



HOME NEWS FEATURES MONEY CONTACT JOBS

Web posted Sunday, October 19, 2008

## Hoonah builds tourism hotspot, avoids tourist trap

By Charles L. Westmoreland  
*Capital City Weekly/Morris News Service-Alaska*



Icy Strait Point renovations include building a theatre where Alaska Native stories and culture are shared with travelers. *Photo/Capital City Weekly*

HOONAH - Huna Totem Corp. opened Icy Strait Point to cruise ships in 2004 with some apprehension. At the time Hoonah's reputation was that of a quiet, pristine fishing and logging community; untouched by the flamboyant commercialism of other Southeast Alaska ports.

Like many remote Alaska villages, with local jobs dwindling away, a new viable source of income was needed. But marketing Hoonah as a tourism hotspot without turning it into a tourist trap was a challenge.

Tourists who disembark at Icy Strait Point, an early 20th century cannery located a few miles outside Hoonah, at first were kept away from the heart of the town so as to not disturb the everyday life of residents. But Hoonah's 850 citizens didn't just embrace their new role of host to as many as 2,500 travelers daily - they craved more direct involvement.

"At first everybody was deeply concerned about tourism coming to town because of what (Hoonah) could turn into," said Bob Wysocki, CEO of Huna Totem, a Native corporation formed by the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. "People quickly realized the impact wasn't like everywhere else. Folks went from being concerned too many people would be in town to (Huna Totem) getting a lot of heat for not enough people coming into town. The community really opened up and embraced it."

Wysocki said Huna Totem has allowed only one cruise ship to port each day, though he is looking at the possibility of allowing two ships at a time next season. Hoonah saw a drop off from 80 ships in 2007 to 59 last year due to scheduling conflicts among cruise lines.

"We're not just about the mighty buck and bringing in three or four ships a day," Wysocki said. "That just wouldn't work. We'd burn out our employees and risk guest satisfaction."

Hoonah has been an easy destination for Wysocki to market. Chichagof Island has one of Alaska's highest concentrations of brown bears, and nearby Point Adolphus is known as one of the richest humpback whale feeding grounds in Southeast Alaska. Tourism activities are enhanced by the village's remoteness and other factors, such as Hoonah's predominantly Alaska Native population, and how subsistence hunting and fishing remain a staple of everyday life.

Huna Totem uses that cultural authenticity to its advantage, involving elders and youth in the showcasing, storytelling and presentation of their history, artwork, values and lifestyles to travelers. Many of Huna Totem's 130 workers wear their Tlingit name on their badges next to their English name.

Faggen Skaflestad, a lifelong Hoonah resident and owner of Janaggan Touring and Guiding, said little has changed in the town in the past five seasons.

"It's nice having (Icy Strait Point) out the road because tourism hasn't changed the

**berry**  
YOUR LOCAL LEADS EXPERT™

**EXTREME  
MARKETING  
MAKEOVER**

FOR SMALL  
BUSINESSES

CHOOSE THE  
WINNER OF BERRY'S  
GRAND PRIZE  
VALUED AT \$60,000!

VOTE NOW >

  
Search 

Alaska Journal on Facebook

town," he said. "As far as the economy, (tourism) definitely hasn't hurt us. I believe next year will be the telltale of what will transpire."

Tourism may very well have saved Hoonah after the village saw its fishing and logging industries dwindle during the 1980s and 1990s. Icy Strait Point employs about a quarter of the Hoonah's population, most of whom also are shareholders in Huna Totem.

"We've maintained about 90 percent local hire and 85 percent Native hire over our five-year history," Wysocki said. "With most Alaska villages declining in population and economic activity, Hoonah and Icy Strait Point stand out as proof that a culture can be maintained and that an economic base can be built providing jobs that keep the village and culture alive."

Huna Totem Corp. purchased Icy Strait Point in 1996, and it is now home to more than a dozen locally owned and operated shops, including four restaurants, a museum, theatre and gift shops. Huna Totem invested millions in the project, to include building the world's largest zipline, but Wysocki was hesitant to disclose how much money has been invested so far.

Huna Totem's practice of hiring locally and creating business opportunities for the community earned it the Travel Industry Association and National Geographic Traveler magazine's "Travel to a Better World" award this month for sustaining an indigenous culture and community. Hoonah's seasonal unemployment has dropped below 1 percent since Icy Strait Point reopened.

"Darn near anybody who wants a job has got one," Wysocki said. "If you can show up, be clean and straight and come to work every day, we hire just about anybody who walks through the door."

Hoonah Mayor Dennis Gray said tourism has done more than just create job opportunities; it also has led to much-needed infrastructure improvements in the town. A new ferry terminal will be built next year and a 220-ton boatlift is expected to be operational by next summer.

"We've seen a few local business owners open gift shops and other stores," Gray said. "People have disposable income to go shopping and are keeping dollars in town and putting them into the economy. (Tourism) saved the city in sales tax and revenue."

Hoonah Harbormaster Paul Dybdahl anticipates more businesses moving in once the projects are completed. He's already seen an increase in independent charter vessels trying to cash in on Hoonah's tourism.

"I see the infrastructure changing even more," he said. "Mechanics, fiberglass workers and shipwrights will need shops to support (the lift). We've already had people who perform these services call about setting up shop."

Dybdahl's brother, Johan Dybdahl, oversees special projects for Icy Strait Point and said the cannery is finished expanding for now. The infrastructure can accommodate up to 5,000 visitors at a time, and with cruise ships expected to dock five days a week next season, its limits will be tested. That's especially if tourists keep making return visits.

"This year we had a lot of people come back because they visited once before, and they keep telling us not to change a thing," he said. "They really appreciate getting on the ground and skipping rocks on the beach, going into the forest to see wildlife. Some even claim we control our whales because we haven't missed on a whale watching tour in five seasons now."



[AlaskaStar.com](http://AlaskaStar.com) | [AlaskanEquipmentTrader.com](http://AlaskanEquipmentTrader.com)

[MY YAHOO!](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Find Anchorage Jobs](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Privacy and Legal Information](#)

Copyright © 2007-2008 [Alaska Journal of Commerce](#) & [Morris Communications Inc](#)

[Explore the Kenai](#) | [Visit Homer Alaska](#) | [Fishing Report](#)