

It's time for tourism in the villages

by David G. Hoffman

Department of Community and Regional Affairs

JUNEAU — Tourism, Alaska's third largest industry, is a major contributor to the state's overall economy, yet few rural communities have reaped its benefits.

OPINION

This situation is changing as communities look for new ways to create jobs and income. They are finding that tourism is also sparking renewed interest and respect for Alaska's rich cultural heritage — not only among visitors but among our young.

Last year, tourists left about \$526 million in the state, employing some 20,000 Alaska residents in the process. Projections indicate revenues will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

This may sound impressive, but actually, tourism in Alaska is only in its infant stages. The potential for growth and much greater impact on the economy is tremendous and as yet unrealized.

For example, the average age of visitors coming to Alaska is 50-55. Within the next five years, the cutting edge of the "baby boomers" will be turning 50, therefore our target visitor group is going to grow dramatically in size. If we are prepared to meet their needs and serve their interests, the state can reap major economic benefits.

The major communities in Alaska are currently deriving substantial

benefits from tourism dollars. We need to determine what rural communities need to do to tie in to the industry and whether tourism development is a desirable goal for rural Alaska.

Assessing the opportunities

Any community, particularly a small community, needs to go through several steps before it can effectively connect with the travel industry. First, the community must inventory and evaluate its potential tourism attractions.

Some communities are near natural attractions such as glaciers, hot springs, sport fishing or wildlife observation sites.

Other communities may boast heritage attractions such as totem parks or old mining operations and associated cultural or industrial museums.

Sometimes a community's attraction may be simply natural wonders such as the midnight sun or the splendor of the Northern Lights. The Japanese, who constitute our largest block of foreign travelers, have these two phenomena high on their "must see" list.

After a community has completed its assessment of what it has to offer visitors, it then needs to consider the ability to cost effectively transport and accommodate them. Consideration also must be given to the potential emergency medical needs of visitors and to requirements such as handicapped access for attractions and accommodations.

Finally, if a community has a good, marketable attraction and if it has the ability to transport and accommodate

visitors, then the community as a whole must reach consensus that it wants to pursue tourism.

If the majority of the population is not supportive of the planned venture, its chances for success will be dramatically reduced.

If visitors find that they are treated poorly or indifferently, or that the experience does not measure up to what was advertised, they will complain to their travel agents, and they most certainly will advise their friends and acquaintances against the trip. Such bad publicity is very hard to overcome, even if the problem eventually is corrected.

Is tourism desirable in a rural community?

It is. Tourism is a relatively clean industry. Since it is largely seasonal in Alaska, the experience of having strangers wandering around asking the same questions day after day is limited.

Most rural communities would experience visitors only during the summer months unless they intentionally pursued winter activities.

Tourists are definitely a renewable resource, so if a community develops and manages its venture carefully it will not experience a boom and bust situation.

Native culture revitalized

These factors aside, perhaps the most important reason for rural communities to consider tourism is the positive impact that it can have on the preservation of the culture. Dr. George Kanahale, a visionary Hawaiian Native who has taught entrepreneurship in Alaska, has

developed and promoted a concept he calls "Tourism: the Keeper of the Culture."

A few years ago Native Hawaiians were feeling both left out and exploited by their state's enormous tourism industry. Non-Natives were capitalizing on the music, dance, foods and artifacts of the indigenous people, with no benefit accruing to the Native Hawaiians.

Kanahale was able to assist in turning this situation around by helping the Native people see that tourism provided them with the best rationale for learning about and preserving their ancient culture.



Tourists want to see Natives perform their dance and music, and they want to purchase artifacts made by Natives themselves, not imitations. This has resulted in Native Hawaiian youth developing a renewed interest and pride in their culture.

If they are knowledgeable about their history and skilled in one or more aspects of their arts forms or technologies, they now have marketable skills.

This same lesson can apply to Alaska Native youth. Rural tourism can contribute to a sense of renewed cultural pride and relevance, and thereby contribute to the preservation of the Native culture, one of Alaska's most cherished but fragile possessions.

David G. Hoffman is commissioner of the Department of Community and Regional Affairs.