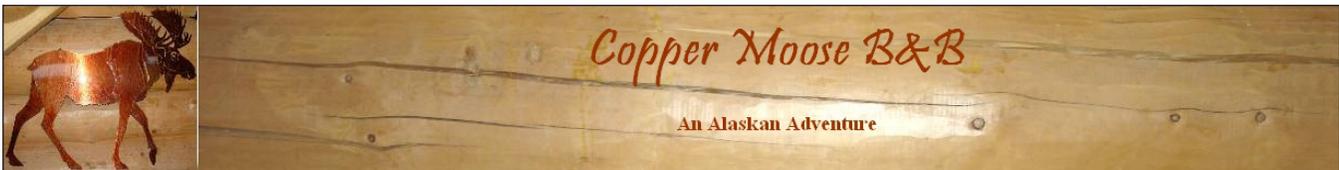
New Research

A number of research efforts came as a result of this project. The first two reports were funded or completed as part of the DART project, the third was done concurrently by project partners:

- A Profile of Visitors to Rural Alaska and the Copper Basin Region – McDowell Group research report. This is a marketing research report to gain a greater understanding of visitors to rural Alaska. This is baseline information that has never been collected and analyzed before. It is region specific, not Alaska-specific, and can be used for future business planning and development. The report is posted on our website: Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/Copper_Basin.pdf. These are some of the highlights from the report:
 - ◆ Copper Basin visitors were more likely than the overall rural Alaska visitor market to be traveling for vacation/pleasure (90%, compared to 82%)
 - ◆ 74% of visitors said that they chose to visit Copper Basin because they were “passing through” the region
 - ◆ The most enjoyed experience was the outdoors/scenic beauty
 - ◆ Copper Basin visitors reported an exceptionally long average length of stay in Alaska, at 18.6 nights, compared to the 12.5 nights of the average rural visitor.
- Copper Valley Regional Tourism Inventory - a current listing or inventory of existing tourism businesses in the region. This is meant to provide contact information and provide a snapshot in time of the level of visitor services today in the region. The listing includes Accommodations, Dining, Transportation, Services (including guides), Retail, Attractions, and Events. This inventory is posted on our website. Link: (see November, 2005): <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/whatsnew.htm>
- Copper Valley Tourism Development Survey - in August, 2005 students of the PWSCC tourism class and the Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce conducted an informal survey of visitors, asking them for feedback about the attractions and services in the area.

Project Impacts (results in brief)

- Tracy Ansell, of the Greater Copper River Valley Chamber of Commerce (GCRVCC), has had opportunities to go to the ATIA annual convention with support of the Chamber and DART program. She has increased tourism awareness on the board and in Copper River Country.
- 7 new business plans were written.
- Sharon Forster of Kenny Lake Mercantile & RV Park rewrote her business plan during the class and has now successfully expanded her business.
- Lynn Grams has a new job as a local business liaison with the National Park Conservation Foundation.
- Cole Milstead got a job at the Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center in summer of 2006, and he is seeking the same job for summer 2007.
- Donna Petrillo wrote her business plan during the Tourism in Rural Alaska class, and is now an entrepreneur in DCCED's new Tourism Mentorship Assistance Program (TMAP)¹. She is working closely with her mentor Debbie Eberhardt, a longtime Fairbanks B&B owner, to establish her business and begin operations on her visitor retreat center.
- Kathleen McCurry has wrote her business plan during the Tourism in Rural Alaska course, and has recently expanded the Copper Moose Bed & Breakfast (www.coppermoosebb.com).



¹ The Tourism Mentorship Assistance Program (TMAP) is a spinoff to the DART project in which OED is providing job shadowing and direct mentorship opportunities for new businesses with established and successful operators in Alaska tourism.

Featured Project

PWSCC - *Tourism in Rural Alaska* Course Spring 2005

In partnership with the Prince William Sound Community College, DART provided scholarships to qualified Copper Valley residents to attend this established course. With support from DART, these students were able to attend the course which they may not have attended otherwise. The course focuses on the basics of tourism's potential benefits to rural Alaska, and it provided skills training in business development and other aspects of the industry. These are the activities and accomplishments of the course participants:

- The students performed a resident attitude survey in Spring 2006, to determine regional residents' attitudes towards tourism.
- One current small business owner decided to stay in business because the class "excited him about the tourism industry again." The student made improvements on the business website, created new brochures, added photos to the local website, and joined the Chamber of Commerce.
- Another student wrote a business plan for a new business.
- A new small business owner developed and updated her website employing marketing techniques with information gained from the class.
- As an 'add-on' to the class, PWSCC offered Native Guide Training (with an emphasis on interpretation) in September 2005. 10 Native Alaskans completed the class and 5 were offered jobs from the National Park Service and Princess Lodge upon completion of the class. Comments included "This class helped me to realize the things that I know that would be of interest to other people," and, "The class benefited me by teaching me about my cultural background and Native history."
- One student used networking opportunities and information derived from the class to update the local National Park Service community website to include many more new businesses, thus helping the local economy.



Tourism in Rural Alaska Class with Guest Speaker



Native Guide Training students and a sponsor on a field trip to Kennicott, Alaska

Testimonials

Tracy Ansell, the Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce (GCVCC) Executive Director, attended the Tourism in Rural Alaska course offered by PWSCC. As a result of the class, DART technical assistance, and her own initiative and enthusiasm, she was able to increase her chamber membership base from 100 to 175 total members. She is also confident that a new "branded" website will help serve as a valuable marketing tool to help attract even more new members, and increase advertising revenue, to help fund operations. "The local businesses have greatly benefited from this grant by having the Chamber involved" she says. "Through the DART project I have been able to help educate my membership on available resources to help develop individual businesses. I have been able to focus on areas of need for tourism in our area. I was able to participate in the branding of our region and help the locals understand why this is important. By building a new regional website, the local businesses have become excited about what our region has to offer. The project has sparked their interest to improve upon the methods of marketing, whether it is through the Alaska Travel Industry Association, or through branding and marketing the region. This has made the local entrepreneurs proud of what the Valley has to offer. I believe the program has helped the businesses of the area to work closely together to market the area as a whole, not just individually. The membership for the Chamber is once again excited and proud to be apart of the local economy. I am proud to be a part of this project. As a result of this project, I have many new ideas for the Chamber. This is only the beginning."

-Tracy Ansell, the Greater Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce

"This (program) has been a wonderful asset to the community. As an active community member helping to drive economic development, and as a former business owner, our region really needs the assistance that is being provided. I hope the workshops and opportunities will continue!"

-Suzanne McCarthy, Former Owner, Copper River Wranglers

"Thanks for everything! I think it has some positive effects on the Copper River Country. Not all of the results are tangible at this time, but they will continue to affect the area for years to come."

-Katrina Church-Chmielowski, Instructor, PWSCC Tourism in Rural Alaska

Nome/Bering Straits Regional Case Study

Location

The Nome census area, which includes St. Lawrence Island and Little Diomedede Island in the Bering Sea, covers over 23,000 square miles of land and is home to over 9000 residents. Nome lies on the southern coast of the Seward Peninsula in the Bering Strait Region. Situated 102 miles south of the Arctic Circle, 161 miles east of Russia and a 75-minute flight from Anchorage, Nome is considered a gateway to much of Alaska's untamed beauty and wildlife. Additionally, Nome is the originating point for three major state roads: Teller Highway, Council Road and Kougarak Road. These 250 miles of road were originally constructed to provide access to villages, subsistence resources and mines; however, their popularity in recent years has grown due to the recreational freedom they provide for tourists. Nome is inaccessible by any outside roads but does not receive daily jet service from Anchorage.



Community information

The Nome census area is a well-established tourism destination; an estimated 10,000 visitors appear annually as a direct result of tourism. Nome is the largest community and serves as the transportation hub for the region. Cruise ship tourism is important to Nome's economy as a port of call for expedition-class cruise ships (ships that carry a maximum of approximately 100 passengers), which attract visitors interested in culture, wildlife and adventure. When ship schedules and visa's allow, the adventure has included at times a visit to the Russian Far East on the Chuckotsk Peninsula. Other activities in the Bering Strait region often relate to the rich cultural history of the area and the strong presence of Native cultures. Visitors to the Bering Strait region can enjoy gold rush history during the summer months, and in the winter, the Iditarod Sled Dog Race attracts thousands of visitors from around the world.

The communities of the region that have benefited from the DART program include Little Diomedede, Gambell, King Island, Nome, Savoonga, Solomon, and White Mountain.

Project Background

These goals were discussed in the initial Bering Straits DART proposal, and discussed in the initial stakeholders meeting:

- Expand tourism activities beyond Nome and throughout the region.
- Expand bird watching and eco-tourism in areas where such ventures are feasible.
- Encourage the construction of a multi-use facility, which offers cultural information, performing arts, visitor information, museum space and other types of interpretive and educational information.
- Identify through research what people would like to see in Bush Alaska and what they would like to tell their friend about for repeat visits.
- Develop a 5-year plan for tourism to include advertisement, conventions, websites, etc.

- Develop a well-maintained and safe winter and summer regional trail system for snow machines and ATV's, which connects villages for region residents and tourism. This will fuel the development of B&B's, eating establishments, guide businesses, small engine repair, arts & crafts sales, retail sales and also will encourage visitors to experience the uniqueness of this region.
- Improve or expand a regional website that addresses and highlights the region's strengths to reach larger targets.

The DART Project Partners are

- The Bering Strait Development Council/Kawerak Inc.
- The City of Nome
- The Nome Chamber of Commerce
- Cruise West
- The Nome Visitors Association.

The Project Objectives for the Bering Strait Region include

- Include tourism in the Nome Port Marketing Plan. The City of Nome is developing a marketing plan for Nome's \$39 million port expansion project. The plan will include new small cruise ship (100 passenger) opportunities between Nome, Diomedede, Gambell, Nome, Savoonga, and several Russian communities. Cruise West has expressed interest in maintaining cruise ships in Nome for this purpose.
- Increase the number of birdwatching and ecotourism "products" in Nome and on the Seward Peninsula. The Bering Strait Region is home to a variety of rare migratory birds. Ducks, geese, swans and cranes reside in fresh water habitats, while seabirds such as eiders, murrets and auklets concentrate in great numbers along the coastline. Because the region is home to a number of rare birds such as these, it is a popular location to visit among birdwatchers.
- Reinvigorate the Bering Straits Inuit Cooperative: The Bering Strait Region (BSR) has one of the richest and oldest Eskimo cultures documented in Alaska. Artifacts found in the region have been dated as being 9,000 – 10,000 years old. The region is also culturally diverse in that we have three main Eskimo cultural/linguistic groups in the region.

Project Accomplishments

- **Website development.** Conducted a 2-day website development workshop in Nome/ Bering Strait designed to provide tourism business owners with the skills necessary to create and maintain their own website.
- **Regional tourism stakeholder meetings** in Nome, and St. Lawrence Island (Gambell and Savoonga) - discussion with communities and businesses about how to work with cruise lines to provide products, negotiate new products. The initial stakeholder meeting brought representatives from Frontier Flying Service in Fairbanks, and the Fairbanks Convention and Visitors Bureau, who are interested in partnering with Nome on visitor opportunities.

- **Internet Marketing.** We presented an in-depth workshop on internet marketing in Nome. This workshop focuses on effective ways to get your product out there and known.
- **Business website development.** The businesses and individuals who attended our website development workshop in Nome received instruction on how to create, develop and manage an affordable website. Workshop and individual training, 4 individuals trained on Front Page web development software. Three of five website development participants have started work on developing their own websites using skills taught during the FrontPage workshop.
- **Native Arts and Crafts.** As a result of this DART project, Kawerak, Inc. has taken the lead in reinvigorating the Bering Straits Inuit Cooperative to assist the region's artists in marketing their pieces and creating portfolios in an effort to increase sales prices as well as beginning planning for a cultural center in Nome.
- **Birding and Cultural Tourism.** DART and EDA staff made site visits to Gambell and Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island and determined ways that their birding and cultural tourism ventures can grow.
- **Funding.** Bering Strait Inuit Cooperative received \$10,000 in funding through Alaska Marketplace business plan competition, coached by Kawerak (regional development organization and partner).
- **Bed & Breakfast Mentorship and Training.** Brian James from Solomon received a scholarship under the DART program to attend the annual Bed & Breakfast Association of Alaska conference in Fairbanks.
- **AlaskaHost Training.** We trained the Nome Visitor Association Director as an Alaska Host customer service teacher.
- **Familiarization Tour.** We organized a familiarization tour with cruiseline executive and Nome representatives to investigate interest and opportunities in bringing in small groups of cruise visitors to Nome by air.
- **Regional Economic Development.** OED participated and presented at the Kawerak Regional Economic Development Conference in Nome.

New Research

- The Juneau-based McDowell Group completed the *2006 Profile of Visitors to Rural Alaska and the Bering Strait Region* for OED and DART. Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/Bering_Strait.pdf. These are the highlights from the report:
 - ◆ One-quarter of Bering Strait visitors said they chose to visit the area for friends and family. A similar number said it was the remote location that attracted them.
 - ◆ The most-enjoyed aspect of the region was outdoors/scenic beauty, mentioned by 43% of visitors. Remote location was also frequently mentioned (36%).
 - ◆ People (29%), wildlife (29%), and visiting friends and family (24%) rounded out the top five most enjoyed experiences.
 - ◆ Visitors reported an average length of stay of 5.7 nights in Bering Strait of an average total length of stay in Alaska of 15.7 nights.
 - ◆ Bering Strait visitors did little active trip planning besides the internet, relying more on friends/family and on prior experience.
 - ◆ 11% of Bering Strait visitors were motivated to travel to the area for bird-watching. This niche market appears very compatible with the attractions and services available in remote communities.

- *Bering Strait Tourism Business Inventory* - a current listing or inventory of existing tourism businesses in the region. This is meant to provide contact information and provide a snapshot in time of the level of visitor services today in the region. The listing includes Accommodations, Dining, Transportation, Services (including guides), Retail, Attractions, and Events. This inventory is posted on our website. Link: (See November, 2005) <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/whatsnew.htm>

Project Impacts

- At the initial stakeholders meeting, representatives from Kawerak decided to reinvigorate the Being Straits Inuit Cooperative for Native Arts sales. This is an initiative that already existed but benefited from networking opportunities.
- The villages of Gambell and Savoonga have become more motivated in developing local benefits for tourism, and begun working with small cruise ship companies on itinerary development. Gambell has continued to expand as a birding destination.

Next Steps

- Tour guide training/entrepreneurship/business development training on St. Lawrence Island.
- Cross selling/marketing of EDA Multi-Use Facilities in Bering Strait Region for potential tour products.
- Business Mentorship program to assist individuals interested in developing sustainable tourism products.
- Access to more information for rural villages interested in day trips or overnight trips from Nome (i.e. websites, info at Nome Visitor Center, brochures, etc.).



St. Joseph's Church in Nome



Panel presentation on Bering Strait tourism at the Nome stakeholder's meeting

Featured Project

The Bering Straits Cruise Ship Marketing Project (BSCSMP)

- The Bering Straits Cruise Ship Marketing Project (BSCSMP) is designed to create a six-day adventure/expedition cruise ship tour that will sail the Bering Sea/Norton Sound/Bering Straits and call on the villages of Gambell, Savoonga and Little Diomedede. The ship(s) will home port in Nome where cruises will embark and disembark. We are working with the City of Nome and the three communities on a strategy for new product development, and how to negotiate package deals with the cruise lines. We are working collaboratively with Cruise West and other adventure class cruise lines.
- Nome Chamber of Commerce received grant from Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (\$75,905) for the BSCSMP marketing DVD, which will be used to ultimately attract new potential tour operators and visitors to the region.

Central Southeast, Alaska's Rainforest Islands: A Regional Case Study

Location

In central Southeast Alaska, at the heart of the Inside Passage, Wrangell, Petersburg, and the communities on Prince of Wales and Kupreanof Islands are linked by two ferry systems, those of the Inter-Island Ferry Authority (IFA) and Alaska's Marine Highway System, as well as the road system on Prince of Wales. This unique part of Alaska offers visitors the best of Alaska in one place: ancient forests, mountains, glaciers; fishing, boating, hiking, biking, and wildlife viewing; and historic and welcoming communities. The communities of central Southeast Alaska are now working together to promote these and other opportunities in "Alaska's Rainforest Islands."



Hammer Slough, Petersburg

Community information

Combining spectacular natural beauty and wildlife viewing, central Southeast Alaska is a prime location for travelers seeking independence and adventure. The census area's largest towns, Petersburg and Wrangell, are nestled among the forests of the Tongass National Forest and along the waterways of Alaska's Inside Passage. This unique location has provided the towns with a substantial stake in the fishing and logging industries, and more recently, an interest in developing the independent traveler market. With fishing village images and small town appeal, the communities of central Southeast Alaska are often considered hidden "gems" along Alaska's coast. The Tongass National Forest is a major ecotourism attraction, and many of the Central Southeast communities can represent themselves as unique, "off-the-beaten-path" destinations for the visitor.

The main communities in this project included Petersburg, Wrangell, Coffman Cove, and Prince of Wales Island Communities of Craig, Thorne Bay, Klawock, Hollis, Hydaburg, and Kasaan.

Project Background

In 2004, the communities of Coffman Cove, Petersburg, and Wrangell recognized the need to capitalize on the upcoming Inter-Island Ferry Authority (IFA) service between communities starting in 2006. By working cooperatively toward the common goal of economic development for the region, an ad hoc group was formed to further this effort.

At their first stakeholders meeting, in April, 2005, the partnership adopted this mission:

"to create a sub-regional development strategy that will define the links between communities, enhance recreational opportunities, support existing visitor industry jobs and create new business and job opportunities."

The DART Project Partners are

- City of Wrangell, Wrangell Convention and Visitors Bureau
- City of Petersburg, Petersburg Economic Development Council
- City of Coffman Cove, Prince of Wales Chamber of Commerce
- Inter-Island Ferry Authority
- Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration.

Other stakeholders have also been involved:

- U.S. Forest Service
- Other Prince of Wales Communities - Craig, Thorne Bay, Klawock, Hollis
- Wrangell Cooperative Association
- Alaska's Marine Highway System (Department of Transportation & Public Facilities)
- SEATrails-the Southeast Alaska Trail System
- Alaska Airlines
- Locally owned Merchants and Service providers
- ATIA-the Alaska Travel Industry Association.

The Project Objectives for the Central Southeast Regional Partnership include:

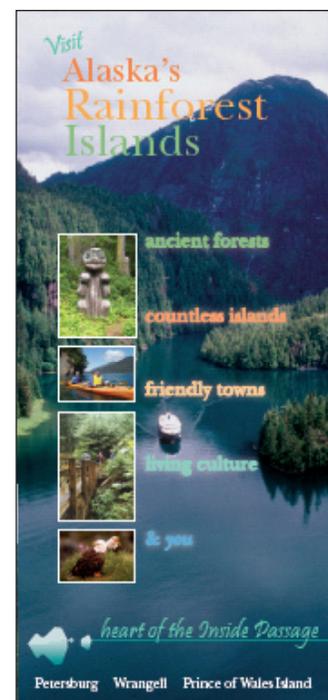
- To develop a "brand" or theme for Central Southeast Alaska visitor marketing,
- To develop a visitor marketing plan for Central Southeast Alaska,
- To derive a funding and implementation strategy for the marketing plan,
- To develop marketing materials for utilization by the marketing group, and
- To use DART funding for travel and communication expenses for this effort.

Project Accomplishments

Using the funding and staff assistance available from the U.S. Department of Commerce - Economic Development Administration and the Alaska Department of Commerce - Office of Economic Development, the Central Southeast Regional Partnership (CSERP) completed a number of key activities and steps towards establishing a regional identity and a way to promote the region:

- **Stakeholder Meetings.** The partnership hosted facilitated regional tourism stakeholder meetings in Coffman Cove (April, 2005), Petersburg (May, 2005), and Wrangell (November, 2005). These meetings provided opportunities for stakeholders and others interested in how to go about promoting independent visitation to the region. Professional facilitation at each of the meetings helped direct peoples, ideas, and concerns into a reasonable and collaborative marketing effort.

- **Solid Participation.** The Cities of Petersburg, Wrangell, Coffman Cove, the Interisland Ferry Authority, and the Prince of Wales Chamber of Commerce have signed a Memorandum of Understanding towards this collaborative marketing effort.
- **Regional Branding.** The partnership recommended a “brand” for central Southeast Alaska that reflects the nature of the region: “Alaska’s Rainforest Islands.”
- **Business Support.** Partners and interested business owners from Petersburg, Wrangell, and Prince of Wales attended an International Tourism Marketing workshop held in Petersburg and sponsored by the DART project. One of the participants was awarded a WSTPC scholarship to Powwow (see next bullet).
- **International Marketing Experience.** Alaska’s Rainforest Islands (ARI) and the Central Southeast Regional Partnership sent a representative to Powwow in Orlando Florida in May, 2006 and in Anaheim California in 2007. Powwow is the largest international travel and trade show in the U.S. Carol Rushmore, Economic Development Director for the City of Wrangell represented ARI in the Alaska booths at Powwow. She met with international operators and the press to discuss travel itineraries and opportunities in Central Southeast Alaska. Funding for the 2006 Powwow scholarship came from a grant from the Western States Tourism Policy Council(WSTPC) under the Market Development Cooperators Program of the U.S. Department of Commerce. For Powwow 2007, the ARI partners all ponied up the funding to send someone.
- **AlaskaHost.** The Alaska Department of Commerce trained Karen Petersen, with the Prince of Wales Chamber of Commerce, as an AlaskaHost Customer Service trainer on Prince of Wales Island. The training was held in Sitka.
- **In-state Marketing.** DART provided a scholarship to Nancy Berg, owner of Viking Travel in Petersburg, to represent “Alaska’s Rainforest Islands” and the Central Southeast Regional Partnership at the Alaska Travel Industry Association’s (ATIA) annual tourism conference in Girdwood Alaska in fall, 2005.
- **Tourism Brochure.** The Partnership produced a brochure called “Alaska’s Rainforest Islands...the Heart of the Inside Passage” and printed 10,000 copies. The brochure is aimed at encouraging the use of the IFA (Inter-Island Ferry Authority) and visitation to the Tongass National Forest communities of Wrangell, Petersburg, Coffman Cove, and Prince of Wales. It has been distributed at Powwow and other travel trade shows, at Alaska based visitor centers, at State ferry terminals and at the IFA. An updated version of the brochure is being produced in 2007. Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/pub/CSERP_brandingbrochure.pdf
- **Website Development.** OED developed an initial website for Alaska’s Rainforest Islands, to begin to build a web presence for the regional marketing effort. Link: www.alaskarainforestislands.com.
- **Branding and Marketing.** Agnew: Beck Consulting completed the Central Southeast Regional Branding and Marketing Plan, which includes an initial business plan for Alaska’s Rainforest Islands. The plan makes recommendations as to how the Central Southeast Regional Partnership can set up an organization and a funding plan to sustain a regional marketing presence. Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/pub/CSERPBusinessPlan_final.pdf.



- **DCCED Grant Awarded.** Alaska's Rainforest Islands (City of Wrangell, City of Petersburg, City of Coffman Cove) applied for and received a State Commerce Mini-Grant (\$27,500) for implementation of the business and marketing plan, and have put up \$27,500 in match. Components include

- Regional Map
- Website Enhancements
- Travel Guide
- DVD
- Media Kit



- **Alaska Coastal Wildlife Trail.** Alaska Department of Fish & Game designed and produced community wildlife viewing guides for Ketchikan, Sitka, Wrangell, Petersburg, Haines, Skagway, Juneau, Gustavus, and Prince of Wales Island. Link: http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=trails.coastal_trail
- **Committed investment for the future.** The Central Southeast Regional Partnership and the Cities of Coffman Cove, Petersburg, and Wrangell have invested roughly \$50,000 in time and money to the Alaska's Rainforest Islands initiative over the course of the DART project, including
 - Brochure Printing - 10,000 copies, all distributed (reprinting in 2007)
 - Attendance at Powwow 2007 in Anaheim
 - Seattle Boat Show - Wrangell and Craig (POW)
 - Time, Travel, and Hosting - Stakeholder Meetings and Workshops
 - \$27,500 Cash and In-Kind Match for 2006 Commerce Mini-Grant

New Research

- *2006 Profile of Visitors to Rural Alaska and the Central Southeast Region.* Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/Central_Southeast.pdf
Here are some highlights from the Central Southeast report:
 - ◆ Three-quarters of Central Southeast visitors were less likely than the overall rural Alaska visitor market to be traveling for vacation/pleasure (76% vs. 82%).
 - ◆ The number one reason given for visiting the region was fishing, mentioned by half of respondents (this compares to 73% of all rural visitors who went fishing at some point on their trip)
 - ◆ Fishing was the most enjoyed activity (nearly half of the visitors mentioned this), and other popular enjoyable experiences include outdoors/scenic beauty, wildlife, visiting friends/family, and people.
 - ◆ "Friendly" people was more frequently mentioned for this region than for other rural regions in this study.
 - ◆ Visitors to the region reported an average length of stay in Alaska of 12.4 nights and spent, on average, 6.6 nights in the Central SE region.
 - ◆ Central SE visitors spent an average of \$1,699 per person while in Alaska and \$1,237 per person while in Central SE.
 - ◆ Visitors to the region spent about half their time in the region, but spent nearly three-quarters of their total expenditures there.
- *Central Southeast Tourism Business Inventory* - a current listing or inventory of existing tourism businesses in the region. This is meant to provide contact information and

provide a snapshot in time of the level of visitor services today in the region. The listing includes Accommodations, Dining, Transportation, Services (including guides), Retail, Attractions, and Events. This inventory is posted on our website. Link: (See November, 2005) <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/whatsnew.htm>

Project Impacts

The positive impacts from the CSERP project, in brief, include

- The new regional brand "Alaska's Rainforest Islands" was created.
- An Alaska's Rainforest Islands organization has been formed, under an MOU (memorandum of understanding), currently under the non-profit umbrella of the Petersburg Economic Development Council, and is committed over the long term to collaborative marketing for the three communities - Wrangell, Petersburg, and Coffman Cove
- CSERP produced and distributed a Travel Guide (brochure) that provides contact information for visitors in each of the communities. Participating communities kicked in \$1,000 for printing.
- CSERP was represented at Powwow 2006, the largest international travel and trade show in the U.S., with positive results and follow-up contacts from travel agents, domestic and international tour operators, and the media. CSERP ponied up the funding (\$5,000) to attend Powwow 2007.
- CSERP now has an initial website. Link: www.alaskarainforestislands.com
- CSERP has completed a Business and Marketing Plan for Alaska's Rainforest Islands.
- CSERP was awarded a 2006 DCCED Mini Grant - \$27,500 to implement the marketing plan.
- Two people were trained as Alaska Host customer service trainers.
- Eleven people from Wrangell and Petersburg completed the International Tourism Marketing workshop in Petersburg.
- Alaska's Rainforest Islands has established a relationship with and recognition by the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA), Alaska's tourism marketing representative.

Next Steps

- CSERP received funding for a follow-up Marketing Plan project in 2007. This project will include many of the tasks in the ARI business and marketing plan.
- Coffman Cove is proposing a dock expansion in part to expand their capacity for yachts and pleasure boats.
- CSERP has committed to continued participation in Powwow (cost to participate exceeds \$5,000 per year).
- CSERP is developing a central booking service, to be supported through commissions and ticket sales, for offering "Alaska's Rainforest Islands" tours.
- CSERP is seeking funding to conduct the "Omega 3 Challenge" - a 3 city, 3-event athletic event, in partnership with Alaska Rainforest Wild (wild Alaska seafood) and the IFA (serving Wrangell, Petersburg, and Coffman Cove). This event will serve to market Alaska's Rainforest Islands.
- CSERP will advocate for planning and funding of tourism infrastructure improvements, such as "way-finding" assistance for travelers.

Featured Project

Regional Branding and Marketing for Central Southeast

The “brand” that resulted from the stakeholders meeting, and from working with a broad cross-section of people from the communities involved, is Alaska’s Rainforest Islands (ARI). This was an important step in the process, as the ARI theme helped inspire the prototype promotional brochure that we developed for the sub-region. That momentum was also carried into the marketing plan, the implementation of which is underway by the participating communities. With this common theme, it became easier for these communities to work together, which allows them to do things not possible individually. As it stands, Wrangell, Petersburg, and Prince of Wales have collectively put up \$27,500 in matching cash and in-kind contributions towards marketing Alaska’s Rainforest Islands. This is a good model for other regional initiatives. The marketing and business plan is posted on our website. Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/pub/CSERPBusinessPlan_final.pdf.

Testimonials

We could not have accomplished our efforts without this program. Three communities working together for economic development of our sub-region could not have come this far without the technical and financial support (travel, teleconference, brochure design and printing, meeting facilitator, business plan) or without the coordination by your staff. A big thank you to Odin and staff for their vision and assistance!

-Marie Oboczky, Wrangell CVB

The immediate tangible outcomes of the DART assistance are substantial; as we have been able to complete a marketing plan, branding effort, website, as well as develop printed marketing material....In the long term, we believe these efforts, sparked by the DART program, will ultimately show tangible benefits in the form of business development, job creation and economic diversification in our respective communities.

-Eric Phillips, Petersburg Economic Development Council



Chief Shakes House in Wrangell



Prince of Wales Island residents

Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Case Study

Location

The Bethel Census Area covers over 41,000 square miles of the Yukon-Kuskokwim (YK) Delta. The town of Bethel is the transportation hub for the region. Bethel sits near the mouth of the Kuskokwim River, 40 miles inland from the Bering Sea and 464 air miles and a one hour flight from Anchorage. Bethel's roads do not connect to surrounding areas. The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area provides a wide range of tourism possibilities, such as sport fishing, wildlife viewing, outdoor adventure activities, cultural tourism, and cultural education.



Community information

Originally the site of a Yup'ik village that became an important trading post for the Alaska Commercial Company, Bethel is the largest community within the Lower Kuskokwim region and the transportation hub for the area. Bethel's economy is predominantly based on regional health services, regional education services, commercial salmon fishing, and transportation services. As the transportation hub for most of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, the City of Bethel is a gateway for visitor activity in the region. Visitor accommodations and services are readily available in the City of Bethel, but are limited in surrounding villages. The YK Delta region has a rich Native history and culture, with the Yup'ik language still widely spoken in many villages. Subsistence hunting and fishing are a major aspect of residents' lives and an important part of the economy. The 20-million-acre Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, the largest national wildlife refuge in the United States, is located in this region.

Project Background

At present, many of the tourism businesses in region, such as sportfishing camps and guiding services, are owned and operated by people from outside of the region. By fostering the development of locally-owned and run tourism businesses, the communities of the region can strengthen the local economy and create more local jobs. Important tourism development issues for community residents include improving basic services, developing visitor infrastructure and services, securing funding for business development and marketing, reconciling conflicts among resource users, and ensuring that tourism activity is compatible with the local lifestyles.

DART Project Partners

In November, 2004, the Lower Kuskokwim Economic Development Council approached OED for assistance under the DART program for the Lower Kuskokwim Tourism Development and Promotion Project. The request came supported by the

- The Nunakuyak Traditional Council (Toksook Bay)
- The Native Village of Kwinhagak (Quinhagak)
- The Native Village of Mekoryuk
- The Native Village of Goodnews Bay
- The City of Bethel
- Calista Corporation
- Bethel Chamber of Commerce
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge
- Pacific Rim International (Pacifica Hotel)

The Project Objectives of their proposal were

- To plan and conduct a familiarization tour to Bethel and surrounding villages,

- To revise and reprint the promotional travel brochure for the region,
- To provide training and technical assistance to interested individuals in Bethel and the surrounding villages, and
- To promote the visitor itineraries and materials that are part of the new Tourism VISTA project with the City of Bethel.

Project Accomplishments

Using the funding and staff assistance available from the U.S. Department of Commerce - Economic Development Administration and the Alaska Department of Commerce - Office of Economic Development, the YK Delta DART project brought about a number of key activities and steps towards improving a regional identity and a way to promote the region:

- **Bethel Visitor Industry Panel (VIP) and VISTA Project.** One of the first things that the project partners did was to apply to Americorps for a VISTA position to help coordinate tourism development efforts in Bethel. In May 2005, the City of Bethel hired VISTA member Sara Scott. One of the first things Sara did was to organize the August 30 Tourism Workshop (below). She also convened a monthly Visitor Industry Panel (VIP), consisting of business leaders in Bethel. Sara and the VIP developed a visitor guide of things to do in Bethel. She was trained as an Alaska Host (customer service for the visitor industry) trainer and offered trainings in Bethel. She was also instrumental in helping to organize and advertise all of the Bethel and Y/K workshops carried out in the DART project. In May 2007, a new VISTA took the reins for Bethel and Y/K tourism development, this time under the employment of the UAF Marine Advisory Program. Jennifer Williams is just getting started. Among her first duties is to compile the assessments, reports, and bird lists from the 2006 and 2007 birding assessment tours (see below).
- **August 30, 2005 - Tourism Workshops.** Camille Ferguson, from Sitka Tribal Tours, facilitated a day-long workshop in Bethel. Participants came from Bethel, Mekoryuk, Quinagak, Goodnews Bay, Hooper Bay, Akiak, and Toksook Bay. We began to identify some of the existing opportunities and attractions in Bethel and the region that can be packaged into a viable tour product. Some of the immediate needs or opportunities are lodging, tour guiding, and providing information about the area.
- **Alaska Host.** Last winter, VISTA member Sara Scott, an AlaskaHost trainer, held an AlaskaHost workshop in Bethel. Alaska Host provides basic customer service training for the visitor industry, and is an excellent introduction to the industry for new employees or those interested in working in the industry. Sara also organized an affiliate "Culture Host" workshop in Bethel, taught by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council. A follow-up Alaska Host training was offered in Bethel this winter by VISTA member Jennifer Nu.
- **Small Business Workshops.** The University of Alaska's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to conducted a Business Plan workshop in Bethel with 11 attendees from Bethel and Kotlik. Sponsors included OED, SBDC, EDCA, City of Bethel, UA Kuskokwim Campus, and VISTA.
 - ◆ 5 individuals took advantage of the one-on-one consultations with SBDC on their individual business plans.
 - ◆ One attendee since entered her business plan in the Alaska Marketplace (Alaska Federation of Natives and Denali Commission) business plan competition, and was selected as a semi-finalist, for a business of packaging tours, itineraries, and tourism products in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.
- **Chevak Workshop.** Partnered with the University of Alaska's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to conduct Business Plan workshop in Chevak. 10 attendees from Chevak. 5 individuals took advantage of the one-on-one consultations with SBDC on

their individual business plans. Sponsors included State Commerce, SBDC, EDA, and Chevak Tribal Council.

- **In-Depth Workshops.** Co-Sponsored Beginning Your Own Business workshops in Bethel, Quinhagak, and Emmonak. The other sponsors include HUD, University of Alaska Kuskokwim Campus (KuC), UA Marine Advisory Program (MAP), the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), and EDA. This three part series of business planning workshops (one in January in separate villages, the second and third sessions in Bethel) was offered in 2006 and 2007. The series of workshops included
 - Writing a Business Plan (with a business professor from the University Alaska)
 - Alaska Host – Customer Service Training for the Visitor Industry (by OED)
 - Starting and Operating a Bed & Breakfast (by the Bed and Breakfast Association of Alaska, see below).

In 2006, 40 people from three communities (attended at least one session, 25 participated in the entire series (sessions in February, March, and April). One person was awarded a State of Alaska business license at no charge, for his completed business plan.

In 2007, Over 40 people from the three communities attended at least one session, 25 participated in the entire series

- **B&B Workshops.** In March, 2006, Jerry Scholand, President of the Alaska B&B Association, conducted workshops in several places around the state, including one in Bethel during the in-depth business planning workshops at KuC. He also conducted site visits after the workshop to prospective B&B's in Bethel and Scammon Bay. The individual in Bethel, Donna Fleury, now has a business license for Barrow Bed and Breakfast and is currently targeting guests who go to Barrow on state and other business. With a web presence and membership in BBAA, they will surely attract visiting tourists as well. In March 2007, Mary Richards of the BBAA delivered the B&B workshop at KuC. Also in 2007, the White House Bed & Breakfast in Bethel joined the BBAA. Besides the benefits of networking and internet presence that the BBAA offers, Fran Reich of the White House decided to join BBAA so that he could teach the BBAA Bed & Breakfast workshops in Bethel and interested villages on the Y/K.
- **6-Pack License Training.** In February, 2007, KuC, MAP, AVCP, and the Yuut Elitnaurviuat Training Center in Bethel offered a week long course in which the student completes their classroom requirements for the license. The course was cancelled due to weather but is being rescheduled for this winter.
- **Alaska Marketplace Winner.** With technical assistance from DART staff, Ulric Ulroan from Chevak submitted a winning business plan proposal to the Alaska Marketplace² competition. He was awarded \$25,000 in seed funding, plus a \$1,000 People's Choice award.

"In collaboration with experienced guide Karla Hart of the Department of Fish and Game and Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours, the Chevak Bird & Culture Tours is in the planning stage for engaging in eco-tourism in a nearby waterfowl nesting region in the summer of 2007. This activity can serve as a gateway to other forms of eco-friendly economic development and improve the quality of life in Chevak."

-Excerpt from AlaskaMarketplace.org

² Alaska Marketplace, patterned after the highly successful Development Marketplace started by the World Bank, is administered by the Alaska Federation of Natives. It is an annual competition to highlight and assist talented Alaskan innovators whose ideas will contribute to building a stronger rural economy. See <http://www.nativefederation.org/marketplace.php#>

In June, 2007 Ulric was invited to apply for extended funding under Alaska Marketplace. His application was accepted and he is now a finalist for continued funding.

- **Alaska Marketplace Finalist.** Sharon Gillikin submitted the business plan that she developed in our (DART) Bethel small business workshop to the AFN Alaska Marketplace competition, for a cultural tour operator. While she did not ultimately receive funding for her project, she did develop a business plan and learned a lot from the experience. She is also eligible to refine her business plan and try again in the same competition next year. Her business revolves around putting together Yukon-Kuskokwim tours and itineraries, which is a basic and sorely needed service throughout rural Alaska.
- **The Bethel Visitor Industry Panel** was initiated by Sara Scott, the VISTA member working with the DART project while working for the City of Bethel, to bring local businesses together to identify ways that Bethel can grow tourism. As a result, the Bethel Chamber of Commerce became a member, for the first time, of the Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA).
- **ATIA Marketing Conference.** Provided assistance and financial support to ensure that one representative from each DART region (Bethel, Copper Valley, Central Southeast, Nome Bering Straits) was able to attend, and participate at the annual Alaska Travel Industry Association (ATIA) conference in Girdwood. Not only were participants pleased to talk with each other about their "rural visitor industry product development" projects, but each of these rural participants caught the attention of the marketing community. Carl Berger (LKEDC), Sara Scott (VISTA), Ulric Ulroan from Chevak, and James Akerelrea from Scammon Bay attended the conference for the YK Region. There were resulting newspaper and radio pieces written about the OED/EDA DART project as a result of ATIA. Also as a result, the membership and development staff leader at ATIA visited Bethel to learn more about the unique "product" on the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta.
- **New Business Startup.** Ulric Ulroan, owner of Chevak Bird & Culture Tours, offered familiarization tours to his birding camp, which is about a 45 minute boat ride from Chevak on the Keoklevik River. Bob Dittrick, owner and guide for Wilderness Birding based out of Anchorage, was so impressed with the birds, the location of the camp, and the professionalism shown by Ulric, his uncle, and his assistant, that Bob plans to partner with Ulric in 2008 to put together two tours of 5 or 6 people each. This will be a big step for Ulric, to get his business known. As described above, Ulric stands to receive continued funding under the Alaska Marketplace program to make improvements to his camp and equipment, and for training.
- **Birding Assessment Tours** - see *Featured Project, below*.

New Research

- *2006 Profile of Visitors to Rural Alaska and the Western Alaska Region* http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/Western_Alaska.pdf. Here are some highlights:
 - ◆ Four out of five visitors to Western Alaska were traveling for vacation/pleasure purposes. They were more likely than the overall rural Alaska visitor market to be traveling for both business and pleasure (10%, compared to 4%)
 - ◆ The number one reason for visiting Western Alaska was fishing, mentioned by over half of respondents (59%) and it was also the most enjoyed experience.
 - ◆ Wildlife (mentioned by 22%), specifically bear viewing (18%) were also strong attractions.
 - ◆ Western Alaska visitors spent an average of \$2,657 per person while in Alaska, and \$2,272 per person while in Western Alaska. The average spending in this region is greater than what the average rural visitor spends, statewide (\$1,767 per person).

- ◆ Western Alaska visitors did little active trip planning other than over the internet, relying more on friends/family and on prior experience. 72% used internet as their information source.
- *Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Tourism Business Inventory* - a current listing or inventory of existing tourism businesses in the region. This is meant to provide contact information and provide a snapshot in time of the level of visitor services today in the region. The listing includes Accommodations, Dining, Transportation, Services (including guides), Retail, Attractions, and Events. This inventory is posted on our website. Link: (See November, 2005) <http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/whatsnew.htm>

Project Impacts

- Two guides in Chevak, two guides in Scammon Bay, and one guide in Quinhagak have started offering (and getting paid for) their services and are in progress of getting their 6-pack (U.S. Coast Guard small boat) licenses.
- A regional leadership team has formed to address common tourism challenges and opportunities across the Y/K Delta (see next bullet).

Next Steps

There are many next step actions to discuss for this region. At the conclusion of the DART project, Sheila Selkregg and Associates prepared an overview of the tourism development activities that are occurring on the Y/K Delta, including this DART project. In four monthly teleconferences facilitated by Ms. Selkregg (October 2006 to January 2007), a Regional Collaborative Leadership Group³ met to discuss possible steps towards sustaining a Yukon Kuskokwim Delta Tourism Development Initiative. The overview is posted on our website.

Among the important “next steps” for the initiative are

- Sign a letter of agreement among the leadership group, towards common goals and objectives.
- Complete a village readiness assessment or survey to determine which communities want to participate in tourism.
- Complete a region-wide Master Plan for YK Tourism Development.
 - ◆ To be effective, the plan should be driven by YK Delta leadership entities and villages that hope to engage in tourism.
- Many activities can proceed simultaneously in coordination with the planning efforts.
 - ◆ Continue development work in small birding activities, building partnerships with Alaska Native Heritage Center and others who can coordinate economies-of-scale tours from Anchorage, and who can do market research on business travelers to identify likely visit extenders.
- Develop community and regional marketing strategy to attract tourists.

³ The Regional Collaborative Leadership Group for the Y/K tourism initiative consisted of representatives from the State of Alaska OED, UAF Marine Advisory Program, the Native Village of Kwinhagak, the City of Bethel, Nerklknute Native Corporation (St Marys), the Yukon Delta Fisheries Development Association, the City of Chevak, the City of Scammon Bay, Sea Lion Corporation (Hooper Bay), and the Yuut Eitmaurviuat Training Center.



Birders with their paid guides during the 2005 Birding Tours of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta project.

Featured Project

Birding Tours of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta

In May 2006, then again in June 2007, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) coordinator Karla Hart and UAF Marine Advisory Program manager Terry Reeve made arrangements for five teams of statewide and nationally-known birders to complete a birding assessment trip to Bethel, Chevak, St. Mary's, Mountain Village, Quinhagak, Hooper Bay, Paimiut, and Scammon Bay. The expert birders traveled to and stayed in the participating communities, hired local fishermen or guides to take them around, and put together a list of birds sighted, as well as an assessment of the birding opportunities and the infrastructure and business needs they see for the area. The hub city Bethel received high marks from the visiting birders for its diversity and availability of bird species. The team commended the established Bethel bird and wildlife guiding business (Kuskokwim Wilderness Adventures) and noted that Bethel has the necessary infrastructure (food, lodging, and transportation) for birders and other visitors. In general, the Y/K Delta needs infrastructure investment, and the investment is warranted based on the great birding opportunities that are out there.



Professional Birder with Quinhagak Guide in DART Birding Assessment Project

In June, 2007, the assessment team that visited Chevak and the newly established birding camp of Ulric Ulroan and Chevak Bird and Culture Tours, included Bob Ditrack, owner and guide with Wilderness Birding (www.wildernessbirding.com). That visit went so well, that Wilderness Birding plans to book two tours with Ulric in the Summer of 2008.

The visiting birders paid many of their own expenses for the birding assessment tours. Funding and support also came from ADFG, various Native Village Corporations, the City of Bethel, and ticket and seat donations from Alaska Airlines and the local air carriers. DART funds were only used for providing coordination and technical services.

Tier 2 DART Regions

Haines Borough

- Partnership: Haines Borough, the Juneau Economic Development Council, Chilkat Cruises & Tours, Cannery Cove LLC, and Tsirku Canning Company, committed to facilitating the construction and operation of a diversified tourism attraction or facility at the historic Letnikof Cove cannery in Haines. As part of this DART project, we completed a the feasibility analysis and initial business plan for the facility. Based on this feasibility plan, the Haines Borough has since received a \$30,000 State Commerce Mini-Grant, to begin work on converting this historic cannery to a tourist attraction.
- In 2006 and 2007, OED delivered Alaska Host training to over 100 individuals in Haines and Skagway. Youths and new visitor industry employees were targeted for training.

Southeast Alaska

- Alaska Department of Fish & Game designed and produced community wildlife viewing guides for Ketchikan, Sitka, Wrangell, Petersburg, Haines, Skagway, Juneau, Gustavus, and Prince of Wales Island, as part of the Alaska Coastal Wildlife Viewing Trail. Link: www.wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov. The wildlife viewing trail was modeled after successful viewing trails in Texas and elsewhere, where these trails have been means for stimulating economic development.

Barrow

- Jerry Scholand (BBAA) and Dru Garson (OED) conducted a workshop in Bethel entitled: Starting and Operating a B&B in Alaska. The named sponsors included BBAA, OED, EDA, and Ilisagvik College.
- Odin Brudie made a presentation about the DART project at the joint North Slope Borough – Northwest Arctic Borough conference on Economic Development.

Bristol Bay Borough

- “Bristol Bay Economic Action Summit” held in Dillingham, with an emphasis on building small tourism businesses, and branding and marketing Bristol Bay. Sponsors included Bristol Bay Native Association, State Commerce, EDA, and Bristol Bay Borough. Dru Garson made a presentation about the DART program. As part of the DART program, we facilitated a day-long session on tourism at the summit. We also provided some travel funds for people to come to Dillingham from the King Salmon. From the summit, we developed an initial marketing plan. Link: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/dart/pub/DART_BB_MarketingPlan.pdf
- The Bed and Breakfast Association of Alaska conducted site visits of prospective B&B businesses in the Dillingham area.

New Research

- 2006 A Profile of Visitors to Rural Alaska - prepared by the McDowell Group. This is a marketing research report to gain a greater understanding of visitors to rural Alaska. This is baseline information that has never been collected and analyzed before. The report is posted on our website: http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/Rural_Alaska.pdf

Alaska Host and Culture Host

What is AlaskaHost?

AlaskaHost is a statewide customer service training program designed for employees of the hospitality and visitor services industry. The core of the AlaskaHost program trains participants in how to provide quality customer service for both residents and visitors to Alaska.

In 2006, in the course of the DART project, we added a Cultural Host class to the AlaskaHost menu of courses. The Alaska Native Cultural Host Seminar is a comprehensive training program designed with assistance from the Cook Inlet Tribal Council to provide a greater understanding and appreciation of Alaska Native culture for workers within Alaska's hospitality and tourism industry. The course covers:

- Discussion of the meaning of "culture"
- Overview of the main Alaska Native groups
- Detailed presentations on the culture and characteristics of several Alaska Native groups

In early 2007, the "Serving International Visitors" component was developed to provide training on special service considerations of international guests, and for communicating verbally with limited-English speakers. The class also includes country-specific training for Germany, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and the United Kingdom.

DART Evaluation Survey Results — All Regions

Final evaluation surveys were sent out in summer 2006 to all participants of the program's four DART regions. Overall, the responses were positive and encouraging. There is overwhelming support of continuing to offer the services offered by the DART program on a larger scale throughout rural Alaska. These results summarize the surveys we collected during our workshops, and at the end of the project, when most of the workshops had been completed.

- Satisfaction rating
 - ◆ 57% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be excellent
 - ◆ 32% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be good
 - ◆ 7% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be fair
 - ◆ 3% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be poor
- Relevance rating
 - ◆ 54% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be excellent
 - ◆ 36% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be good
 - ◆ 11% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be fair
 - ◆ 0% of participants rated their satisfaction with DART services to be poor or unacceptable
- Attend additional
 - ◆ 96% of respondents said they would attend additional DART trainings offered.
- Interest in future programs
 - ◆ 10 respondents ranked a business plan review and assistance service to be their number 1 choice for future service.
 - ◆ 6 respondents ranked an on-site visit and evaluation of current or potential business ideas by an expert to their community to be their number 1 choice for future workshops.
 - ◆ 6 respondents ranked business consultations by phone or email to discuss issues related to starting or improving business to be their number 1 choice for future workshops.

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