IMPEDIMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHWEST ALASKA

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Abstract: The Bristol Bay region of southwestern Alaska is sparsely inhabited, but richly endowed in resources that could support a major tourism industry. Despite an abundance of natural and cultural attractions and a clear need for economic diversification, the tourism industry is still largely undeveloped.

Several factors account for this unfulfilled opportunity, including high travel costs, lack of visitor facilities, a shortage of capital, willing labor and skilled management, local resistance, problematic weather, and an ignorance of the region on the part of tourism promoters and the traveling public. A dynamic involving local people, tourism service providers, and the tourists themselves is required for successful development of an industry and this dynamic is not yet fully in place in the region.

Bristol Bay presents numerous opportunities for regional tourism development and for local individual enterprise. Governments, associations and communities may play a role in assisting business owners to capitalize on those opportunities. However, it remains to be seen whether the region’s residents will come to the point of endorsing further tourism development, and whether local individuals will find ways to make new tourism businesses work in the region.

Keywords: Bristol Bay, Southwest Alaska, tourism development

Introduction

The Bristol Bay region encompasses some 120,000 square miles of land and water in the southwestern corner of mainland Alaska, north of the Alaska Peninsula and bordering the southeastern Bering Sea. About half of that area consists of the tidal waters of Bristol Bay itself, the remainder being tundra, rolling hills, and mountains, laced by dozens of rivers, hundreds of creeks, and thousands of lakes and ponds. The total population is about 7,000 which means that people there are outnumbered by bears.

The regional economy has long depended primarily on the commercial salmon fisheries, but changing environmental and economic conditions have drastically reduced the value of the commercial fisheries, and the region has earned several state and federal economic disaster declarations in recent years.

About two-thirds of the region’s people are classified Alaska Native and belong to any of three regional cultural groups: Yup’ik Eskimo, Aleutiiq Eskimo (some consider themselves Aleut), and Denaina Indian. They are distributed among some 32 towns and villages, the largest of which is Dillingham with a year-around population of about 2,200 persons. No roads connect the region to any other part of Alaska, and within the region only a few communities are connected to one another by road. Shallow water, severe weather, and seasonal ice covering preclude passenger vessel access. Virtually all travel into and within the region is by airplane.

The region is rich in potential visitor attractions. Wildlife abounds, including moose, caribou, black and brown bears, wolves, porcupine, otter and beaver, walrus, seals and sea lions and several species of whales, plus many species of seabirds, shorebirds, raptors and migratory water fowl. Thousands of miles of clear rivers and streams
support healthy wild populations of trout, char, salmon, grayling and pike, and serve as corridors for rafters, kayakers and motor-boaters. Snow-capped mountains, some with glaciers and volcanic peaks, give way to scenic timbered hills and tundra lowlands suitable for hiking and camping, as well as for big game hunting and wildlife photography.

In most Native villages people continue to conduct traditional subsistence activities. Local languages are spoken, dances performed, and arts and crafts such as walrus ivory carving, skin sewing and grass basket weaving, are practiced. Although village architecture is dominated by the ubiquitous and homely “HUD house”, visitors may still see the log cabin, the smoke house, the meat rack, dog sled, the seal or bear hide tacked to the shed wall, and even the skin-on-frame kayak.

A few dozen high-end sport fishing lodges and hunting guides account for the bulk of the tourism trade in the region. Most sportsmen fly into hub town airports (many in their own or their corporations’ Lear jets), transfer to bush planes, and fly out to the remote lodges. Most lodges and hunting operations are owned by non-residents of the region, and most fishing guides are hired from other parts of the country. It is possible for a visitor to spend a week and several thousands of dollars in the area without ever meeting a local person.

**Impediments to Tourism Development**

Several impediments retard development of a broad and locally based tourism industry. These include the high cost of access to and travel within the region, climate and weather, cultural resistance, lack of capital, lack of expertise and management skills, lack of visitor facilities and amenities, and ignorance of the region by the public and the tourism industry.

As noted above, virtually all travel to and within the region is by air, and because of low volume and high operating costs, fares are disproportionately high. For example, round-trip commercial airfares for the 300-mile flight from Anchorage to Dillingham currently range between $329 and $489 during the summer season. Local commuter fares (to villages with airstrips) average $2 to $2.50 per mile, and seat fares (when available) on bush planes (landing on beaches or on floats) are $3 per mile or more. In most cases bush flights require charter of the whole plane (with three to six passenger seats) at a cost of $350 to $500 per hour, and the rate is applied to the air time for the plane making the return flight from the drop-off point as well as the time passengers are on board. Since many of the region’s recreational attractions are located 50 to 200 miles from hub locations, air travel cost can be a significant deterrent to potential visitors.

High insurance, fuel and maintenance costs, along with a long slow travel period in the off-season, keep air travel costs up. Although start-up companies are constantly entering the market, attrition is high. In the last ten years alone, three of the five major regional air carriers serving the Anchorage-Bristol Bay market have gone out of business, as have numerous commuter and bush flying services. No indicators currently point to a lowering of air travel costs in the foreseeable future.

The Bristol Bay region is only a few hundred miles east of the home of the Aleutian Low, the atmospheric phenomenon that spawns storms for the entire Bering Sea. Summer temperatures normally are in the mid-40s to low 60s (°F), with frequent overcast skies and rain through the summer. In some years isolated snowdrifts remain into June, and by early August autumn colors begin to appear. Fog is common, especially where warmer air overlies cold river waters. Frequent squalls of 20-30 knots, and occasionally up to 50 knots, buffet the region during the summer. Waterborne activities, including kayaking, sport fishing and marine
wildlife viewing, are frequently curtailed or interrupted by weather. Uncertainties about weather delays of flights make a trip to Bristol Bay less appealing to some potential visitors.

Residents of the widely dispersed Native villages within the region are divided in their attitudes about tourism and tourists. An illustration of the dilemma is the classic confrontation over catch-and-release fishing. While anglers and fishery managers favor non-retention, particularly of rainbow trout and other sport species, traditional Native people are highly offended by the practice, which they disparagingly refer to as “playing with your food.”

Other serious conflicts arise, such as spatial competition for quality fishing sites between anglers and subsistence fishermen, and offense taken by local people who are studied and photographed in their villages. Some Native people believe that tourists bring bad habits to village youth and encourage an unhealthy interest in money and material goods. Most villages are split on the issue, with some members actively opposing while others are planning to engage in or currently enjoying financial rewards of tourism businesses. Where tourism has succeeded it has created a class of haves in a cash-poor community of have-nots.

Most of the residents of the region live on small earned cash incomes, and rely to a large extent on subsistence activities and on services and transfer payments from government. Savings are low to non-existent, and many people don’t have checking accounts, or a credit history. Access to capital for business start-up is sorely lacking. Although various funds exist to assist with small business development, some exclusively for Native people, few local people meet minimum standards for cash equity and creditworthiness.

Also lacking is business expertise and managerial skill. Few area residents have experience with any kind of business other than commercial fishing, and in that industry the processors do much of the maintenance, procurement, and accounting for most of the local fishermen. Other area businesses, such as general stores, air taxis and construction, tend to be managed by outsiders, and relatively few local people are hired even as technicians and laborers. College courses offered through rural campuses and by distance delivery emphasize office skills and village government administration, but not business management.

Many but not all villages in the region have one or more bed and breakfast-type lodging facilities, but otherwise tourist infrastructure is scarce. Dillingham, Naknek and King Salmon each have a few hotels and restaurants; otherwise the exclusive fishing and hunting lodges are about the only other source of tourist facilities. Opportunities for shopping and dining, which consistently rank at the top of the list of activities enjoyed by Alaska tourists, are sparse and considered low in quality by visitors to the region. Although most of the land area of the region is encompassed by various reserves, including Katmai and Lake Clark National Parks, Wood-Tikchik State Park, Aniakchak National Monument, and the Togiak, Alaska Peninsula and Becharof National Wildlife Refuges, nearly all of these areas are de facto wildernesses. In fact, with the single exception of the Brooks Camp location in Katmai, none of those millions of acres of public lands is even graced by an on-site administrative center. Again, with the exception of Brooks, not one has roads, campgrounds, concessions or other visitor facilities. Even a high-profile visitor destination like Round Island in the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary has only six plywood tent platforms and a single outhouse as its complement of visitor amenities.

Possibly the single biggest impediment to tourism industry expansion in Southwest Alaska is a general lack of knowledge of the region on the part of tourism professionals and the traveling public. The perception of Bristol Bay is that it is a “terra incognita – a distant, difficult-to-reach land.” Only
about eight per cent of Alaska’s tourists visit the Southwest, which encompasses about 20 per cent of the state. Cruise ships do not visit the region, no roads bring automotive visitors, and package tours generally omit it. Few Anchorage-based or outside tour packagers and wholesalers have ever visited Bristol Bay. When inquiring about opportunities there, some potential visitors ask if they can fly directly from Juneau, whether they can drive to their destinations, or they ask if they can see glaciers, musk ox, polar bears or even penguins.

Among those who know of Bristol Bay at all the association is with superlative trout and salmon fishing, and with caribou and bear hunting. A much smaller group, mainly Alaska residents at that, associates the region with bear viewing at Katmai, walrus at Round Island, and kayaking/rafting in Wood Tikchik and on various other rivers.

**Tourism Development Opportunities**

Because sportfishing is considered by some to be nearing capacity, and hunting is locally controversial (see below), this inquiry addresses three somewhat interrelated directions that tourism development could take: nature/wildlife-based ecotourism, cultural tourism, and possibly adventure travel.

- Ecotourism, based on the region’s abundant birds, mammals, wilderness scenery, lakes and rivers, probably represents the greatest growth potential. Bird watching and large mammal viewing may serve as the biggest draw. Key attractions for wildlife enthusiasts: the 200,000-plus Mulchatna caribou herd, the walruses at Round Island, the 8,000 brown bears on the east side, belukha (white) whales in the Nushagak and Kvichak, and several million red salmon escaping past commercial fishing fleets and into crystalline lakes and rivers. Sparse and widely scattered human populations leave plenty of room for undisturbed wildlife, and the large amount of land in federal reserves protects habitat while assuring access to visitors.

- Cultural tourism could be based largely on the still relatively intact Eskimo and Indian cultures of the region. Village tours, music and dance performances, native foods feasts, arts and crafts creation and sales, demonstrations of subsistence activities, storytelling, and home stays are all potential cultural tourism attractions. In addition to Native cultures, tourism based on “economic cultures” such as commercial fishing, fish processing, prospecting and mining and similar activities could provide a northern version of the “agricultural tourism” that is popular elsewhere in the country. Museums, cultural and visitor centers, and community festivals can enhance both Native and non-Native cultural appeal.

- Adventure travel can encompass everything from whitewater rafting and mountaineering to windsurfing, hang gliding, jet boating, snow machining, dogsled travel and winter camping.

Each of these options has been developed at least to some extent. A few small village-based operations exist that combine cultural tourism with wildlife and nature viewing, and some of the sport fishing and hunting lodges also have cultural and ecotour components to their program. The bear viewing site at Brooks Falls is probably the best known ecotourism destination in the region (along with McNeil River on the “back side” of Katmai if you count the west shore of Cook Inlet as part of Bristol Bay). The village of Togiak has a cultural center that serves as a workshop for village crafts producers, and hosts visitors. A few individuals have experimented with commercial fishery based visitor programs, hosting tourists at their setnet sites. One individual
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outside of Kotzebue (800 miles north of Bristol Bay) has made a business out of hosting groups of visitors at her setnet site through the Elderhostel program, serving as an example of the potential.

Adventure travel is probably least developed of the three. A considerable amount of rafting is done on some rivers, but mostly in conjunction with sport fishing as those rivers have little whitewater. Various individuals have considered going into snow machine or dogsled tours but have been stymied in part by inconsistent winter weather that presents 40-below temperatures one week and warm winds the next that turn the snow to slush and make the rivers dangerous to cross.

Interest in nature/wildlife and cultural tourism is growing, and an affluent class of professionals and retirees with financial resources and free time points to the potential for a bright future. Nationally, ecotourism growth in the 1990s grew at a rate estimated at 30 per cent annually, and although no Alaska data are available, it appears that the trend is replicated in the state. Crowding and overuse of quality recreation areas in other parts of the country, awareness of wildlife and natural systems instilled by cable television nature programming, and an increasing reverence for Native cultures are all contributing to increased interest in the amenities Bristol Bay offers.

In particular, the effort on the federal and international levels to create a Bering Land Bridge international park, and attention directed on the Bering Sea by international conservation organizations, are focusing national consciousness on western Alaska. Although the perception is that the Land Bridge encompassed only a narrow strip of what is now the Bering Strait, the fact is that it was a very broad expanse of the current Bering Sea floor, extending south to the heart of Bristol Bay. As more progress is made on park development, and as more information reaches the public on the results of scientific work in the region, greater public interest is sure to be expressed in the form of increased tourism.

Discussion

Elsewhere tourism theorists, academics and planners may argue over whether tourism is good or bad for local people and communities, and how to develop and regulate it and mitigate its effects. In Bristol Bay it is still an open question whether an expanded tourism industry is even possible. In all of Alaska west of Cook Inlet (with the possible exception of Kodiak) tourism is viewed theoretically as a panacea for regional economic woes (or as a threat to traditional lifestyles and values), without significant first-hand experience. Mass tourism is unknown in the region, and even the more exclusive low-volume, high value tourism is limited to select locations and is largely out of the view of, and little understood by, most residents.

An often expressed sentiment within the region goes something like this: “If fish prices don’t come back up, we might have to turn to tourism,” as if it is a less-desirable industry that at least has the advantage of being an easy and reliable source of income.

Several components have to come together for tourism to work:
- A marketable attraction.
- Capital for goods and for operation costs over a period of several start-up years.
- Provisions for acquiring pertinent permits and complying with laws and regulations.
- Willing and capable workforce.
- Managerial expertise.
- A viable marketing plan.

As indicated above, some of these elements are missing or in short supply in Bristol Bay.

As outlined by Miller and Auyong, the tourism industry is comprised of three components—locals, tourists, and brokers—and development of the industry in the Bristol
Bay region depends on a suitable dynamic involving all three components. This does not mean that they all have to be in agreement and work in concert, but rather that a balance is required whereby the goals of each can be reasonably accommodated without unduly harming the others.

Tourism is controversial in Bristol Bay, and it remains to be seen whether local people are going to get behind it, at least at the village level to allow it to develop on the broadest terms. In a 1996 survey of area village councils conducted on behalf of the Bristol Bay Native Corporation, 12 of 14 responding councils registered support for tourism development. However, most opposed cultural tourism, most perceived tourism as causing conflicts with traditional activities, most viewed sport hunting as denying access to subsistence foods, and most viewed sport fishing as creating conflicts with subsistence fishing and the health of the fishery resources. A similar survey conducted five years later indicated a diminished support for tourism in general, despite increasing need for economic development due to poor financial returns to the fishing industry.

To be sure, acceptance by locals is not essential for further tourism development. Just as most tourism businesses currently are owned and run by non-locals, there is nothing to prevent further development by outsiders. Brokers, public sector and private, may continue to promote and exploit opportunities where they exist, whether local people choose to participate or not, and for that matter, whether they like it or not. The question is not whether locals will stop industry expansion, but whether they will facilitate and benefit directly from it.

The bigger question is whether those brokers, particularly entrepreneurs directed at providing tourism services, can put together the necessary components in order to develop new or expanded tourism businesses. Marketable attractions exist and compliance with laws and regulation is not a difficult hurdle to cross, so those brokers need capital, workers, managerial expertise, and a workable plan for marketing those attractions to potential tourists.

Notes:

1. Mark Air, Yute Air and Reeve Aleutian Airways were regional carriers that provided service between Dillingham, other Bristol Bay locations and Anchorage with jet or turboprop aircraft during the 1990s. All three have gone out of business.

2. According to course catalogues of the Bristol Bay Campus (University of Alaska Fairbanks) and the statewide distance delivery catalog of the College of Rural Alaska, also UAF.


5. These are all questions posed to the author by prospective visitors. One lady announced that she intended to “do” Alaska in a week and planned to see “the beautiful glaciers, the polar bears and penguins.” Penguins, of course, do not occur in the Northern Hemisphere.

6. For example, the Maranatha Lodge in Koli- ganek, owned by Roger Skogen, who retired after 20 years as a schoolteacher there and his wife, Vera, a Yup’ik woman who grew up in that village.

7. For example, Chrystal Creek Lodge, located about 20 miles from Dillingham, specializes in sport fishing but also takes guests to see walruses and to visit the cultural center in the village of Togiak.


9. LaVonne Hendricks, Arctic Circle Educational Adventures, located at Kotzebue.

10. The World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy are two prominent national organizations currently with Bering Sea and Beringia initiatives.

11. Some specific examples of brokers in this story are the people referenced in notes 6–8, which can be further separated into private, part-time brokers and brokers also in government, illustrating the range and interconnectedness of dynamics. Locals include those in other trades such as
commercial fishermen, and all residents uninterested, against or unaware of tourism, including elements of the native population mentioned.


References


