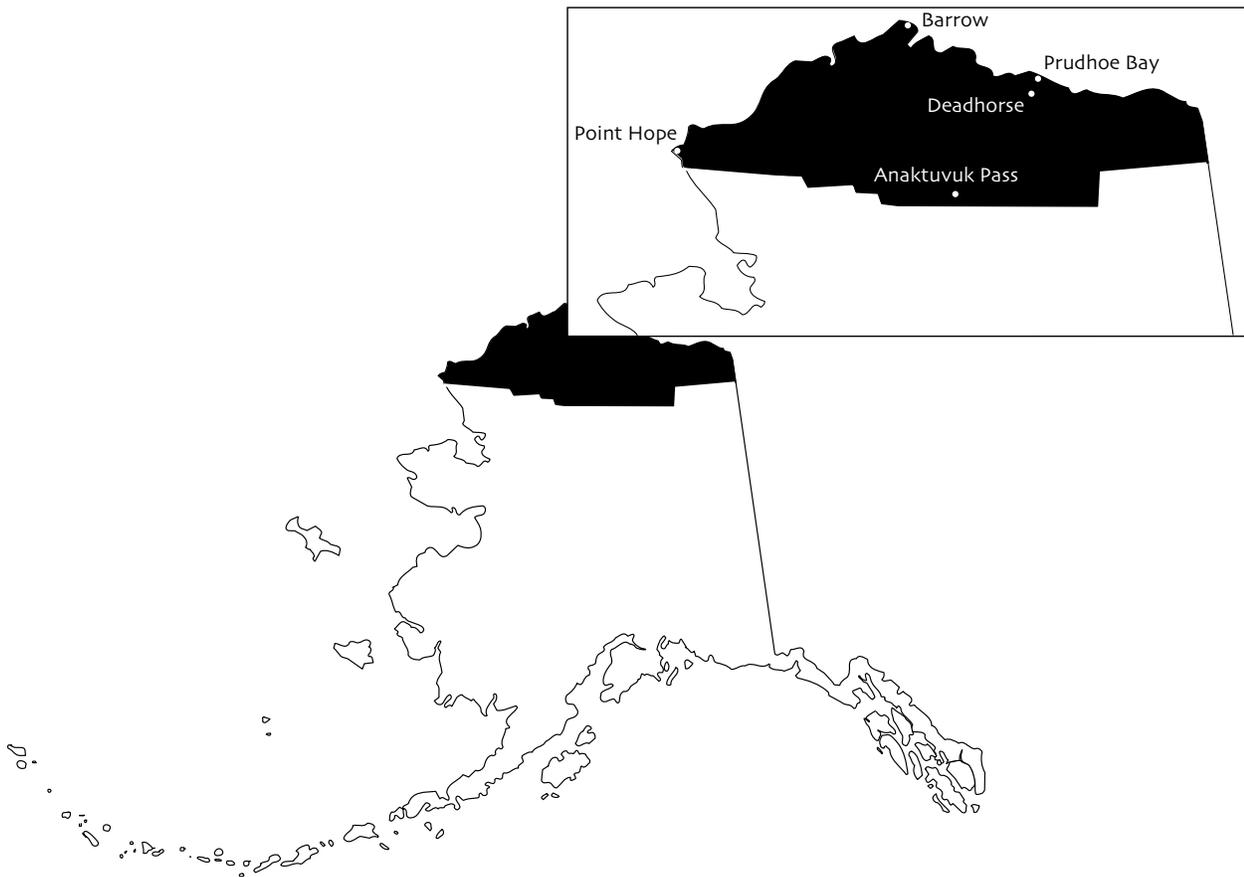


Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment



North Slope Borough

A joint project of the
Arctic Development Council
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 (TRAACK) 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 Plan-

ning, 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 Fairbanks North Star Borough.

NORTH SLOPE BOROUGH

Sources: *North Slope Tourism Plan*, Arctic Development Council, Inc., July, 1996; *Tourism Potential for the North Slope Borough Villages*, North Slope Borough/Arctic Development Council, December, 1993; *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*, Barrow, Alaska, July, 1996

A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

The North Slope Borough encompasses a 90,000 square mile area in northernmost Alaska. It extends 650 miles from Point Hope on the Chuckchi Sea eastward to the Canadian Border, and 225 miles north from its southern boundary to Barrow, the farthest north community in North America. The borough has three distinct regions: the Coastal Plain with its treeless lowland tundra dotted with marshes, lakes, and rivers; the foothills of the Brooks Range with ridges and plateaus varying from 300 to 3,000 feet; and the rugged Brooks Range with its tallest peak at 9,050 feet separating the Arctic and Interior drainage systems.

This region is home to the vast oil reserves of Prudhoe Bay that fuel Alaska's economy. Its tundra and adjacent ocean also host an abundance of birds, mammals and vegetation which support the subsistence lifestyle of many of the region's 9,200 residents. Barrow, with a population of 4,200, is the region's seat of government and the commercial and service center for the other seven villages in the borough.

ACCESS

Scheduled and charter air service from either Barrow, Kotzebue or Fairbanks are available to every village in the region, as well as daily jet service to Barrow, Deadhorse and Prudhoe Bay. Although most villages are located on the coast or along rivers, these water routes are not widely used. The unpaved Dalton Highway traverses the region, paralleling the Trans-Alaska Pipeline from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay; however, there are no roads connecting any of the borough's communities.

PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

Among the primary tourism attributes and assets of the North Slope Borough region are its exotic location, the northern lights, the dramatic contrast of a modern petroleum industry side-by-side with the Arctic wilderness, abundant wildlife, unique scenery, national parks and wildlife refuges, and the distinct Inupiat Eskimo culture. Some specific examples include.

LOCATION

- Northernmost city in North America (the Top of the World)
- Arctic Ocean
- Arctic Circle
- Northern Lights
- Prudhoe Bay oil fields

NATIONAL PARKS AND REFUGES

- Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve
- Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
- Brooks Range

WILDLIFE

- Birding
- Caribou
- Fish
- Whales

CULTURE AND HERITAGE

- Simon Paneak Memorial Museum in Anaktuvuk Pass
- Traditional arts and crafts
- Archaeological sites
- Cultural presentations
- Whaling history
- Local events

ADVENTURE

- Camping
- River trips

Most North Slope communities have hotel or lodge accommodations for guests, cafe or restaurant facilities, and local guide services. Not surprisingly, these are most plentiful and consistent with customary standards in Barrow. In general, the region's service business capacity is adequate to support some increase in local visitation, but is not positioned to accommodate large increases.

CURRENT VISITATION TO REGION

Currently, there are three primary motivators for pleasure visitation to the North Slope area: its unique location at the "top of the world," the experience of crossing the Arctic Circle, and the special qualities of its public lands. The two primary types of visitors currently motivated to visit the North Slope region are adventure travel and tour package visitors.

Adventure travelers come to the region seeking a variety of wilderness experiences including wilderness camping, river float trips, wildlife viewing, and sportfishing and/or hunting. Often the North Slope is a primary destination for this type of visitor; meaning they come to Alaska with the specific intent of visiting the region. The vast majority of these visitors come to the region via Fairbanks and generally travel to the Brooks Range, Gates of the Arctic National Park or the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Packaged tour visitors commonly include the North Slope as an add-on to their primary tour itinerary (i.e., an Alaska cruise, highway RV trip, or specialty group tour). Tour visitors

travel to the region to experience its unique geographical and climatic features, to learn first-hand about Native history and culture, to view wildlife and participate in other soft adventure activities. The vast majority of these visitors purchase a "Top of the World" tour to Barrow, an oil field tour to Prudhoe Bay, or a village tour to Anaktuvuk Pass.

Any attempt to quantify types of visitation to the North Slope region is made difficult given the lack of research data currently available. The most current visitation data available is the 1993 Alaska Visitor Statistics Program (AVSP) data which aggregates the North Slope Borough with all of the Interior/North region (which includes Fairbanks). This makes it almost impossible to glean any discrete information about visitation to the Borough. Additionally, sample size issues with the AVSP cause information concerning Barrow visitation to be mostly unreliable. However, local sources estimate that approximately 20,000 - 25,000 visitors travel to the region annually and the vast majority are package tour visitors.

POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

According to the North Slope Tourism Plan, July 1996, and the Tourism Potential for the North Slope Borough Villages, December 1993, the greatest potential for tourism development within the North Slope Region is within the cultural heritage tourism, wilderness adventure travel, and ecotourism sectors.

The villages of the North Slope are largely populated by Inupiat Eskimos. By cultivating the unique historical and cultural qualities of these Native people there is significant potential for the communities of the northern Arctic as destinations for cultural heritage tourism. Access to historical sites and archeological digs, cultural presentations, opportunities to meet with area residents or to purchase art and crafts from the artist are attractive options to the heritage traveler and are important components of a comprehensive Native culture tour.

The proximity of the Brooks Range to the Arctic Ocean creates a combination of landscapes and habitats unique in North America. The area has exceptional wildlife and wilderness that make it an attractive destination for the adventure travel market. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge hosts a network of river corridors that can accommodate rafting and fishing. The rich diversity of Arctic and subarctic wildlife include 140 species of birds, caribou, bears, wolves, fish and a variety of small mammals. For this active, adventure travel market, wilderness adventure programs are possible year-round. Depending on the season, tours may include guided backpack tours, raft expeditions and fishing trips, winter recreation activities, caribou and other northern climate wildlife, as well as northern lights viewing.

Ecotourism features low impact activities, environmental and cultural appreciation and sensitivity. It often focuses on the educational aspect of an experience and relies heavily on the responsible use of the natural resources in the area. In many cases, ecotourism offers a combination of adventure, cultural and natural history features. Ecotourism appeals to a growing market in the US and Europe. Since international ecotourists come primarily from heavily industrialized countries to visit destinations that offer unique, natural environments, the remote location and lack of industrialization on the North Slope should be an asset for cultivating the ecotourism market.

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Tourism development on the North Slope has many challenges. Some attributes of the area which can attract visitors can also serve to keep them away; the extreme climate and the distant location, for example. The distance from major tourism corridors is a particular problem because of the additional expense and time required to reach and travel within the region.

In general, the North Slope has an underdeveloped attraction and services base - not enough established activities and attractions, outside of Barrow, for visitors once they decide to visit the region and not enough services designed to meet specific visitor needs. A related problem is the lack of a local workforce trained in hospitality industry skills. The region's low unemployment rate and the high wages offered by local government and industry also tend to make the largely seasonal tourism industry jobs uncompetitive.

At this time, the visitor market offers a limited number of potential travelers to the North Slope Borough. 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 on the North Slope. On the other hand, there is a significant market for what the region offers once the basic infrastructure and services are in place to insure a quality experience. To effectively reach this market, the region also needs to develop the marketing expertise and implement an organized, focused effort to identify and attract these potential visitors.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

While there are no organizations within the region focusing exclusively on tourism development or promotion, both the Arctic Development Council, the Alaska Regional Development Organization for the borough, and the North Slope Borough have included tourism development and/or promotion as a component of their overall development efforts. In addition, a key component of the newly completed North Slope Tourism Plan is the establishment of a North Slope Tourism Council to manage and direct the development and expansion of the North Slope tourism industry.

B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

1. DEVELOPMENT OF BARROW CULTURAL CENTER AND MUSEUM

LOCATION: Barrow

Description: This facility is being developed as a center for the preservation and practice of Inupiat culture, a venue for education in the folkways of the Inupiat people, and as a drawing card for visitors to the North Slope. Its offices will house the North Slope Borough's Inupiat Native language and history departments. The museum will be managed by an administrative director and staff; salaried and volunteer positions will be filled from the community at large.

The development of this center has been approved with concept and design phases funded by the State of Alaska. The North Slope Borough Assembly will fund the continuation of the project. This project is supported by the community, will be appreciated by the visitor and will benefit the Inupiat people. Proponents include Jana Harcharek, Director of Communications, Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC FACILITIES ON DALTON HIGHWAY

LOCATION: Dalton Highway Corridor

Description: Basic traveler services are currently not available on the Dalton Highway. Emergency services are provided through the generosity of Alyeska Pipeline Company. Public facilities are required if the Dalton Highway is to be promoted as a tourism destination and experience. There could be an opportunity for private enterprise to provide traveler services; the North Slope Borough, village councils could endeavor to provide visitor services (fuel, accommodations, dining). Without basic services visitors now traveling the highway can harm the environment. For development to occur, access needs to be granted to potential development sites by those managing the land. (North Slope Borough, State of Alaska, Alyeska Pipeline Company, etc.) Parties affected by development could be village residents along the highway corridor and environmental agencies. The North Slope Borough and State Department of Transportation have indicated a willingness to participate. Village councils potentially impacted by development would need to be involved in the planning process. Funding would need to be partnered through the State, Borough and private enterprise, depending on the specific project. Proponents include the North Slope Borough and the Arctic Development Council.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC FACILITIES IN ANAKTUVUK PASS

LOCATION: Anaktuvuk Pass

Description: Anaktuvuk Pass is currently involved in tourism with individuals and small groups visiting the community. To accommodate larger numbers of visitors, additional public facilities and visitor services (accommodations, dining, restrooms) are needed. The village has been in the planning stage of constructing a Bed & Breakfast and/or a lodge but has not decided how to proceed. Employing locals to staff these facilities is viewed as a primary reason to build them. At this point a decision needs to be made as to what facility will best meet the village's needs. The project has been presented to the North Slope Borough's mini-grant program and to a commercial lending institution. Mini-grant dollars have been set aside until the resolution of the project occurs. Then, along with private donors, the North Slope Borough mini-grant will fund the project. The State funded the planning of the facility. Proponents include the North Slope Borough.

