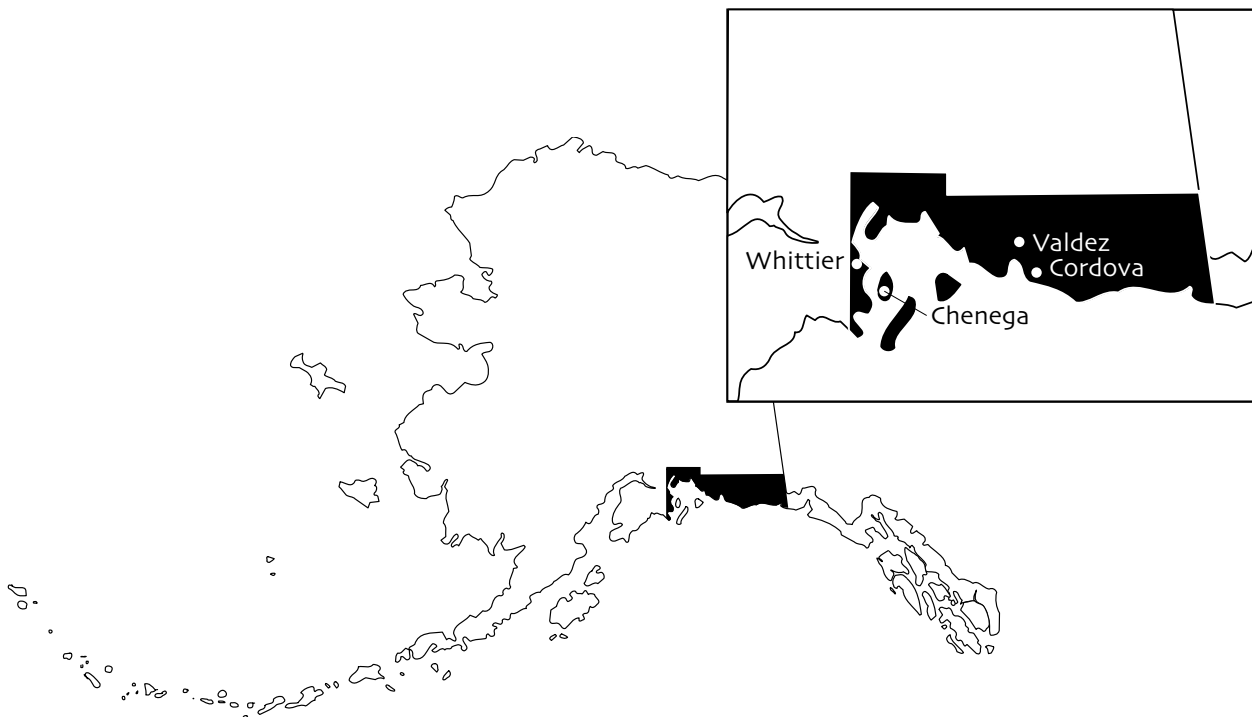


Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment



Prince William Sound

A joint project of the
Prince William Sound Economic 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 (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.

PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND

Sources: *Alaska Visitor Statistics Program III*, Division of Tourism, Summer 1993; *Prince William Sound, Regional Development Strategy Update*, Prince William Sound Economic Development Council, 1995; *Rural Alaska Community Visitor Profiles*, Rural Tourism Center, June, 1996; and, *Rural Tourism Infrastructure Roundtable Meeting*, Anchorage, Alaska, May, 1996.

A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

Located at the northernmost point of the Gulf of Alaska, Prince William Sound encompasses over 2,700 miles of coastline; 4.4 million acres of National Forest; and 10,000 square miles of protected waterways, islands, fjords and glaciers. Surrounded by the rugged coastal mountains of the Chugach Range, Prince William Sound lies at the heart of the Chugach National Forest. The region is richly forested with Western Hemlock and Sitka Spruce and its countless islands shelter large populations of sea birds. The region is well-known for its scenic beauty; abundant fish, bird and marine mammal populations; and as a prime recreation area.

Valdez, with 4,500 residents, and Cordova, with 2,600, are the population and commercial centers for the region. Most of the region's remaining population of approximately 550 are found in the coastal communities of Whittier, Chenega Bay and Tatitlek.

The region's economy is closely tied to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline Terminal and attendant services in Valdez; to commercial fishing and processing; to recreation and tourism-related activities; and to federal, state and local government services. Subsistence continues to play an important social and economic role in the communities of Chenega Bay and Tatitlek.

ACCESS

Access to Prince William Sound varies greatly by community. Cordova is the only community with daily scheduled jet service, offered as a stop-over on flights between Anchorage and Juneau. Scheduled prop airplane service is available daily between Anchorage and Valdez, while air taxi and charter service are available to other communities within the region.

The Alaska Marine Highway System provides passenger and vehicle transport service between Valdez, Cordova and Whittier. The frequency of ferry schedule varies depending on the time of year.

Highway access is available year-round to Valdez from Anchorage and from Fairbanks, via the paved Glenn and Richardson Highways. Whittier is accessed from Anchorage via the Seward Highway and the Alaska Railroad shuttle service from Portage.

PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

Prince William Sound is a veritable tourism treasure. The area abounds in beautiful scenery, spectacular glaciers, abundant wildlife and recreational attractions and opportunities.

A sampling of the region’s tourism assets and attributes includes:

GLACIERS

- Columbia Glacier
- College Fjords
- Whittier Glacier
- Worthington Glacier
- Childs Glacier
- Sheridan Glacier

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Sportfishing
- Kayaking
- Motor and sail boating
- Hiking and bicycling
- Camping
- Scuba diving
- River rafting
- Glacier skiing
- Day cruises
- Flightseeing

WILDLIFE

- Seabirds and bald eagles
- Whales and porpoise
- Sea otter and sea lions
- Bear
- Dall sheep and mountain goats
- Deer
- Salmon, halibut and crab

ATTRACTIONS

- Trans-Alaska Pipeline Terminus
- Native communities
- Historical sites
- Museums

SPECIAL EVENTS

- World Extreme Skiing Championship
- Prince William Sound Regatta
- Cordova Iceworm Festival
- Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival

CURRENT VISITATION TO REGION

Visitation patterns vary greatly within the region, according to the latest Alaska Visitor Statistics Program data.

Cordova received 17,200 visitors during the summer of 1993. Vacation/pleasure was the main reason most visitors traveled to Cordova (86%), while 10% traveled to visit friends and relatives and 2% traveled for a combination of business and pleasure. More than half of Cordova’s visitors (55%) traveled independently, while 22% traveled on a package tour and 23% traveled as inde-package visitors. Cordova visitors overwhelmingly used air service to enter/exit Alaska (60%), while 22% used the highway and 12% used the Alaska Marine Highway System.

Valdez hosted 124,300 visitors during the summer of 1993. Vacation/pleasure was again the primary reason for most visitors to travel to Valdez (88%); while 7% traveled to visit friends and relatives and 5% traveled for combined business and pleasure. Most Valdez visitors were independent travelers (40%), while 33% traveled on a package tour and 27% traveled as inde-package visitors. Valdez visitors primarily used air to enter/exit Alaska (35%), while 22% used cruise ships and 43% used a combination of highway and ferry.

Whittier received 83,600 visitors during the summer of 1993. Vacation/pleasure was the overwhelming motivation for most visitors (90%), while 2% traveled to visit friends and relatives and 4% traveled for combined business and pleasure. Most Whittier visitors were package tour visitors (48%), while 32% were independent visitors and 20% traveled as inde-package visitors. Whittier visitors used primarily air to enter/exit Alaska (51% to 59%), while 28% used cruise ships and 21% used highway and ferry.

POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

One significant area for Prince William Sound tourism potential is developing better access and more carrying capacity for visitation. Basic visitor facilities, including restrooms, trails and campgrounds, need to be increased to support growth in the active recreation and ecotourism areas.

Additionally, Prince William Sound has yet to really tap its historical and Native culture assets. Development of cultural and historical attractions and activities within the three largest communities, as well as the smaller Native communities may represent good potential for capturing more visitor dollars.

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

While the Prince William Sound region now enjoys a very healthy visitor industry, its further development is hindered by a lack of visitor facilities and infrastructure.

Additionally, the Prince William Sound Tourism Coalition, and other visitor organizations, do not enjoy marketing budgets as large as many of their Alaska competitors. Further, there is some feeling within the region that potential visitors still harbor negative impressions resulting from the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Marketing challenges are further exacerbated by the diversity of visitor types and travel patterns.

There are also divided opinions within the region's visitor industry as to what kinds and how much industry growth is beneficial. It is important that stakeholders in the region continue to work together to plan for an industry that can meet the diverse needs of local residents and industry participants.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

The regional cooperative marketing organization for the region is the Prince William Sound Tourism Coalition. In addition, the Valdez Convention and Visitors Bureau and local Chambers of Commerce promote individual communities within the region. Tourism development efforts are supported by the Prince William Sound Economic Development Council, an Alaska Regional Development Organization, as well as by local government bodies.

B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Participants from throughout the Prince William Sound region identified a variety of tourism infrastructure and attraction projects which they believe should be implemented. They opted not to prioritize these projects, but to pursue them as additional analysis and unfolding events determined the time to be appropriate.

TRAILS AND CAMPING

- Complete a non-motorized trail from Shoup Bay State Park to Worthington Glacier with access from the Richardson Highway
- Develop a camper and tent camping site near city of Cordova for transient workers and recreational campers

CULTURE

- Build a cultural center in Cordova highlighting and interpreting the Eyak Native presence and influence in the region

PARKS

- Recognize Chugach National Forest Wilderness Study Area as the attraction and resource it is and its value to the visitor industry and local communities

TRANSPORTATION

- Develop a deep-water port facility, with the capacity to handle both cargo and passenger service, at Shepard Point near Cordova
- Construct cruiseship/ferry terminal facilities in Valdez
- Improve ferry service scheduling into Cordova
- Expand existing dock facilities in Cordova

PUBLIC FACILITIES

- Expand the Prince William Sound Waste Management Plan to cover areas outside of the communities and develop a facility for handling human waste generated in western Prince William Sound
- Obtain additional weather buoys for Prince William Sound
- Complete public facilities at Dock Point in Valdez, including restrooms and interpretive signage

COMMUNICATIONS

- Establish a quality communications system throughout the region including the capacity for accurate weather information gathering and transmittal and the capacity to responding to public safety and emergency services needs

