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Alaska Natives gain foothold in tourism

By RACHEL D'ORO / Associated Press
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ANCHORAGE, Alaska - Alaska Natives have established a solid foundation in the state's tourism industry, captivating visitors with their dances and songs, their art and a history as varied as the tribes themselves.

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Much of the cultural boom is found at cruise ship ports, Alaska's large cities and points along the state's minimal road system. But travel experts say independent travelers are increasingly venturing to isolated villages to experience life with descendants of the continent's first inhabitants on their ancient grounds, a trend that could be confirmed by a summer visitor survey planned by the Alaska Travel Industry Association.

Whatever the venue, Alaska Natives represent an "authentic experience" for many travelers, said association president Ron Peck.

"Yes, they come to see the beauty that is Alaska," he said. "But the truth of the matter is, as they come here, they want to be more experiential. They want to learn about these cultures."

One cruise ship destination has even boosted the economy of an entire southeast Alaska village, thanks to a long-closed salmon cannery that was converted to a tourism complex near Hoonah. The privately owned Icy Strait Point features Tlingit heritage performances, restaurants and nearby attractions including nature tram rides, fishing excursions, whale-watching tours and a mile-long zipline with a 1,300-foot vertical drop.

Hoonah, a Tlingit community of 765 people, struggled during the years following the cannery closure in the 1950s, then seeing the gradual decline of the fishing and logging industries. Then Huna Totem Corp., the village Native corporation, transformed the 1912 buildings of the cannery - 1 1/2 miles from the village - into the cruise ship port.

Since opening in 2004, Icy Strait has brought in hundreds of thousands of visitors, including 123,000 people last year, according to corporation figures. The attraction has created more than 130 seasonal and permanent jobs annually with most of the jobs going to Hoonah residents, making the corporation the largest local employer.

For the community, it's a lucrative bounty in taxes, wages and local purchases. Last year, it meant a total of \$3.6 million to the economy, including 60 percent of the community's sales tax revenues, according to Huna Totem CEO Larry Gaffaney. Some of Icy Strait's profits also go toward thousands of dollars in scholarships awarded to Hoonah teens.

"It's a huge engine in the community," Gaffaney said. "Absent that, the community would look

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very, very different."

For participating communities, the benefits extend beyond money, said Ed Hall, tourism coordinator with the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, one of the organizers of a three-day cultural tourism conference taking place this week in the southeast Alaska town of Sitka, which has a large Tlingit population. It's also about pride of heritage, said Hall, who helped launch the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association in 2009.

Many of Alaska's off-road villages lack the cushier accommodations seen along the cruise ship routes, and most don't have a designated visitor coordinator. Still, independent travelers have discovered these remote places on their own, Hall said. And they devote plenty of time, finances and effort to get there, just to immerse themselves in a culture so different from their own. Hall believes the respect and admiration from these strangers sends a powerful message to villagers, particularly young people, who might take their traditions for granted.

"When young people see that coming from the outside, it reinforces something, really, that they don't see day to day," he said. "They're just living."

Perpetuating a tribal culture is a way of keeping it alive, as well, said Camille Ferguson with the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, another organizer of this week's conference. The tribe has operated a cultural tour program since the mid-1990s, offering dances and knowledge of traditional herbs and plants, as well as demonstrations of wood carving, beadwork and other crafts to cruise ship passengers and other travelers.

To many tourists, indigenous people represent the nation's early history, said Ferguson, a former president of the Albuquerque, N.M.-based American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association. This applies not just to Alaska Natives, but to tribes across the nation, who also are sharing their cultural experiences in tourism programs of their own. There is a market not just in the U.S., but other nations, including Germany, whose residents are particularly fascinated by "the real American Indian," according to Ferguson.

"To them, we're history, part of American history," she said.

More than a thousand miles to the west, the tiny island of St. Paul in the Bering Sea, travelers can watch traditional dances, view fur seals and visit a museum, which notes this community's Russian past.

But cultural heritage is secondary for most visitors to the Aleut village of the same name. That's because the island is a paradise for birders from around the world. Almost 300 species of birds - including rare sightings - have been documented in the wind-swept, rugged landscape, according to Tanadgusix Corp., the village Native corporation that owns St. Paul Island Tours.

"A lot of it is mostly concentrated on the birding right now, the people that are showing up here, and dancing is something a little extra we throw in," said corporation president Jason Bourdukofsky. "People who come here are die-hard birders."

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