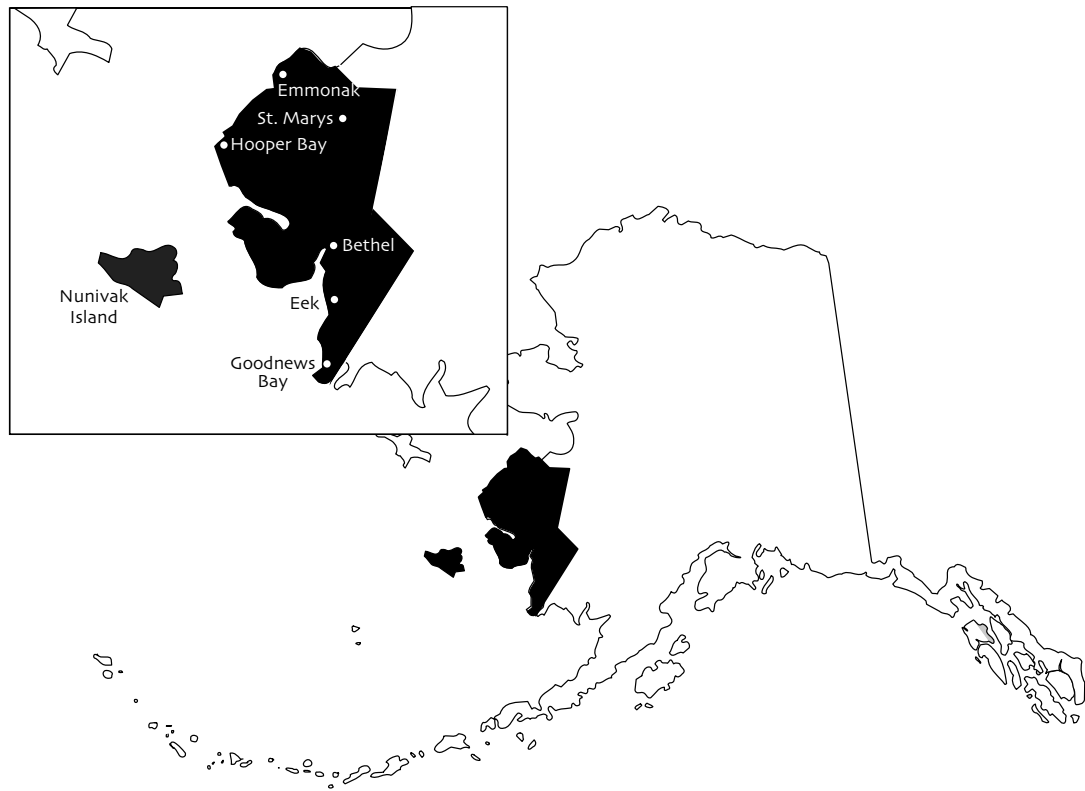


Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment



Lower Yukon - Kuskokwim Delta

A joint project of the
Lower Kuskokwim and Lower Yukon Economic Development Councils
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 indus-

try 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 spacial 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.

LOWER YUKON-KUSKOKWIM DELTA

Sources: *Lower Kuskokwim Region Tourism Marketing Plan*, UAA/CED, 1995; *Alaska Visitor Statistics Program III*, DOT, Summer 1993; *Rural Alaska Tourism Assessment*, Community Enterprise Development Corporation, June 1991; *Two Year Strategic Plan For The Lower Kuskokwim Economic Development Council*, LKEDC, June 1996; *Lower Yukon Regional Development Strategy*, Lower Yukon Economic Development Council, May 1996; *Association of Village Council Presidents, Overall Economic Development Plan*, FY 1995 Update, AVCP, June 1995; *Rural Tourism Infrastructure Roundtable Meeting*, Bethel, Alaska, September, 1996.

A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region is comprised of two sub-regions. The Lower Kuskokwim sub-region covers approximately 28,000 square miles on the southwest Alaska mainland. There are 27 communities in the region, of which Bethel, with a population of 5,200, is by far the largest. Approximately 10,000 people reside in the other 26 communities which follow the Kuskokwim River from Tuluksak to Kuskokwim Bay and extend from Platinum on the bay's southern shore to Hooper Bay on the Bering Sea coast.

The Lower Yukon sub-region encompasses approximately 22,000 square miles immediately north of the Lower Kuskokwim sub-region. Emmonak, with about 800 residents, and St. Marys, with about 500, are its transportation and service centers. Approximately 3,700 people reside in eight other communities which descend the Yukon River from Marshall and the Bering Sea coast from Kotlik on Norton Sound to Scammon Bay at the base of the Askinuk Mountains.

In general, these sub-regions consist of rolling tundra hills, lowlands and flood plains containing thousands of lakes, ponds and hummocks. There are few significant upland areas, the highest point being Mt. Oratia at 4,700 feet above sea level.

The majority of people in these regions are Yup'ik Eskimos who speak their native language fluently, with English as a second language. Subsistence hunting and fishing drive the economy of most villages with cash income used largely to support this traditional lifestyle.

ACCESS

The city of Bethel serves as the regional transportation hub for most of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and has year-round, daily jet service from Anchorage. With the exception of only a few villages, both scheduled and charter air services are available on a daily basis. There is no road system that connects communities within the region. Inter-village travel is either by air, in summer by boat along the waterways, or in winter by snowmachine and ATV on frozen rivers and trails.

PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

The primary tourism attributes and assets of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region include the Yukon Delta and Togiak national wildlife refuges which offers excellent birdwatching opportunities, several major waterways, a rich Yup’ik Eskimo culture, traditional arts and crafts, Eskimo dancing and storytelling, the Kusko 300 sled dog race, sportfishing, museums and historic sites.

Wildlife, waterfowl and fisheries: The Lower Kuskokwim region, in particular, is rich in wildlife, waterfowl and fisheries resources. Of note are the musk ox herds on Nunivak and Nelson Islands, the Pacific salmon and other sport fish (including all five salmon species, whitefish, rainbow trout, Arctic char and Dolly Varden) abundant throughout the Kuskokwim River drainage, and the millions of waterfowl, seabirds and shorebirds (including ducks, geese, whistling swans, snipe, curlews, sandpipers, cranes, grebes, kittiwakes, murrets and puffins) found throughout the Clarence Rhode National Wildlife Refuge, the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding areas.

Recreational: Recreational opportunities abound throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta including world class hunting, sportfishing, canoeing, kayaking and river rafting, as well as other camping and ecotourism activities. Winter recreation includes dog mushing, snow machining and cross country skiing.

Cultural: The region offers a unique opportunity to enjoy the culture and traditions of the Yup’ik Eskimos, including traditional Eskimo dancing, story telling, mask and basket making, and subsistence activities. Among the cultural events attracting a number of visitors to the region is the annual Camai Festival held in Bethel. The recently-completed Yupiit Piciryarait Cultural Center, also in Bethel, houses a museum and gift shop, the University of Alaska-Kuskokwim Campus library and meeting rooms. Accessible archeological dig sites offer a glimpse into the past, as do the museum housed in the Cultural Center and the historic photos displayed at the Aniak Visitors Center. The Moravian Children’s home in Kwethluk is listed on the National Historic Register. A display of regional wildlife and cultural artifacts can be found at the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge headquarters building in Bethel.

CURRENT VISITATION TO REGION

Any attempt to quantify types of visitation to the Yukon-Kuskokwim region is problematic given the lack of research data currently available. The most current visitation data available is the 1993 Alaska Visitor Statistics Program data which aggregates the Yukon-Kuskokwim region with all of southwest Alaska. However, if one assumes that visitors to this area have demographics similar to overall visitors to southwest Alaska, the following applies:

VISITORS TO THE REGION INCLUDE:

Visitors by Trip Purpose	% of Visitors
Vacation/Pleasure Visitors	49.84%
Visiting Friends & Relatives	9.31%
Business & Pleasure	7.02%
Business Only	33.83%
Visitors by Travel Type	% of Visitors
Package	22%
Independent	74%
Inde-Package	4%

What this data suggests is that the majority of visitors to the Yukon-Kuskokwim region are either traveling on vacation to the region or traveling primarily for business; relatively few visitors are visiting friends or relatives or combining business with pleasure.

Additionally, the data suggests that visitors to this area are primarily independent travelers (those visitors who make all their own arrangements) versus package tour visitors (those who purchase travel and tours bundled together).

POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Further opportunities for visitor industry-related development in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta region include (by visitor type):

Business travelers: Opportunities exist for the residents of the Yukon- Kuskokwim Delta to provide additional visitor services to travelers coming to the region primarily for business purposes. These services include:

- Lodging facilities, including bed & breakfast accommodations
- Food service
- Retail sales of arts & crafts
- Transportation, inter and intra-community
- Recreational and entertainment activities

Vacation travelers: Opportunities exist for the residents of the Yukon- Kuskokwim Delta to provide visitor services to vacation or leisure travelers who visit the region for the primary purpose of touring, to participate in recreational activities or to visit friends and relatives. These services include:

- Lodging facilities, including bed and breakfast accommodations
- Food service
- Retail sales of arts & crafts
- Transportation, inter and intra-community
- Recreational activities and services including:
 - Boat, kayak and canoe rentals
 - Birding tours and wildlife viewing
 - Cross country skiing
 - Sport fishing and hunting
 - River rafting
 - Ecotourism activities
 - Culture and heritage related activities

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

A number of challenges face the development of tourism in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. They include an underdeveloped attraction and services base - i.e., too few established activities and attractions for visitors once they decide to visit the region and not enough services designed to meet the visitors' needs. A related challenge is the lack of a local workforce trained in hospitality industry services and skills.

Currently there is a relatively small market from which this region might draw potential visitors. To some extent, this can be attributed to the fact that, for a variety of reasons, many travelers are simply not attracted to the types of experiences available in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. There is, however, a distinct market for what the region does offer once the basic infrastructure and services are in place to insure a quality experience.

At this time, the region also lacks the financial resources and marketing expertise which could enable it to effectively promote existing opportunities and establish a presence in the marketplace. Location and distance from the major tourism corridors and business hubs are likewise challenges, because of the additional expense and time associated with travel to and within the region.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

There are no organizations within the region focusing exclusively on tourism development or promotion. There are, however, several organizations that have included tourism development and/or promotion as a component of their overall development efforts. These include, the Lower Kuskokwim Economic Development Council, an Alaska Regional Development Organization, the Association of Village Council Presidents, the Bethel Chamber of Commerce and several local village corporations and councils.

B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Participants from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region identified a number of infrastructure needs but only two specific infrastructure projects were submitted.

- 1. ESTABLISH AND FUND A REGIONAL TOURISM COORDINATOR POSITION**

Location: Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Service Area

Description: Examine other regional programs for appropriate models, involve all regional tourism interests in planning and decision making, identify available financial resources, prepare position description and establish minimum qualifications.

2. ESTABLISH A REGIONAL VISITORS CENTER

Location: Bethel

Description: Tourism industry development is hampered by the lack of a focal point for gathering and disseminating information about the tourism attractions and opportunities in the region. This project proposes the establishment and staffing of a joint headquarters facility for regional tourism development and marketing and chamber of commerce programs.

3. COMPLETE THE INTERIOR RIVERS ARTS & CRAFTS COOPERATIVE BUILDING

Location: Aniak

Description: Redesign and complete the building housing the Interior Rivers Arts & Crafts Cooperative and the Aniak Visitors Center to better inform visitors about the community and the region and to provide local artists with an outlet to sell their work. The challenge is identifying funds to complete the project and for ongoing operations.

ADDITIONAL PROJECTS AND NEEDS IDENTIFIED

Village Needs

- Inns and bed and breakfast facilities
- Campsites
- Improved airport services including food service, phones, and safety equipment
- Airport information kiosks
- Transportation services into villages

Bethel

- Larger supply of guest rooms with baths and phones
- Community gathering areas

Regional

- Communications network to share tourism-related information
- Small business and visitor industry workforce training
- Regional visitor information center with trained staff
- Airport improvements
- Public lands access sites

Transportation Needs

- Improved harbor and dock facilities
- Airport shelter facilities with public phones
- Visitor information signage

