



# **TravelAlaska.com**

## **Mapping Features Usability Study Report of Findings**

**June 2013**





## Methodology

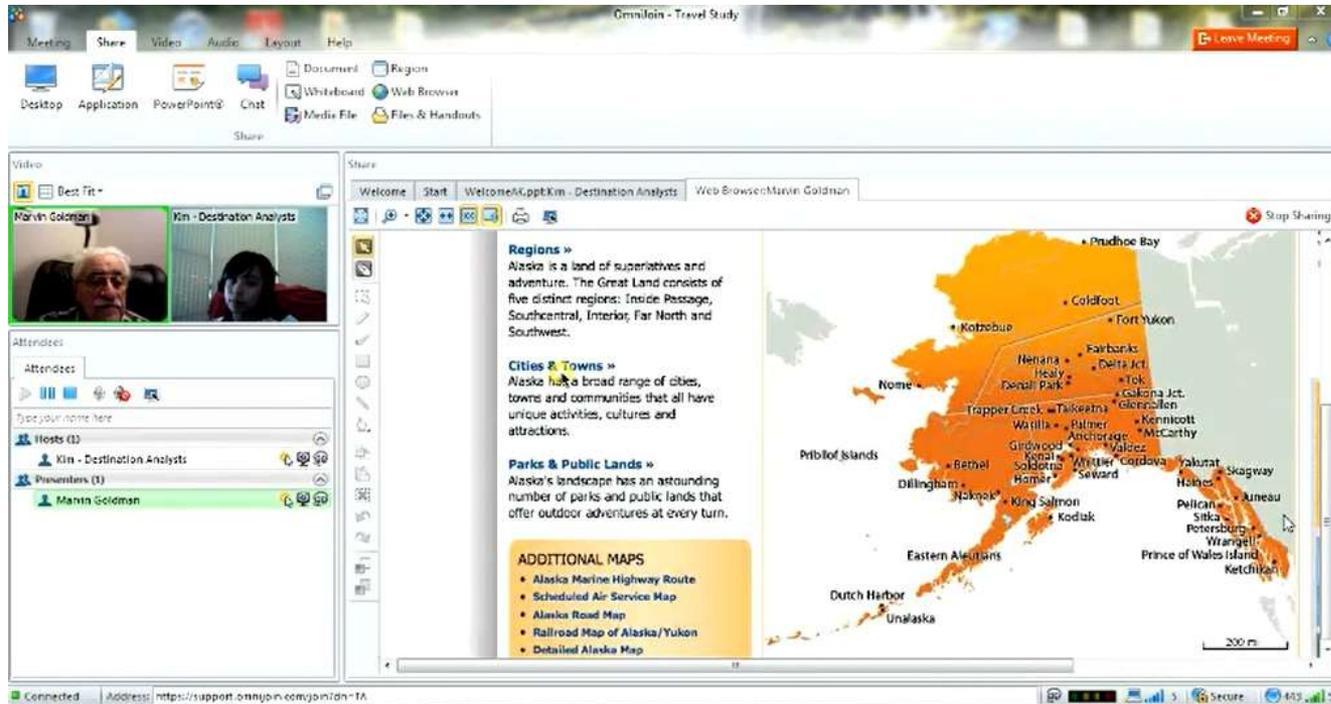
- This research is based on of 60-minute in-depth interviews of 18 travelers. Half of these travelers will be traveling to Alaska this summer (2013) and the remaining half plan to travel to the state within the next 2 years.
- These in-depth Interviews were conducted via online video conference using Destination Analysts' online usability lab. Respondents accessed the usability lab through their preferred computing device. Through a sharing feature, Destination Analysts research staff could observe respondents' behaviors and actions on the website, as well as monitor their emotional responses via their web cam feed.
- In addition to sharing their general opinions of the mapping features in terms of how they aligned with their expectations, respondents were asked to complete a series of trip-planning related tasks using the site's maps.

## Respondent Profile

- Visiting Alaska in 2013 or plan to visit sometime before 2016
- Regularly use the Internet for trip research and to perform travel-related planning tasks
- Household income above \$50,000
- At least some college education
- Range of ages between 31 – 67
- Majority are married/partnered

## The Interview Environment

A screenshot of the interview environment from the moderator's perspective is shown below. During the interview, respondents viewed and used TravelAlaska.com from their own computing device.



## Alaska Trips

Interviews began with a general introduction as well as a discussion of the type of trips respondents were planning or considering . The following is a summary of findings from these conversations as it relates to mapping features on the site

- **A diverse destination—a diverse set of trips being planned on the website.** Travelers interviewed for this research represented a variety of Alaska trip aspirations, including large and small ship cruises, RVing through the state, and guided tours. These trips all involve multiple transportation methods, from chartering aircraft to renting a car to taking the Alaska Railroad.
- **Maps that serve the informational needs of these diverse trip aspirations are necessary on the site.** As TravelAlaska.com serves such a varied audience, it is important that mapping content is available that addresses each of them.



## Alaska Travel Planning Resources

Research participants shared the resources they used (or would use) to plan their trip to Alaska.

- **As the official state tourism website, TravelAlaska.com has particular importance to Alaska’s visitors and potential visitors.** The state, rather than the individual towns within it, is perceived as the destination. Research participants also expressed a sound trust in the information provided by official tourism organizations/departments– these sources are seen as experts who have vetted the businesses they recommend and/or feature.
- **An effective search engine marketing strategy is critical.** The predominant way research participants said they found TravelAlaska.com (or would locate it) was typing some iteration of “tourism Alaska” into a search engine. Participants also said they would try a variety of searches and explore what came up, including “things to do in Alaska” and “Alaska sightseeing.”



- **Alaska travelers rely on the same set of resources as the general public,** including consumer review sites such as TripAdvisor, OTAs like Expedia and printed guidebooks like those available from Frommer’s.

## The Role of Online Maps in Alaska Travel Planning

- **Mapping is critical to Alaska's visitors and potential visitors in helping them gain perspective of the destination.** Alaska is seen as massive and unknown, and thus the travelers interviewed for this research pointed to maps as the means for getting a handle on what destinations they could visit, how long they would stay in each place, estimated travel times, even the overall length of their trip to the state.
- **Map content is primarily accessed online.** Research participants said they typically use online services such as Google Maps, Yahoo! maps and Mapquest, as well as GPS-based maps on their smartphone or other devices. There was little mention of printed maps.
- **Maps and mapping features are used in the latter stages of trip planning.** Map features are not top of mind in terms of the major planning resources travelers initially turn to. Mapping is used later in the trip research process for tasks such as logistical planning and identifying lodging, dining, attractions and transportation options.



- **There are high expectations of the maps available on Alaska's official tourism website.** Although maps would not be the first thing most website visitors would seek out on TravelAlaska.com, they do expect to see high quality, highly functional maps on the site.

## General Findings

Following is an overview of some of the general findings of this research.

- The incorporation of findings from previous usability studies has notably improved the utility of the maps.** A prime example is the hover-over descriptions that appear on the Regions map. Research participants praised this feature, finding it very helpful for their trip planning and research.
- Even for people who will be visiting to the state, an understanding of Alaska's geography and how to travel within the state is very limited.** Several research participants had questions about which areas are accessible by road, which destinations require flying into, and distances and travel times between towns. This reiterated how critical detailed maps are to users of TravelAlaska.com.
- TravelAlaska.com represents an important opportunity to inform people about the state and its regions.** The Regions and Cities & Towns map in particular is looked to by site users as a resource for learning about the Alaska. The website also clearly represents a great opportunity to promote the varied transportation methods available – ferry, planes, railroad, etc.



## Maps & Places to Go Section Overview

- **The existing navigation to find mapping content is excellent.** Maps were easily accessible through the site's top navigation and none of the research participants experienced trouble locating maps.
- **The navigation on the Maps & Places to Go section overview page is both understandable and usable.** Respondents primarily used the top tabs to navigate this section, and did so with ease.
- **Users would benefit from a larger map that accommodates more detail.** None of the participants in the study showed interest in reading the descriptions of the three main mapping options on the left nav. They did however request and/or suggest that all the maps initially show more detail—i.e. more destinations, display roads, etc. It is likely a better use of this valuable real estate on the page to reduce or remove the left nav to make room for larger, more detailed map images.



- **Reconsider the maps' color theme.** Respondents commented that the maps could use a brighter and/or more varied color scheme (i.e. assigning a color to each region). Some respondents noted that the orange color was not what they associate with Alaska.

## Regions Overview Map

- **The hover-over content feature was very popular with research participants.** Adding an image(s) to accompany the text was suggested as a way to make this feature even more beneficial to users.
- **Show more cities on the Regions map to generate interest in each region.** Some regions were felt to look particularly sparse and thus completely uninteresting. Perhaps there should be a minimum number of towns shown for each region (i.e. three destinations are shown for each region).
- **Consider adding a higher level of detail to the Regions map.** Participants felt that displaying roads, airports, seaports, etc would greatly help them with understanding traveling within the state and formulating trip ideas.
- **It's unclear what region Denali National Park is in.** Given the tremendous interest in Denali National Park amongst visitors and potential visitors, this question surfaced numerous times throughout the study . Users expect to click on "Denali National Park" on the regions map and get information about the park. A pinpoint like the one on the Parks & Public Lands map could be used on the Regions map, or the "Denali National Park" text could link directly to Denali content.



## Individual Region Maps

While respondents easily arrived at the internal regions pages by clicking on the region from the Regions Map, the maps used on these pages do not initially appear to users to be a useful planning tool. This is largely due to the limited detail and the seeming lack of interactive functions. The following are suggestions derived from the research to address this.

- **Add a zoom feature** (or use Google mapping content)
- **Make it clearer that the map has interactivity by adding mouse over features** (i.e. changing text and image colors)
- **Add more detail that would be of interest to visitors**, such as displaying roads, landmarks, etc.
- **Add a direction to click the map for more info**



- **Note: The image area on these pages can better serve as a planning tool** with the addition of captions about the image (and the destination and/or activity being featured) and links to more information.

## Cities & Towns Overview Map

The concept of this map is well understood and well-liked. **Users were generally able to find information on a city of interest.** In addition, the map clearly represents an opportunity to educate site users about Alaska's cities and towns – research participants repeatedly noted how excited they were to see how much more Alaska had than they expected. The usability of this map could be improved through the following:

- **Feature a larger map overall.** Users wanted to be able to view more and see detail more clearly. Again, consider reducing the left nav to accommodate for a larger map.
- **Designate larger cities differently, such as through using a larger font or larger map pinpoint.** Users wanted a quick way to learn which were larger cities and which were smaller towns.
- **Communicate that the map is interactive by making something happen when you hover over a city name,** such as have the city name change color, or make name or map point larger. For some research participants, it appeared that they knew to click, but it was not clear if they noticed the mouse pointer change.



## View Cities Overview

The overall navigation of the View Cities Overview is understood and perceived as well-organized. Research participants found it to be another useful tool for finding information quickly, however it may be underutilized by website users as many don't know the geography well enough to guess which region a city may be in.

Note that because it appears below the fold, some research participants did not notice it independently.

VIEW CITIES OVERVIEW

**INSIDE PASSAGE** INTERIOR SOUTHCENTRAL SOUTHWEST FAR NORTH ALL

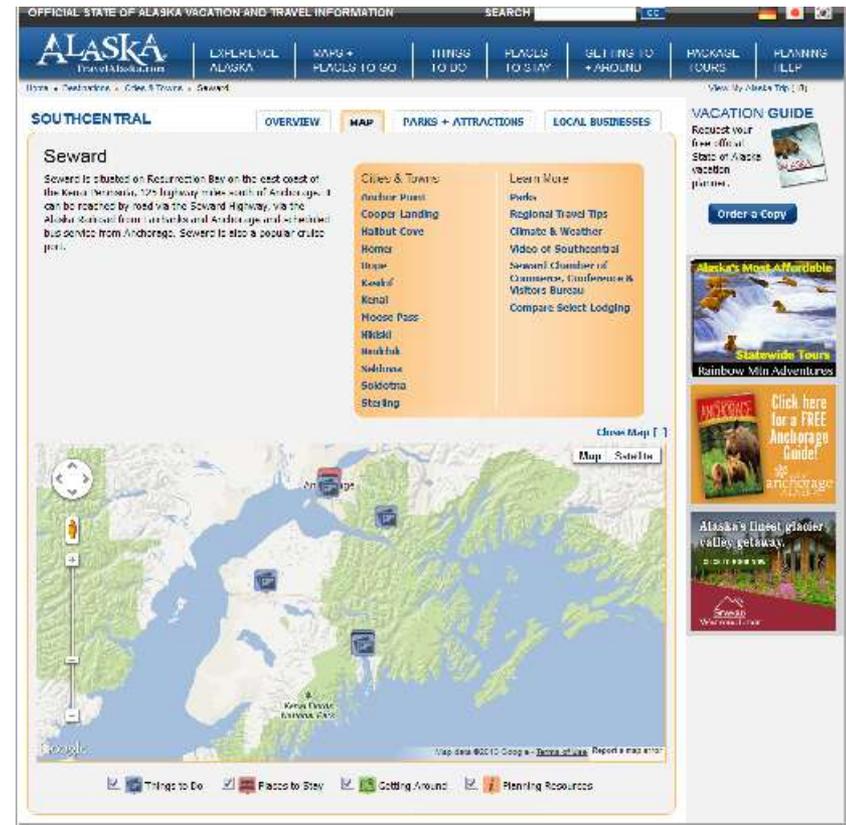


Angoon	Juneau	Prince of Wales Island
Elfin Cove	Kake	Sitka
Glacier Bay / Gustavus	Ketchikan	Skagway
Haines	Metlakatla	Tenakee Springs
Hoonah	Pelican	Wrangell
Hyder	Petersburg	Yakutat

## Individual Cities & Towns Maps

Research participants experience on these pages yielded the following suggestions for improving their usability:

- **Rename “Cities & Towns” to “Nearby Cities & Towns.”**  
The current iteration confused research participants who thought, for example, that the cities & towns listed on the Seward page were all within Seward.
- **The Google Map (e.g the Seward map shown right) doesn’t always display the city name, which is disorienting to users** as they aren’t sure what they are looking at. These maps also sometimes display businesses outside of the city/town, which then can make the view too zoomed out to be usable. Users would prefer the default view to be a close-up of the featured city.



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Home » Destinations » Cities & Towns » Seward

SOUTHCENTRAL

OVERVIEW | MAP | PARKS + ATTRACTIONS | LOCAL BUSINESSES

**Seward**

Seward is situated on Resurrection Bay on the east coast of the Kenai Peninsula. The Highway 129 route south of Anchorage can be reached by road via the Seward Highway, via the Alaska Railroad from Upernivik and Anchorage and seasonal bus service from Anchorage. Seward is also a popular cruise port.

**Cities & Towns**

- Anchorage
- Cooper Landing
- Halibut Cove
- Homer
- Upernivik
- Kenai
- Ketchikan
- Hoonah
- Hoonah
- Kodiak
- Sitka
- Sterling

**Learn More**

- Parks
- Regional Travel Tips
- Climate & Weather
- Video of Southcentral
- Seward Chamber of Commerce, Businesses & Visitor Bureau
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## Parks & Public Lands Overview Map

There was a strong sentiment amongst the Alaska visitors and potential visitors interviewed that Alaska's parks would be the highlight of their trip. Thus, the Parks & Public Lands map was seen as very important in their planning process. The research identified several ways that this map's usability could be improved:

- **While the hover-over with the park name is a nice feature, research participants felt this didn't have much utility without a description of the park.** Most are not familiar enough with the parks and therefore need information as to what makes each one worth traveling to. The format of the Regions Map hover-over window—with a brief description and basic how to get there info—would work well here.
- **A critical piece of information for users is how to travel to these parks, i.e. by plane, road, boat, etc.** Again, this information could be included in the pop-up window that appears when you hover your mouse over a park name. The map should also display roads.



- **The “Hover your mouse...” instruction at the bottom of the map is hard to notice.** Site users are more likely to notice it if it is moved to the top of the map

## Interactive Google Maps—Overview

The Google Maps were seen as a highly valuable planning tool and research participants were excited by their integration into the site. However, the current execution presents some challenges. Following is a summary of the opportunities for improvement:

- **Some of these maps have an ideal zoomed-in view (Fairbanks, Anchorage), while others are far too zoomed out (Juneau, Barrow).** It would improve site users' experience if all the Google Maps have an appropriately zoomed in view . Users prefer the default display to be a detailed view of the city/town.
- **The zoom function is currently not usable, as it doesn't zoom in around something meaningful, i.e. the center of the city or one of the featured businesses pinpointed on the map.** Users lose their place, get confused then frustrated, and end up having to start over. **A “Reset Map” feature or other way to return the Google Map to its original view would be highly appreciated by users.**



- **The Google Maps should display the city names.** Without major markers like this, research participants did not have the point of reference they needed to use the map effectively.

*(continued)*

## Interactive Google Maps—Overview

*(continued)*

- **All businesses featured on the maps should be required to provide an address relevant to their business listing instead of just a corporate address.** The use of corporate addresses is a key contributor to the maps zooming too far out by default.
- **Users would also like a way to click on the name of a business on the Find Businesses pages and then see it on the map,** or some other integration with the listing content and the map. Research participants felt that without this feature it was a guessing game.
- **Using these maps is not an effective way to find certain Alaska travel information that is very important to many visitors, such as glaciers and hiking.**



- Note: It was suggested that other sites that use Google Maps (such as Yelp) should be looked at for best practices.

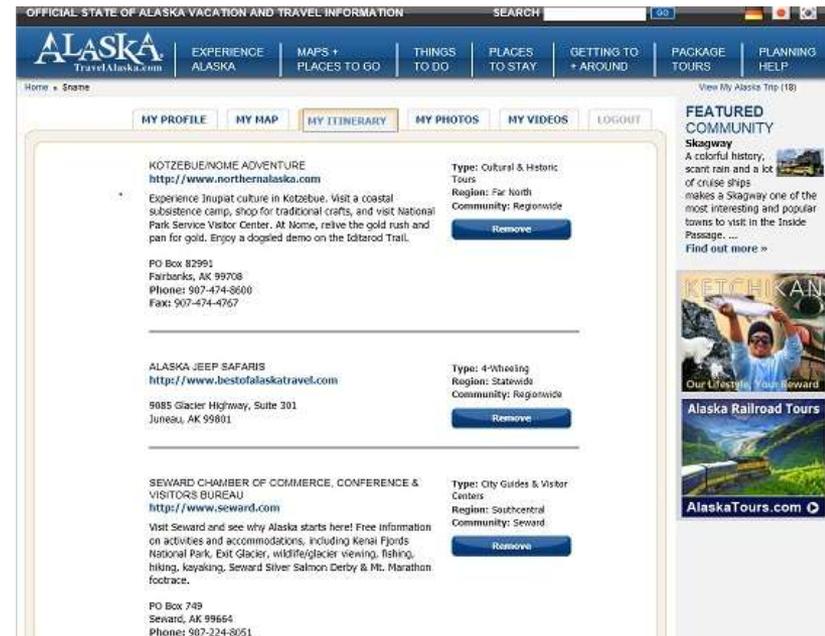
## Interactive Google Maps—Icons

- **Consider redesigning the icons so that they don't so easily cover each other up.** A colored pinpoint system or smaller icons would help
- **Research participants felt they could use the maps more fruitfully to find content they were interested in if there were additional category options.** In particular, “things to do” could have more specific categories (e.g., restaurants, wildlife, sightseeing, etc.)
- **On the Things to Do maps, consider making the default setting display only Things to do** (and similar for the Places to Stay), rather than all categories. The user can display the other icons should they wish (currently nothing happens if you turn them on/off).



## My Alaska Trip—Mapping Features

- **Users prefer the map icons used in the My Map section be the same as those used in the rest of the website.** The use of different icons in My Map (stars) caused some apprehension amongst research participants.
- **The hover-over feature on the map icon should say the business name.** The hover-over currently says “location” rather than the name of the business. Users would like if the name of the business in the hover-over linked to the information about the business.
- **The My Map tab should also include the My Itinerary content so that users don’t have to toggle back and forth between the two sections to effectively use this feature.** Users would also like a way to click on the name of the business from the list and see it on the map.
- **Some participants expressed a desire for more extensive itinerary building options** such as a calendar creating function and point-to-point driving directions .



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 Type: Cultural & Historic Tours  
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View My Alaska Trip (18)

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- **Change the first tab/default view to the My Itinerary tab or My Map tab instead of the My Profile tab,** which participants felt was the least important of the My Alaska Trip options.

## Additional Maps: Overview

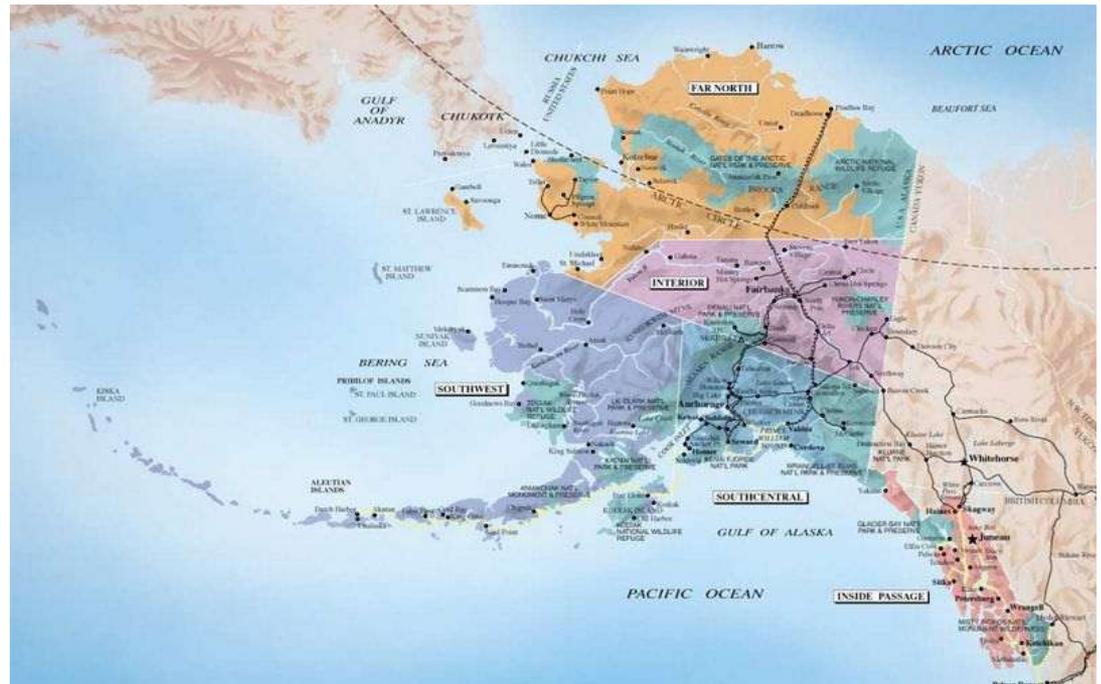
- **The content of the maps included in the Additional Maps section is considered highly valuable to Alaska visitors, however, the design element used to promote these maps and its placement on the page may make them underutilized by website users.** Consider relocating the Additional Maps section higher up on the page, using a more differentiating color, and/or including it as one of the options in the tab navigation.
- **As with all the maps on the site, there is an expectation amongst users that these maps will have interactivity.** Consider adding features or developing Google-maps based maps for each of these types of map content.
- **Users prefer the maps to have a standard style theme.** Standardization eases their ability to quickly comprehend information presented to them and provides a more comfortable user experience. Consider redesigning the maps featured on the site so that they match stylistically (i.e. adopting the look of the Regions and Cities & Towns maps).

### ADDITIONAL MAPS

- Alaska Marine Highway Route
- Scheduled Air Service Map
- Alaska Road Map
- Railroad Map of Alaska/Yukon
- Detailed Alaska Map
- Alaska's Wildlife Habitat Zone

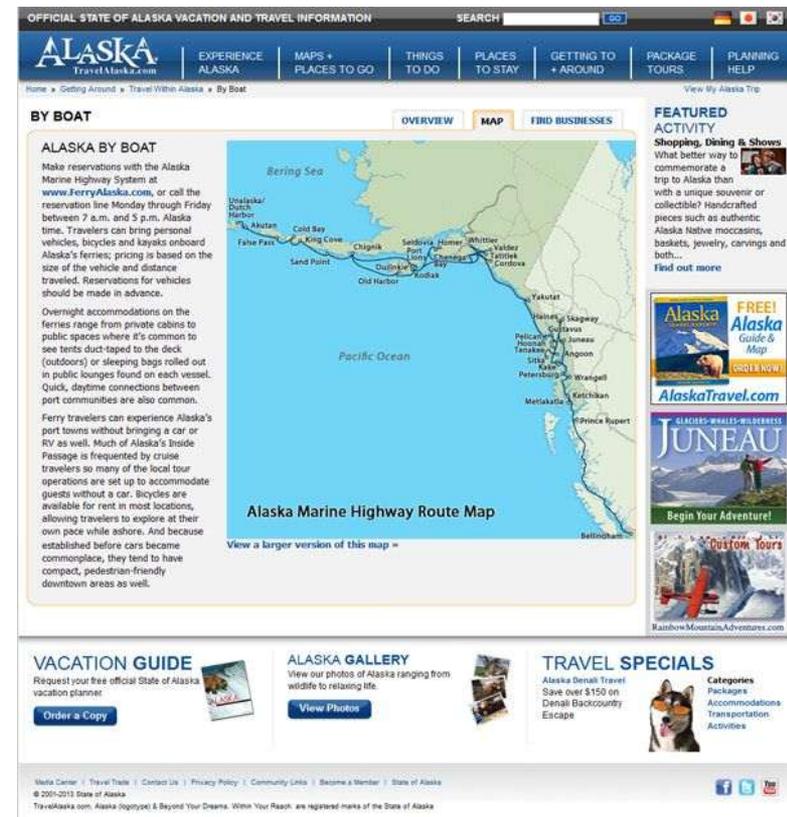
## Detailed Alaska Map

This map has the level of detail users desire, however, its size and lack of interactivity likely results in users seeking out maps from other sources, such as Google. There was a strong level of interest amongst research participants in the detailed Alaska map and they were generally pleased with the information on the map. However, they saw it to be of limited use given the image size and the fact that it is a static image. For the map to better maximize its utility, it needs to have interactivity—i.e. link to content, allow users to zoom, display driving routes, etc.



## Alaska Marine Highway Map

- Even though the Alaska Marine Highway is the official name, given users lack of awareness about the Alaska Marine Highway and their association with highway meaning road, the state may want to consider titling the link to this map on the website “Alaska Ferry Route Map” (or similar). Then once users are on the page it can be explained that the ferry route is referred to as the Alaska Marine Highway.
- Users expect the map to have interactive features—for example, clicking on a port name to get more information about that port and a ferry service schedule.
- Add information important to users such as pricing, ferry schedule/stops schedule
- Research participants found this map easy to understand and learned from it. Several became open to a way of traveling in Alaska they had not considered before.



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BY BOAT

ALASKA BY BOAT

Make reservations with the Alaska Marine Highway System at [www.FerryAlaska.com](http://www.FerryAlaska.com), or call the reservation line Monday through Friday between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. Alaska time. Travelers can bring personal vehicles, bicycles and kayaks onboard Alaska's ferries; pricing is based on the size of the vehicle and distance traveled. Reservations for vehicles should be made in advance.

Overnight accommodations on the ferries range from private cabins to public spaces where it's common to see tents duct-taped to the deck (outdoors) or sleeping bags rolled out in public lounges found on each vessel. Quick, daytime connections between port communities are also common.

Ferry travelers can experience Alaska's port towns without bringing a car or RV as well. Much of Alaska's Inside Passage is frequented by cruise travelers so many of the local tour operations are set up to accommodate guests without a car. Bicycles are available for rent in most locations, allowing travelers to explore at their own pace while ashore. And because established before cars became commonplace, they tend to have compact, pedestrian-friendly downtown areas as well.

Alaska Marine Highway Route Map

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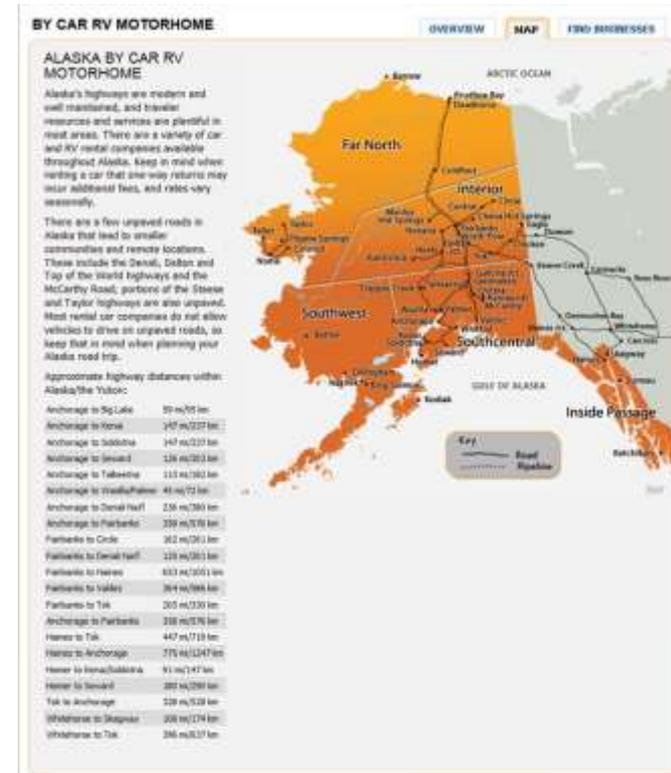
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## Alaska Road Map

The Alaska Road Map was amongst the most popular of the Additional Maps set tested in the study. Based on the feedback from study participants, this is likely to be a map of high value and interest amongst website users, as most are largely unfamiliar with Alaska's roads and have a lot of questions and trepidation (availability of gas, safe roads, accessible roads, etc.). Suggestions to improve the utility of the map include:

- **Adding a Google map-like “Directions” function or linking to Google maps** so that users can input start and end points and see a route, as well as mileage and estimated travel time info.
- **Adding a function in which if users click on a route on the mileage chart, that route is highlighted on the map.**
- **Differentiating the state's major cities with larger font or a larger dot-point on the map.**
- **Including more information on the page:** Users want to know details such as which roads are unpaved and the general availability of gas stations (i.e. if there are areas in which there are long distances between gas stations)



## Alaska Railroad Map

Travel via railroad in Alaska has strong awareness and is an attractive concept to visitors and potential visitors. Research participants were keen to learn more about railroad travel in the state and thus were tremendously interested in the railroad map. While they were happy to see its inclusion in the mapping options, they were disappointed in the current map's lack of travel-planning essentials. The following could improve the user experience with the Railroad map:

- **A more zoomed in view as the default**—Rather than showing the whole state, the view could just focus on the area that the railroad serves.
- **Adding important information such as links to the schedule and frequency.** Users would also appreciate a timing chart that shows the average travel time between cities.

### BY TRAIN



- **Participants did not notice White Pass & Yukon Railroad,** likely due to the white font color used. Consider making this more pronounced.

## Alaska Wildlife Habitat Zone Map

Research participants were excited about the availability of Alaska Wildlife Habitat Zone Map, as they intend wildlife viewing to be a major highlight of their visit to Alaska. However, **this particular map is strongly misaligned with expectations.**

- **Participants expected to see points of interest denoted on the map and information such as the optimal locations for viewing Alaska's famed wildlife, including bears, whales, eagles and wolves.**
- **Participant also found the page to appear overly text-heavy overall and suggested breaking up and reducing the content into a bulleted style.**



Wet and Alpine Tundra

Spruce-Hardwood Forest

Hemlock-Spruce Forest

Find a list of businesses below that match your interest:

Services	Additional Resources
<a href="#">Bear Viewing</a>	<a href="#">Alaska Wildlife Guides</a>
<a href="#">Birding</a>	<a href="#">Map of Alaska's Wildlife Habitat</a>
<a href="#">Wildlife Excursions</a>	<a href="#">Alaska's Wildlife Photo Gallery</a>
<a href="#">Wildlife Packages</a>	<a href="#">View a Video of Alaska's Wildlife</a>
<a href="#">Zoos, Aquariums &amp; Wildlife Parks</a>	

### WILDLIFE HABITATS

#### HEMLOCK-SPRUCE FOREST ZONE



The vegetation in this area is dominated by an evergreen hemlock and spruce rain forest which is home to deer, bears, flying squirrels, bald eagles, owls, woodpeckers, wrens and other songbirds. In marine waters, whales, seals, sea lions, otters, puffins, myrrelets, kittiwakes, and other seabirds and ducks can be seen. The forest is interspersed with marshes at river outlets where millions of salmon begin their migration upstream to spawn. In the wet meadows and bogs look for deer, bears, geese, grouse, swallows, and sapsuckers. At higher elevations, the forest gives way to treeless alpine tundra and glaciers where deer, mountain goats, grouse, brown bears, and ptarmigan can be seen.

#### SPRUCE-HARDWOOD FOREST ZONE



Much of the interior has boreal forest, comprised of spruce and hardwood trees such as birch, aspen and poplar. This forest is the habitat of moose, wolves, bears, porcupines, sparrows, chickadees, thrushes, woodpeckers, hawks, and owls. Interspersed in the forest are lakes and rivers where loons, swans, ducks, beaver, swallows and frogs can be found. Swampy muskags are favorite haunts of moose and insect-eating birds such as swallows, flycatchers, and warblers as well as larger predators like black bears, goshawks and gray owls. In mountain regions where alpine tundra and snow-capped peaks occur, you can find Dall sheep, caribou, marmots, bears, wolves, ptarmigan, and golden eagles.

#### TUNDRA ZONE



This treeless coastal zone is comprised primarily of wet, moist and alpine tundra, a mixture of grasses, sedges, moss, lichens, low shrubs, and other plants. Wet and moist tundra contains standing water, at least part of the year, and caribou, musk ox, brown bear, foxes, shorebirds, swans, loons, jaegers, snowy owls, and waterfowl can be found in certain areas. The drier alpine tundra occurs along slopes and at higher elevations where caribou, wolves, brown bears, ptarmigan, plovers, gyrfalcons, Asian and other songbirds can be seen. Taller shrub thickets occur along river courses where moose, bears, ptarmigan, and a variety of songbirds occur.

## Scheduled Air Service Map

Respondents liked this map and its simple denotation of the air routes made it well-understood. As with all maps, if it was stylistically consistent with the other maps and included more links to additional information, it would be considered even better.



## Summary of Top Recommendations from Users

Consider these recommendations from users for the next iteration of the website's online mapping features:

- Incorporate the suggestions on improving the Google maps: smaller icons, default zoom display, resetting function, etc.
- Add any necessary interactivity to maps featured on the site—only use interactive maps
- Make maps bigger with more detail