

## **AIANTA's Ambition: To Introduce the World to Indian Country**

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Visitors worldwide come to the United States to see Indian country for themselves—to expand their knowledge from what history books and other academic sources can tell them. Yet, by Native people handling their own tourism, tribes can tell their own history and share their own perspective.

This is the purpose of AIANTA—the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association. According to the organization's vice-president, Benton Paiute tribal member Sherry Rupert,

AIANTA exists “to help define what tribal tourism is, help to enhance that, help our tribes to become more involved and be able to tell their own stories.”

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“Who knows better than you, yourself, as an Indian person, what your people have gone through and where you’re going in the future,” Rupert continued. “I think tourism is the best opportunity to tell your story. That’s something that we really promote, because if you don’t tell your story, somebody else is going to tell it for you. It happens all the time, every day.”

Beginning in 1989 with its first tourism conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, AIANTA has recently concluded its 15th annual American Indian Tourism Conference at the Cherokee Nation’s Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Tulsa, Oklahoma, September 22-26. Collaborations and sponsoring partners included the U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Department of Commerce, Cherokee Nation, Chickasaw Country, Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara Tribal Tourism, and the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department.

The conference included an opening session with the presentation of colors by the Cherokee Nation Color Guard. Introductory remarks were made by Cherokee Nation Deputy Chief Joe

Don Crittenden; U.S. Representative and Cherokee Nation member Markwayne Mullin; Tulsa, Okla. Mayor Dewey Bartlett; and Oklahoma Tourism Commissioner Javier Neira.

The keynote address for the opening session was made by Kevin Gover, Pawnee tribal member and director of the National Museum of the American Indian. Early in his address, Gover said that Indians are everywhere, “but mainstream America know so little about us.” Gover also said that mainstream America is “taught to believe in imaginary Indians” and misconceptions of the first Thanksgiving, Pocohontas, the Trail of Tears and the California Gold Rush.

“If [mainstream America] knew something about real Indians, the [Baby Veronica Case](#) may have turned out differently,” Gover said.

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Additional presentations during the opening session included a “live paint” by Chickasaw/Ponca artist Brent Greenwood. The painting made onstage during the opening and keynote addresses was auctioned off later in the day.

Breakout sessions ranged from fundraising techniques, expanding promotion into the international market, federal tourism policy, indigenous fashion, intellectual and cultural property, and working with federal partners.

Rupert was appointed this past June to the U.S. Department of Commerce Travel and Tourism Advisory Board. She shared with Indian Country Today Media Network examples of AIANTA’s recently established partnerships with the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. The organization’s work with the NPS culminated with the book *American Indians and the Civil War*.

“When you think of the Civil War, even myself, you don’t really think of American Indians in the Civil War,” she said. “But there were 20,000 American Indians fighting on both sides. There were many, many stories that came out during the process.”

One of the breakout sessions, “Culinary Cultural Trends,” featured a panel with Duane Blue Spruce of the National Museum of the American Indian, Laguna/San Juan Pueblo; Don McClellan, Cherokee Nation member and executive chef with Cherokee Nation Entertainment; and Travis Suazo, Laguna/Acoma/Taos Pueblo, the executive director of the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. The panel included discussions on including traditional Native American foods and suppliers into tribally owned restaurants, as well as consulting with elders on their personal recipes.



*Brent Greenwood, Chickasaw/Ponca artist, performing a "live paint" session during the American Indian Tourism Conference opening session. (Brian Daffron)*

Future plans for AIANTA include the offering of a certificate program for those interested in Native tourism to gain established credentials, Rupert said.

“There are a lot of entrepreneurs within Indian country, and we’re here to provide technical assistance and training,” Rupert stated. “This conference is an opportunity to do that. We welcome everyone to come, whether it be businesses—large or small—or individual artisans that want to go into business for themselves. There’s something for everybody here.”

The 2014 conference will take place at the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe’s Paragon Casino Resort in Marksville, Louisiana. For more information, contact AIANTA at 505-724-3592 or visit [www.aianta.org](http://www.aianta.org), and AIANTA’s flip book [Discover Native Tourism](#).

*Read more at* <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/10/03/aiantas-ambition-introduce-world-indian-country-151576>

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