Lessons from Starting a Small Tourism Business in Western Alaska

Terry Johnson
University of Alaska
Marine Advisory Program

Tourism and Western Alaska

- Travel is the world's #2 industry
- Tourism is Alaska's #2 private employer
  - » Alaska tourism has expanded dramatically
- Western Alaska gets only about 6%

Benefits of Rural Tourism

- Can bring money to individuals, community
- Increases public understanding of local culture, resources
- Provides format for local young people to learn work skills and integrate with outside world

Disadvantages of Rural Tourism

- May create conflict within the community over issues of privacy, resource use, etc.
- Inevitably changes character of the village
- Creates haves and have-nots
- May be unsuccessful, cause loss of money, opportunity

Rural Tourism Options

- **Fishing and**
- **“Cultural” tourism**
- **“Eco-tourism” – wildlife and nature**

Components of a Plan

- A marketable attraction
- Prepare to comply with all legal requirements
- Capital – money to buy equipment, and to operate
- Management and labor
- A marketing plan

Difficulties in Western Alaska

- High cost of access and operation
- Region little known to potential visitors
- Low volume of visitors raises unit costs
- Weather
- Lack of available capital
- Residents not trained or familiar with industry standards and expectations

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Advantages in Western Alaska

- Pristine environment, abundant wildlife
- Intact local cultures
- Not crowded
- Novelty of going where others haven’t
- Safe from terrorism, crime

Lessons Learned with Walrus Islands Expeditions

- Marketing is the hardest part
- Plenty of well-financed competition
- Small capacity limits potential
- High cost of air transportation is a problem
- Sophisticated visitors are well traveled, have high expectations
- Long build up period to profitability

Tourism Business Tips

- Have contingency plans for medical emergencies, weather delays, etc.
- Ensure safe, comfortable, clean conditions
- Ensure operating funds for more than one year
- Know your topic thoroughly—common and scientific names, histories, legends, etc.
- Remember, you are expected to be an entertainer, and to provide personal service

Some Opportunities

- Growing interest in cultural tourism
- Bering Sea is focal point of scientific and environmental interest
- Wildlife viewing and photograhy
- Beringia International Park
- Elderhostel and similar programs