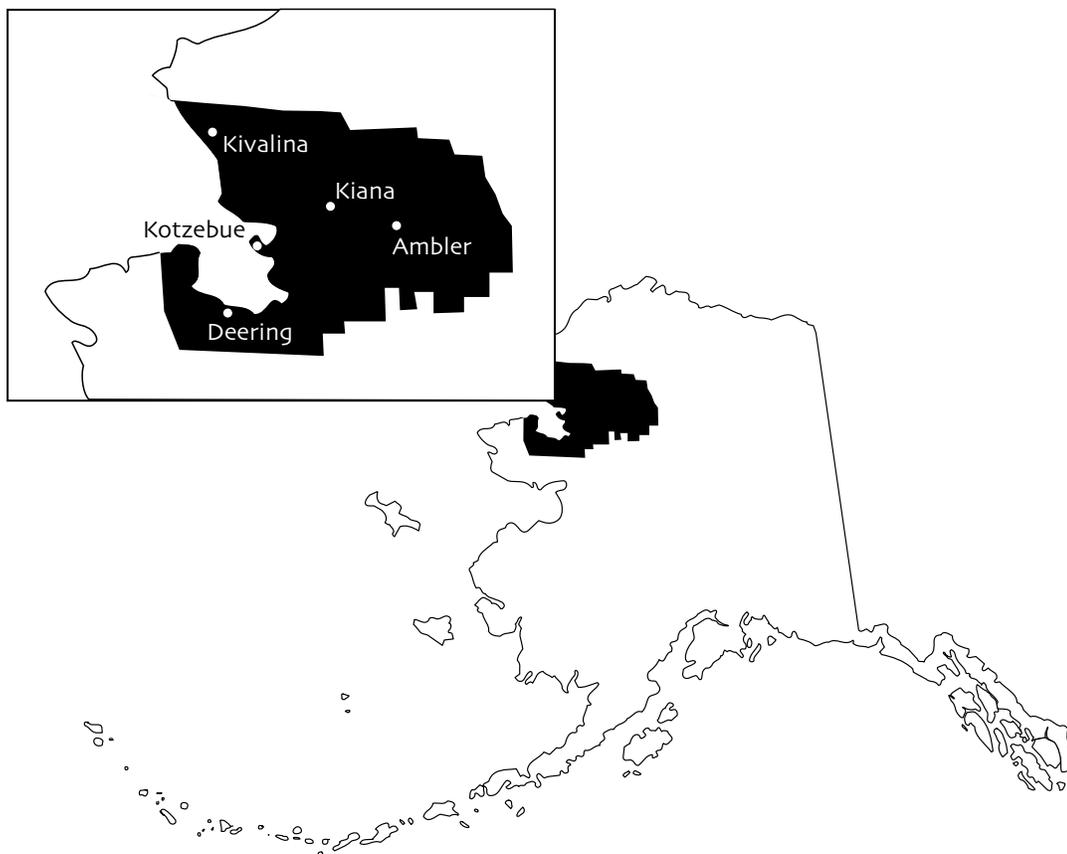


Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment



Northwest Arctic Borough

A joint project of
Northwest Arctic Borough Economic Development Commission
and the
Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development
Divisions of Trade & Development and Tourism

NORTHWEST ARCTIC BOROUGH

Sources: *Northwest Arctic Borough Overall Economic Development Plan (OEDP)*, Northwest Arctic Borough Economic Development Commission, 1996; *Alaska Visitor Statistics Program III*, DOT, Summer 1993; *Rural Alaska Community Visitor Profiles*, Rural Tourism Center, June, 1996; *Rural Alaska Tourism Assessment*, Community Enterprise Development Corporation, June, 1991; and, *Rural Tourism Infrastructure Roundtable Meeting*, Kotzebue, Alaska, August, 1996.

A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

The Northwest Arctic Borough encompasses approximately 39,000 square miles on the south slope of the Brooks Range. Roughly the size of Indiana, the borough is home to about 6,700 residents, over 90% of whom are Inupiaq Eskimos living in eleven communities. Kotzebue, with 3,000 residents is the largest community and the center of government and commerce for the borough. The region's terrain is dramatic with scenic rivers and mountains, giant sand dunes, tundra and boreal forests. Local economies are still closely tied to subsistence activities. The development of rich mineral deposits, a commercial fishery and tourism-related activities, however, are all contributing to a growing cash economy.

ACCESS

Primary visitor access to Kotzebue is by daily, commercial jet service from Anchorage, with some flights routed through Nome. Smaller communities in the region are reached by scheduled and charter air taxi services based in Kotzebue, Ambler and Kiana. Freight is delivered by air cargo or barge service through Kotzebue Sound and beyond via the region's navigable river system. There is no road access between communities. During the summer, rivers often serve as highways and in the winter villagers travel by snow machine and all-terrain vehicles, using well-established trails.

PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

Primary tourism assets of the Northwest Arctic Borough include its national parklands, Native culture and adventure and ecotourism opportunities, as well as its "north of the Arctic Circle" allure.

More than half of all the land within the region is federally owned and protected as parks, preserves and wildlife refuges including: Noatak National Preserve, Cape Krusenstern National Monument, Kobuk Valley National Park, and the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. Additionally, the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve and the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve are accessible from communities within the borough. These national parklands offer visitors unparalleled opportunities for wildlife viewing, kayaking and rafting, sportfishing and camping and feature a wide variety of unique archaeological sites.

Visitors to the region also have a wealth of Native cultural experiences from which to choose, including tour programs to small, traditional villages, the NANA Museum of the Arctic, Eskimo cultural performances, storytelling and opportunities to watch the creation of local arts and crafts.

CURRENT VISITATION TO THE REGION

Alaska Visitor Statistics Program (AVSP) data is available only for the community of Kotzebue. However, given that the majority of visitors to region must enter or exit from Kotzebue, these numbers are a good measure of visitation to the region as a whole. According to the latest available AVSP data, 19,000 visitors traveled to Kotzebue during the summer of 1993. Vacation/pleasure was the primary travel purpose for 17,700 of these visitors, while 1,300 traveled for business/pleasure. More than half, 54%, of Kotzebue visitors traveled on package tours; while 15% were inde-package visitors and 32% were independent visitors.

The majority of visitors to the region purchase the Kotzebue tour package from Tour Arctic. The tour includes a general community overview, a visit to the Kotzebue Culture Camp and a visit to the NANA Museum of the Arctic, which features wildlife displays and cultural presentations. Several hundred of these visitors also purchase a day trip to the village of Kiana which affords general flightseeing opportunities.

The second largest visitor market to the region is the ecotourism/adventure traveler who engages in river rafting, kayaking, camping, birdwatching or wildlife viewing.

POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The areas of greatest potential for tourism development in the Northwest Arctic Borough lie in finding ways to take advantage of the assets which currently are attracting visitors. In effect, to do more with what they have.

This involves developing more activities for their Kotzebue visitors both within that community and in nearby villages. It includes developing more opportunities to purchase authentic arts and crafts, more quality opportunities for quality village experiences, and more opportunities to access and experience national parklands.

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Among the greatest inhibitors to tourism development for this region is the problem of access. This includes the challenge of motivating greater numbers of visitors to spend the time and dollars required to travel to the area, as well as issues related to increasing access to national park lands in the region.

Challenges in developing more tourism opportunities in smaller, Native villages include the lack of trained human resources; the overall inadequacy of visitor facilities and infrastructure; and, in some villages, remaining concerns about conflict between increased visitation and traditional lifestyles.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

Currently, there is no organization in the region that focus solely on tourism development or promotion. The majority of tour promotions for the area are conducted by NANA, the regional for-profit Native corporation, which owns and operates Tour Arctic. The Northwest Arctic Borough also include tourism infrastructure development as a component of its Overall Economic Development Plan. In addition, the Northwest Arctic Borough Economic Development Commission, the designated Alaska Regional Development Organization for the area, includes tourism development as an element of its overall economic development program.

As shown below, borough residents identified the formation of a regional tourism council as the highest priority tourism development project.

B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

1. FORM A REGIONAL TOURISM COUNCIL

Location: Northwest Arctic Borough

Description: With the Northwest Arctic Borough Economic Development Commission playing a lead role, proceed to examine other regional tourism development organizations for a model compatible with local needs. Involve both the public and private sectors in a process to identify the organization's mission and goals as well as a budget and management plan.

2. REHABILITATE THE OLD KIANA SCHOOL BUILDING

Location: Kiana

Description: Rehabilitate the old school building and use it as a museum and visitor information center. It would be a place to display historic photos and other culturally significant items. Local residents could work in the center and have direct contact with visitors providing a rich experience for both. Various agencies would have to be consulted to secure the building and find funds. Staff would have to be trained. Parties involved would be the National Park Service, Northwest Arctic Borough, Kiana Traditional Council, and city council. Funding sources could consist of National Park Service, University of Alaska and legislative appropriations. Other communities may be a source of information on how to structure this project.

3. ESTABLISH A MULTI-AGENCY INFORMATION CENTER

Location: Kotzebue

Description: Establish a multi-agency information center in Kotzebue for greater cost effectiveness, to promote increased cooperation among agencies and to better serve the visiting public.

4. IMPROVE ACCESS TO CONSERVATION SYSTEM UNITS

Location: Northwest Arctic Borough

Description: This project was proposed relative to public interest lands throughout the region, but much of the discussion centered on the need for visitor facilities and improved access to the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes which have the capacity to become a major visitor attraction. Immediately needed are trail head posting and trail improvements, a campground, and water and waste disposal facilities. Partners in this effort would include the National Park Service, NANA, the village of Kiana and the Northwest Arctic Borough.

5. EDUCATE RESIDENTS REGARDING THE IMPACTS AND BENEFITS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Location: Northwest Arctic Borough

Description: A significant obstacle to the growth of tourism in the region is the lack of a general understanding of the economic benefits and development opportunities the industry can bring. There is a need for an ongoing effort to educate residents regarding both the benefits and potential costs associated with this industry so informed decisions can be made regarding the types and level of development that is desirable in the region. Partners in this effort could include the Northwest Arctic Borough, NANA, the Alaska Division of Tourism, the Rural Tourism Center, the University of Alaska, and villages organizations throughout the region.

6. CONSTRUCT A ROAD BETWEEN BORNITE AND KOBUK

Location: Kobuk

Description: The old mine site at Bornite is believed to have excellent potential as an ecotourism camp locale. Some infrastructure is already in place and a tent or cabin camp is being designed that would support cultural and wildlife-oriented activities. A major inhibitor to development of this site is the condition of the 16-mile road from Kobuk to the Dahl Creek Airstrip. To bring it up to acceptable standards, the road needs general upgrading and brushing, replacement of a bridge span and installation of a culvert near Dahl Creek. Partners in this effort should include NANA, the village of Kobuk, the Northwest Arctic Borough and possibly the villages of Shungnak and Ambler.

C. ADDITIONAL PROPOSED PROJECTS

- Develop greater regional access flexibility
- Identify regulatory barriers to the production and sale of traditional food products
- Designate a visitor industry contact in each community
- Provide language aid cards for non-English speaking visitors
- Encourage government use of private sector accommodations and services within the region
- Develop local trails for day program use
- Develop a bike path and walking trail in Kotzebue
- Offer entrepreneurial training and on-going support for small businesses
- Add to local lodging options; particularly those that encourage interaction between residents and visitors
- Improvements to the Deering Road
- Ambler/Jade Mountain road or trail
- Review conservation unit management plans for possible revisions
- Initiate a tourism development partnering relationship with Nome
- Work with Selawik for possible tourism development
- Work with Noatak for possible tourism development

