

# Tourism in Rural Alaska

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**Abstract**—Tourism in rural Alaska is an education curriculum with worldwide relevance. Students have started small businesses, obtained employment in the tourism industry and gotten in touch with their people.

The Developing Alaska Rural Tourism collaborative project has resulted in student scholarships, workshops on website development, marketing, small business development, and customer service. Project results include community profile updates and, regionally, a business inventory, market research, website, branding and a marketing plan. All topics relate to the Copper River Basin's current economy, culture and heritage. Students learn about local natural and cultural resources, and are empowered to use and/or conserve them.

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## Developing a Curriculum

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*Tourism in Rural Alaska* is a comprehensive community education curriculum. It serves as a course curriculum, as a resource book and it is the name of an introductory tourism course. It covers many topics from geology to business development to customer service. In this paper, I will explain how Prince William Sound Community College, Copper Basin Campus (PWSCC-CBC), has used this curriculum. I will also describe some of the dynamics of tourism in rural Alaska and how this curriculum and course address various tourism issues in the Copper River Basin.

The Copper River Basin in Alaska is immense (fig. 1). It covers 23,000 square miles (59,570 km<sup>2</sup>). Population is scarce at approximately 3,200 residents according to the latest census. Twenty percent of those residents are Alaska Native. There are 34 communities located in the Copper River Basin, and all but two lie below the federal poverty level. The region is also home to the largest national park unit in the United States, the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve (WRST). WRST was created by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980. Containing 13.2 million acres (5,341,850 ha), it is over six times the size of Yellowstone National Park. Within WRST boundaries lies the largest federally designated wilderness unit in the system at 9.7 million acres (3,925,451 ha). There are several communities that lie within the boundaries of WRST.

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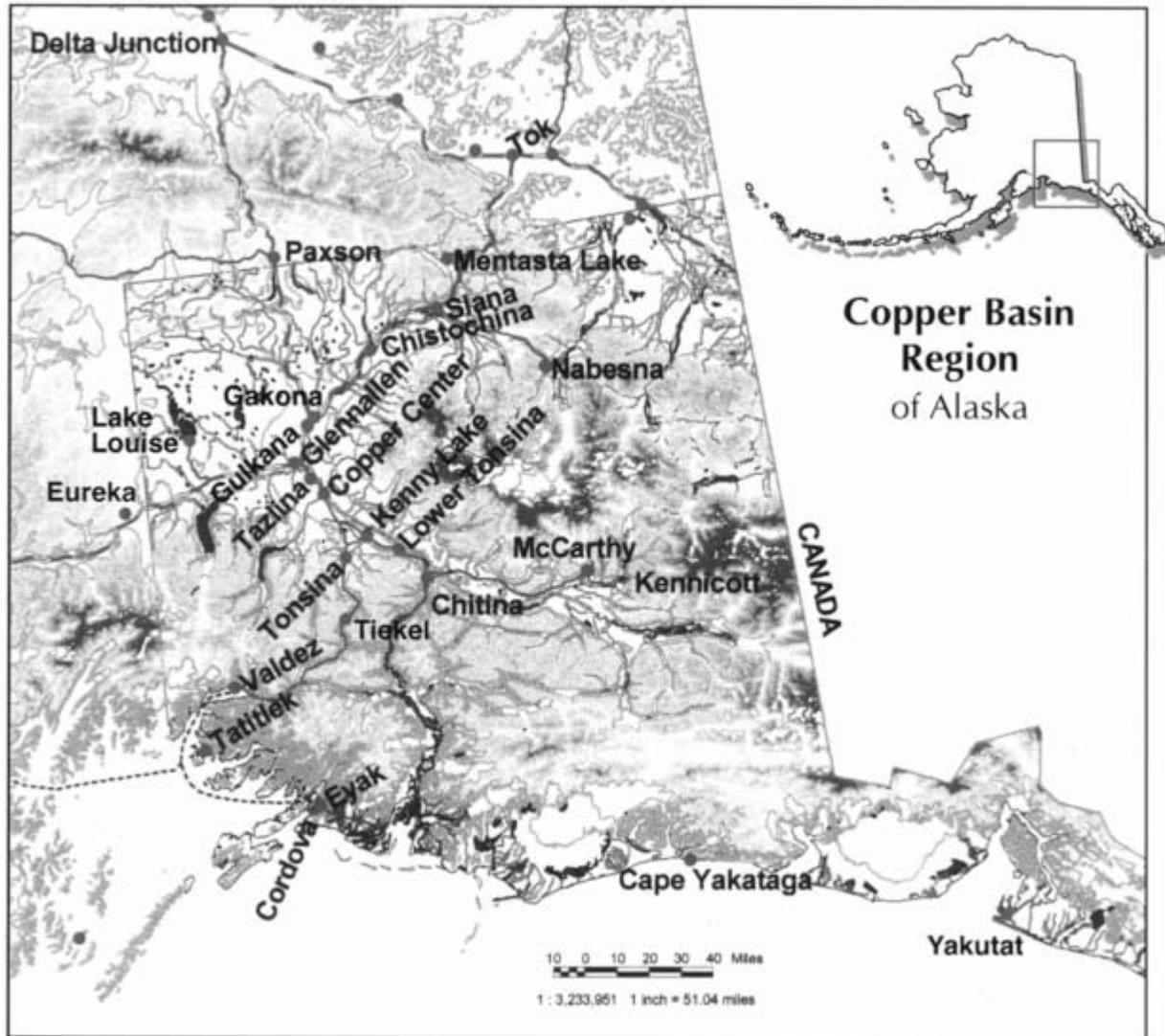
The local indigenous people are Ahtna Athabaskan Indians. They are traditional hunters and gatherers. Evidence has been found to indicate at least 8,000 years of hunting and gathering in the region. Subsistence is a way of life practiced yet today, although there is a cash economy. There has been a very short time of western contact in the Copper River Basin. The 1898 gold rush miners had the first real western settlement impact on the region. What is essential to understand is that the Ahtna people are integrally tied to the land, and the land to them, as are all rural Alaska Natives.

Travel and tourism are the third largest private sector employers in Alaska, and fourth overall. The induced effect of tourism makes its economic contribution \$1.85 billion a year (Sacks 2004). Public lands, both national and state, are abundant and serve as tourism destinations. Most of the public lands are in rural areas, although some are in more urban areas. Currently, 64 percent of Alaska is owned or managed by federal agencies. The State of Alaska owns 24.9 percent, the Alaska Native groups own 10.3 percent and other private land ownership is less than 1 percent (Bureau of Land Management 2004). These percentages will change when all of the land is patented to the owners. Congressional legislation allotted both the State of Alaska and Native entities certain acreages in the state. These lands have been selected, along with additional lands that create a buffer in case some selections are not granted, but not all of the land has been patented. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is charged with completing conveyance of patents by 2009.

Tourism is very big business in Alaska. Tourism's economic contribution was 37,650 full-time jobs in 2002, or 13.1 percent of the total employment in Alaska (Sacks 2004). The economic contribution of tourism in Alaska was \$1.5 billion in 2002, up 28 percent from 1998 (Sacks 2004). Tourism-related spending by and on behalf of visitors in Alaska was \$2.4 billion in 2002 (Sacks 2004).

The Alaska Native culture and rural tourism markets account for nearly half of all current visitors. This market is economically important because the visitors contribute more dollars in state per person per trip than other visitors do (Christensen and others 2003). Interest, not demographics or the type of traveler, distinguishes the visitor market (Christensen and others 2003). The market is centered on two combined interests: nature/wildlife and Native culture (Christensen and others 2003). This is very important because Alaska's rural communities have all of these assets in varying degrees.

Considering the impact of and opportunities for tourism in the Copper River Basin, the CEO of the local Native Corporation, Ahtna, Incorporated, approached PWSCC-CBC to teach local Natives about the tourism industry. They also wanted local Natives afforded the opportunity to learn how to start small businesses. The corporation was not interested



**Figure 1**—Map of Copper Basin Region of Alaska. The map is laid out on a North/South grid, with the top of the figure north, bottom south.

in tourism enterprises at the time, but wished to teach the local Native population of possible opportunities. Exposure to such opportunities can include field trips, as seen in figure 2. Local Natives are historically under-represented in the tourism industry.

The first edition of *Tourism in Rural Alaska* was produced as a partnership between PWSCC-CBC, Ahtna, Inc., and the National Park Foundation. The fully revised and expanded second edition was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The curriculum is a comprehensive tourism resource. The curriculum outlines how to teach a *Tourism in Rural Alaska* course tailored to meet the needs of the host community or agency. It explains how to start a small business or enhance an existing one. Identifying community resources that tourism businesses may use is detailed. Listed also are local to international resource contacts for businesses and employees.

The *Tourism in Rural Alaska* course is an introductory tourism course. The information and format of the book are readily adaptable to various regions statewide and internationally. It is written so that anyone can offer the course, even with no background in teaching or tourism. The writing style is basic and explicit. The target audience often has a high dropout rate from school. Accordingly, the curriculum strives to accommodate all types of learning styles using maps, videos, incorporating field trips and more. The full course runs as three college credits.

We frequently offer topic specific workshops that are generally half a credit or one credit. As place-based students, many with children, students often find it difficult to attend full semester courses. Subsistence hunting and fishing can also affect course participation. Another reason for short workshops is that students often have to travel great distances, sometimes 70 miles (113 km) or more one way, to attend courses on campus. Recent video conferencing technology is



**Figure 2**—Tourism in Rural Alaska Native Guide Training students in Kennicott, Alaska, standing on tailings of Kennecott Copper Mine, with the Kennecott Glacier moraine and the Chugach Mountains behind them (photo by Katrina Church-Chmielowski).

changing that somewhat, but not all communities have the technology. PWSCC-CBC closes at  $-50$  degrees Fahrenheit ( $-46$  Celsius), but classes still run at  $-49$  degrees Fahrenheit ( $-45$  Celsius). Traveling at such cold temperatures can be dangerous even for short distances.

The curriculum is an important resource. Preparing students to answer all visitor questions is not feasible. One solution is to use the curriculum as a resource so that the student knows where to go to find the information needed. The Tourism Business Contacts, Good Reading and Course Examples and Materials chapters are used to augment the text. Each topic addressed has resources listed. There is no one source of tourism information in the state; the curriculum is the most comprehensive listing available. The flexibility of the curriculum also makes it a great resource. Subjects can be added, deleted or expanded upon, and tailored to meet anyone's needs.

## Evaluation and Feedback

Tourism in Rural Alaska courses have had many different and positive region-wide impacts. Some students of the course have started their own businesses, while others have obtained positions in the tourism industry. There are students who now have business plans ready to start new businesses. Several students already had their own businesses, which the course enhanced. A few examples of this include some students updating their business websites, some completely revamping their brochures and some developing marketing strategies for their businesses. A major success was when one student became excited about tourism again and decided to stay in business after taking the course. Students are using knowledge gained from the course to directly affect Copper River Basin tourism daily (fig. 3).

Student feedback is important for this type of course. It sets the tone for the course, but also contributes to following

courses. There were some very positive statements from students, such as, "This class has renewed my interest and enthusiasm for tourism." "I found the material and information very accurate and learnable." Several comments ran along the lines of, "The class and material presented was far more complete than what I had expected. I will be digesting it for a very long time to come." "The availability and opportunity for everyone to accomplish their [tourism] goals is a cornerstone of this course." "Great class, would do it over again." "It gave very much needed new knowledge on a changing market in a changing world."

One of the recent Tourism in Rural Alaska students approached PWSCC-CBC to help create a Native Guide (Interpretation) Training course using the curriculum and course as its basis. Collaborating with several local villages and Native entities, a committee formed and was able to support a Tourism in Rural Alaska course focusing on Native Guide Training. The basic goal of the course was to teach Native students principles of interpretation. There are currently no local Natives working as interpreters in the Copper River Basin. By learning these skills, students of the course would have a better chance of obtaining employment in the tourism industry. It would also give students a way to identify and use their many talents. For villages interested in tourism enterprises, they want to hire students who have completed the course. By interpreting local topics, it can bring the students back to their ancestral land. "Paying Natives to be Native" is another goal. Each Native has compelling stories, and visitors are thirsting for such stories. There is no one better qualified to tell them. It offers Native guides a great opportunity to share part of their lives and stories with others (fig. 4).

The pilot class was an intensive three-credit course. It was 10 days long, with an overnight field trip to Chitina, McCarthy and Kennicott to cap the course. There were several day trips to local businesses and to meet with an Alaska Travel Industry Association familiarization tour. We



**Figure 3**—Tourism in Rural Alaska students listening to speaker (photo by Dawn Caynor).



**Figure 4**—Tourism in Rural Alaska Native Guide Training student interpreting to class at Ahtna Historical Village site in front of traditional sezel (sweat lodge) (photo by Katrina Church-Chmielowski).

also visited a local walking trail, the Chamber of Commerce Visitor's Center, the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve Visitor's Center, the local museum and the Ahtna Historical Village site. These were important visits, as few students had ever been to the sites. Several students had no idea that the sites existed, although some are no more than two miles from their homes.

Again, there were many positive outcomes from the course. In just ten days of class, the students were offered more than four employment opportunities. This depicts how important this type of course is, and how excited employers are to find qualified local people. Some feedback from the

class includes, "This class has helped me to realize the things that I know that would be of interest to other people." "The class benefited me by teaching me about my cultural background and Native history." This portrays an indirect outcome of the course. Being non-Native, as an instructor I did not feel comfortable, nor did the committee, with me teaching Native history and culture. I did not teach it, and recommended that the students talk to the elders to learn the cultural background and Native history. The students, however, gleaned the information from the assignments and other topics, all of which are tied to Native history and culture. You cannot teach any subject about Alaska without including the human connection.

Other comments ranged from, "There are a lot of things that I wouldn't have even bothered to glance at, basically," to "there were a lot of things I didn't know about in our own area." "I just feel like I've barely scratched the surface about all there is to learn about." Probably most dramatic is, "It got me in touch with my people."

## The Future

Students of the courses and businesses face several challenges when considering tourism in the Copper River Basin. One major challenge is that there is no single name for the region. There are several that it is known as, such as the Copper Valley, the Copper River Valley, the Copper Basin, the Copper River Basin and East Alaska. There is a serious lack of infrastructure in the region. It is also an immense area with many diverse interests and needs, that sometimes conflict. There is also a part of the population that does not embrace tourism.

Assets and opportunities do exist, however. One of those is the very fact that we are an immense area with many diverse interests and needs. Because of this, there are opportunities in some communities that may not be in others. The Copper River Basin has incredible natural and cultural resources. Other businesses and entities, such as the Alaska Travel Industry Association and the National Park Service, are marketing the region. This promotion can help raise awareness of the region's assets. There are innumerable opportunities for locals to become involved in tourism. Entrepreneurs can explore fulfilling the tourism needs that are not currently being met.

One of the ways that PWSCC-CBC is addressing tourism challenges is through education and the Tourism in Rural Alaska course. Another important collaboration that PWSCC-CBC is involved with is the Developing Alaska Rural Tourism (DART) project. This is a joint project between the State of Alaska Office of Tourism, Prince William Sound Community College, Copper Basin Campus, Copper Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Copper Valley Development Association. The duration is 18 months, ending in June 2006. The goal of the project is to help local businesses and entrepreneurs interested in the tourism industry address some of the challenges that they face and take advantage of assets and opportunities.

The project began in January 2005 with the funding of ten scholarships for students to take the Tourism in Rural Alaska course. This led to some very exciting results, as detailed previously. Those results are helping fund ten more Tourism in Rural Alaska scholarships for a class starting in January 2006. The project also supported the recent Native Guide Training class. Other courses in the works include a website development class, which will produce ten free websites designed for new local tourism businesses. Several targeted workshops are planned, including more marketing strategies, risk management, interpretation and more

small business development. Customer service training was completed, and more is planned. These are all topics that students and local business owners have asked for courses on. PWSCC-CBC strives to accommodate as many requests for instruction that we possibly can.

Students updated community profiles from the State of Alaska, and the next group of students will complete more. These are very important because the profiles are on the State of Alaska website, but are often incorrect or are lacking information altogether. Updated community profiles should help visitors discover a true listing of resources in the Copper River Basin.

Regionally, a business inventory was developed, which was not available before. The directory will help promote the businesses and identify opportunities for new businesses. A regional website is planned to help promote the region. Regional market research was conducted on the statewide level, and the project partners produced a local visitor's survey to complement the research. Market research has never been done specifically on the region. It should produce much needed information. A regional branding workshop was held to help distinguish factors that could be used to identify the region. More branding workshops are planned to further the process.

Overall, the outcomes of the Tourism in Rural Alaska courses and curriculum are far reaching. All of the topics addressed in the curriculum relate to the Copper River Basin's current economy, culture and heritage. By using the curriculum, we educate people about local natural and cultural resources, and empower them to use and/or conserve them. We help local businesses and entrepreneurs in the tourism industry address some of the challenges they face and take advantage of assets and opportunities.

The curriculum and course apply worldwide and are successful due to their flexibility and commonalities with other regions. They are being used from Australia to Delaware by universities, businesses, NGOs, government and tribal entities, as well as individuals. Students have used the curriculum and course to start small businesses, obtain employment in the tourism industry and get in touch with their people. Very different goals were achieved using *Tourism in Rural Alaska* as a basis. Many more are sure to be achieved.

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