Lessons from Starting a Small Tourism Business in Western Alaska

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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
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 photography
• Beringia International Park
• Elderhostel and similar programs