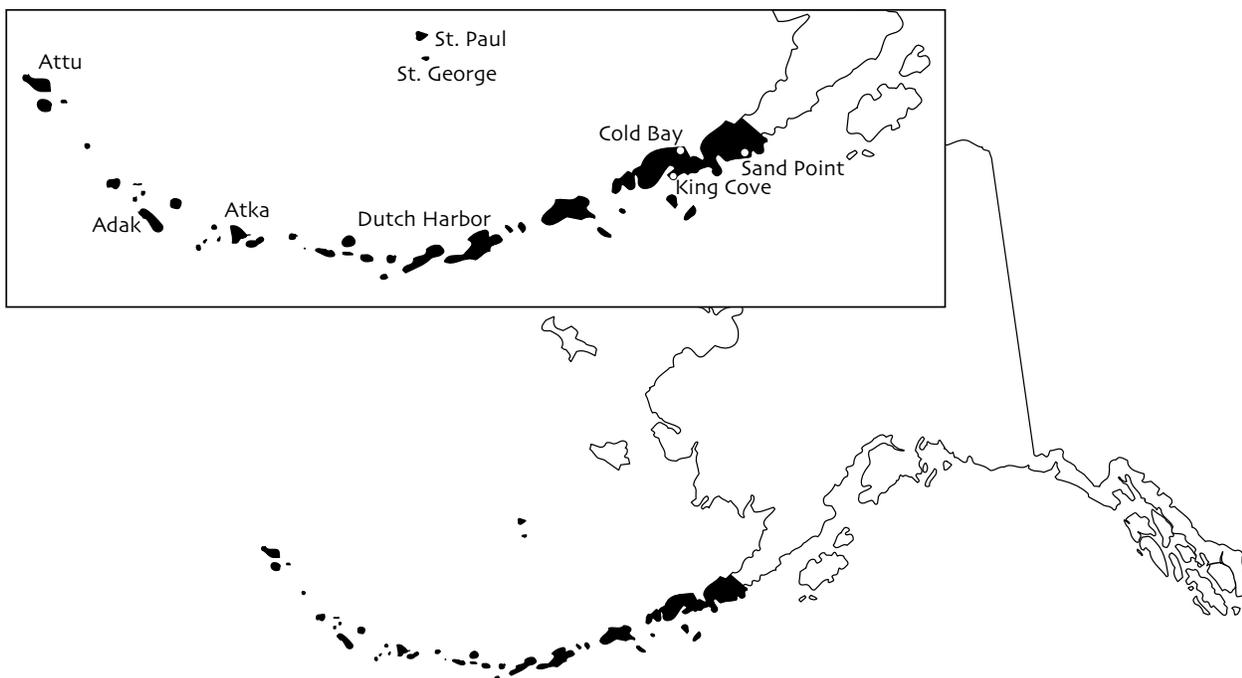


Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment



Aleutian and Pribilof Islands

A joint project of the
Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference
and the
Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development
Divisions of Trade & Development and Tourism

Introduction

In 1995, the Alaska Regional Development Organizations (ARDORs), a network of state-designated and regionally-empowered economic development corporations, identified tourism industry development as a common objective. Further, they concluded that a lack of basic public infrastructure was one of the greatest barriers to orderly industry development and impeded the optimum movement and accommodation of travelers within the state. This lack is particularly pronounced in rural Alaska, where tourism represents one of the few economic development opportunities available to many communities. Subsequently, the ARDORs determined that a top priority was to conduct a rural tourism infrastructure needs assessment. Although other projects could be considered, the focus of the assessment would be on “public infrastructure,” or that for which state and/or local government would have the primary responsibility.

Performance of the infrastructure needs assessment was included in a successful funding proposal submitted to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) by the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development, Division of Trade and Development (DTD).

Concurrently, Governor Knowles’ *Marketing Alaska* Initiative recommended that the Alaska Division of Tourism (DOT) prepare a comprehensive strategic plan for tourism development using a public process that involves all affected parties, looks at the desired future condition of tourism in the state, identifies infrastructure needs and opportunities for public/private partnerships, creates an effective permitting process, considers sustainability, and creates year-round jobs for Alaskans. The information collected through this regionally-based assessment is essential to the beginning of any statewide tourism planning process and is also relevant to other state planning efforts including the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Airport Improvement Program and Governor Knowles’ Trails and Recreational Access in Alaska (TRAAK) initiative.

Marketing Alaska also directed the Division of Tourism to work with the Department of Community and Regional Affairs to implement rural tourism development strategies using the recently established Rural Tourism Center as a one-stop resource for rural Alaskans interested in tourism development. The objectives of the Center, a joint venture of the division, Alaska Village Initiatives, and USDA Rural Development are to coordinate statewide rural tourism efforts, provide rural tourism assistance, and collect and share general tourism information.

The joining of these initiatives, and the financial support of the EDA, resulted in a partnership between the ARDORs, the Division of Trade and Development and the Division of Tourism to carry out a process to identify the public infrastructure needs of rural Alaska as identified by the people and organizations who are stakeholders in the regions.

Project Implementation

Successful implementation of the tourism infrastructure needs assessment project required participation from a broad spectrum of stakeholders including representatives of tourism businesses and organizations, communities and municipal agencies, public land managers and private land owners, and others who participate in or are impacted by tourism industry development in each region. The Department of Natural Resources, Division of Land, and the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Division of Statewide Planning, with

their planning and graphics expertise and understanding of capital improvement project processes, were involved in early discussions about the structure, content and outcomes of this effort.

The assessment was carried out through a series of regional roundtable meetings occurring from May through September 1996. A standardized format for each meeting was agreed, with flexibility for the unique requirements of individual regions. Roundtable meetings were open to the public, however, invitations were specifically sent to agencies and organizations involved in the management of tourism-impacted lands and facilities and to those having a direct interest in tourism industry development in the region. Although the summertime scheduling of these meetings made it difficult for some potential participants to attend, it was determined that this problem would exist to a greater or lesser extent no matter when they were held.

The roundtable meetings were structured to specifically accomplish three objectives. First, to identify the public infrastructure already in place. In support of this objective, Geographic Information System-generated maps of each region were produced showing existing tourism infrastructure and resources to the extent this information was available in existing GIS databases. These maps illustrated what was in place, where development opportunities might exist, and the spatial relationships between infrastructure and geographic features. At the conclusion of each meeting, these valuable reference tools were presented to the local host organization.

The second objective was to become aware of new infrastructure and attractions under development in each region. Federal, state and local organizations made brief presentations regarding their planning processes and new projects under development or in various planning stages. Private sector project developers were also encouraged to share information about their new or planned projects.

Then, recognizing what is in place and what is being planned, participants identified additional infrastructure projects that would either build on what exists, meet current industry needs, or create new industry development opportunities. A panel discussion followed to explain the criteria various funding sources use in assessing project feasibility. It was recommended that "fundability" should be considered in prioritizing projects.

Although it was suggested each region prioritize proposed projects to indicate their relative importance or the preferred sequence for implementation, some regions elected not to take this approach.

Each meeting closed with a discussion of how to move the proposed projects ahead through individual initiatives, through legislative action, and by forming partnerships among stakeholders to advocate for priority projects.

It should be noted that the projects and priorities identified in these meetings reflect the thinking of those in attendance. Although every effort was made to have broad representation of the public and private sector interests, the projects identified and the priorities given them do not necessarily represent a majority opinion of the residents of the specified region. Additionally, some areas of rural Alaska are not included in this assessment. Those are the regions in which there were no designated Alaska Regional Development Organizations at the time the meetings were conducted. These areas include the Bering Straits region, the majority of the Doyon region, and the area of the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

ALEUTIAN AND PRIBILOF ISLANDS

Sources: *Unalaska/Port of Dutch Harbor Convention & Visitors Bureau, Planning Retreat*, November, 1994; *Hot Prospects: A Tourism Inventory & Assessment of Southwest Alaska*, SWAMC, October, 1991; *Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference, 1996 Overall Economic Development Program Report*, SWAMC, June, 1996; *Alaska Visitor Statistics Program III*, DOT, Summer 1993; *Rural Alaska Tourism Assessment*, Community Enterprise Development Corporation, June, 1991; and, *Rural Tourism Infrastructure Roundtable Meeting*, Anchorage, Alaska, August, 1996.

A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

The dramatic, westward sweep of the Aleutian Island Archipelago, extends 1,100 miles from the Alaska Peninsula to Attu Island. The area is characterized by steep, volcanic terrain and by the windswept beauty of its nearly treeless landscape. Its concentration of 46 active volcanoes is known as the Pacific Ocean's "Ring of Fire." The Aleutians mark the meeting place of the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean whose waters rank among the world's richest fishing grounds for all five species of salmon, as well as for halibut, crab and pollock. The region's largest community, Unalaska-Dutch Harbor, with a population of about 4,100, is the largest international fishing port in North America. Its modern industrial economy contrasts with the rich culture and history of the Alaska Native and Russian influences that shaped this region.

North of Unalaska, in the southern Bering Sea, lie St. George and St. Paul, the Pribilof Islands. With a combined population of about 1,000, the Pribilofs comprise the largest remaining Aleut community in the world. These remote islands are known worldwide for the astonishing variety of migratory birds and sea mammals which can be seen here.

In all, fourteen communities with a combined population of about 8,000 dot the islands. The commercial fishing industry is the mainstay of the region's economy and many communities combine the benefits of a cash economy with traditional subsistence activities.

ACCESS

Overall, the communities of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands region are among the more challenging to access in all of Alaska. Anchorage is the principal air gateway to the region. Air service ranges from daily to Dutch Harbor, St. George and St. Paul to weekly for some other communities. Charter service, however, is available on a daily basis to all communities throughout the region.

Limited passenger ferry service is offered from Kodiak to Unalaska-Dutch Harbor in the spring, summer and fall. Marine barge and container services connect many communities to Anchorage and Seattle.

PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

The primary attractions in the region include its national parks, historic sites, wildlife refuges, world-class birding, active volcanoes, strong Native culture, World War II history, hot springs and a wide variety of recreational and soft adventure activities. Sportfishing and hunting are also featured activities throughout the region.

Without question, the greatest tourism assets of the Pribilof Islands are their world-class seabird and wildlife viewing opportunities. Visitors come from around the globe for the unique experiences available in the Pribilof Islands; including rare migratory seabird sightings, rookeries of nesting birds and huge colonies of northern fur seals. Cultural and heritage tourism opportunities in the Pribilofs feature Aleut and Russian influences, however, their full tourism potential has yet to be realized.

In addition to spectacular scenery and wildlife viewing opportunities, the Aleutian Islands offer a variety of soft adventure and ecotourism opportunities such as kayaking, hiking, boating and camping. Cultural and heritage tourism opportunities include Aleut and Russian culture, as well as several World War II historical sites.

CURRENT VISITATION TO THE REGION

According to Alaska Visitor Statistics Program (AVSP) data, the two primary visitor destinations within the region are Unalaska-Dutch Harbor and St. Paul Island. Currently, summer visitation to these communities is an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 each. Additionally, another 7,000 to 10,000 visitors come to the region during the non-summer months. Overall, approximately 13,000 visitors come to the Aleutians annually, while an estimated 10,000 come to the Pribilof Islands.

There are currently two dominant markets for visitation to the region - business and vacation/pleasure.

Business travelers represent the bulk of current visitors to the area. AVSP and local convention and visitors bureau research indicates that business visitors who come to the area frequently add packages and tours they didn't plan to include before they began their trips.

Visitors who arrive for vacation/pleasure purposes are traveling to the region's remote lodges, primarily for hunting and fishing, as well as for wildlife tours to the Pribilofs. In recent years, the area has seen modest growth in small cruise ship visitation from ships sailing across the Gulf of Alaska to the Bering Sea or on positioning cruises en route to the Far East.

In general, visitors to southwest Alaska tend to stay longer than visitors to other parts of the state, spending much of their time in wilderness locations at remote lodges and resorts. The primary activities visitors engage in while visiting southwest Alaska include wildlife viewing, freshwater fishing, photography, casual sightseeing, hiking and birdwatching.

POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The greatest potential for development in the Aleutian and Pribilof region lies in doing more of what is currently motivating visitors to the area. As discussed previously, the area currently attracts "niche" visitors who are looking for birding, wildlife, ecotourism and heritage tourism opportunities.

Communities within the region must continue to examine similar niche markets and develop special appeal products which are motivating enough to convince visitors to overlook the barriers of travel to the area. Such opportunities could include further development of World War II historical sites, as well as developing tour programs targeted to airline employees and frequent flyer travelers.

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Of all the regions in Alaska, the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands area faces some of the greatest challenges to tourism development, including access, infrastructure and product issues. Its sheer size and remoteness make access its single biggest challenge. The cost of travel to the area, the significant amount of time required to reach the communities and the difficulty of traveling within the region all contribute to its development obstacles.

Aggravating the situation further is the lack of infrastructure within a majority of the communities. Beyond the two primary visitor destinations of Unalaska-Dutch Harbor and St. Paul, few communities have accommodations or services capable of handling more than a few visitors at a time.

Additionally, the current lack of a critical mass of visitor products including intra-region travel options precludes the region, rather than single communities, from becoming a major visitor destination. Until a wider variety of visitor products and services are developed, visitors will most likely continue to travel to one community rather than traveling on itineraries that include several communities within the region.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

There are several organizations within the region that engage in tourism marketing and infrastructure development. These include the Unalaska-Dutch Harbor Convention and Visitors Bureau and Alaska's Southwest, the tourism marketing committee of the Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference. The Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference is the Alaska Regional Development Organization for the southwest Alaska. In addition, several Native organizations, particularly the village corporation for St. Paul Island, Tanadgusix Corporation, are actively involved in marketing their local areas to visitors.

B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

1. LONGER PORT CALLS BY MARINE HIGHWAY SYSTEM VESSELS

Location: Aleutian Island Port of Call Communities

Description: Encourage longer port visits, additional ports, and improved docking times; not “off” hours. The Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference, Aleutian Island Borough, Department of Transportation, local communities, US Fish & Wildlife Service, village and regional corporations, and the Aleutian Coalition could support this project. Funding could come from Department of Transportation and other partnering opportunities.

2. ENCOURAGE INTRA-REGION AIR TRANSPORTATION

Location: Throughout Aleutian and Pribilof Islands

Description: Encourage a dialogue between transportation and tourism entities, including the public and private sectors, to determine viable scenarios. Seed money will be required to pursue this project.

3. DEVELOP AIR-SEA PACKAGES FOR SOUTHWEST ALASKA

Location: Regionwide

Description: No project description was provided.

4. ESTABLISH A MUSEUM FOR THE ALEUTIANS

Location: Unalaska

Description: Create a facility for the storage and display of repatriated and newly acquired artifacts and historical objects. Include the capacity to create exhibits to travel to other communities in the region. This would help promote cultural awareness, provide local education and jobs. The project should involve the City of Unalaska, Native corporations, tribal councils, and schools. Funding could come from the Economic Development Administration, private foundations, rural development agencies, and museum grants.

5. ESTABLISH AN INTER-AGENCY VISITOR CENTER FOR THE ALEUTIANS

Location: Unalaska

Description: Establish an inter-agency visitor information center offering trip planning and interpretive materials regarding the history and geography, wildlife resources, people, and industrial development activities of the region. Users of this facility include tourists, fishermen and local residents. This facility could improve local visitor experiences and encourage increased patronage of Aleutian Island tourism businesses. Challenges could include achieving necessary inter-agency cooperation, securing operational funds, and the remoteness of the location. Partners would include local businesses, the Convention & Visitors Bureau, Native corporations, and state and federal agencies.

C. ADDITIONAL PROPOSED PROJECTS

- Create educational materials and programs supporting cultural resource preservation and protection
- Develop community-based trail systems; look at hut-to-hut systems as a model
- Develop a road between King Cove and Cold Bay
- Determine causes of high airfares into and within region
- Convert unused Cold Bay hatchery into a tourism-related facility

