

# Overview

## American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association Information Gathering Session

- During the 21st Annual American Indian Tourism Conference (AITC), on September 19, 2019, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA) hosted it's first ever-Information Gathering Session.
- All conference delegates were encouraged to participate in the session, which drew nearly 50 attendees. All participants were encouraged to provide an overview on the state of tourism in their region and/or with their Tribe or tribal organization.
- Findings from the Information Gathering Session will help shape AIANTA's technical assistance and training programs for the coming year(s).
- Attendees were encouraged to speak on topics relevant to their personal experiences. In addition, AIANTA provided a list of suggested topics, including:
  - » What are your success stories?
  - » Are they cultural? Are they economic?
  - » What are your challenges or barriers to reaching success?
  - » What do you need to develop, grow, or expand tribal tourism in your community?
  - » How would you describe your working relationship with federal and state agencies?



**AIANTA**  
American Indian Alaska Native  
Tourism Association



**NATIVEAMERICA**  
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# American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association

Information Gathering Session Summary  
September 18, 2019



# Attendees



## Alaska

- » Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center
- » Sitka Tribe of Alaska
- » Tanana Chiefs Conference
- » Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

## Eastern

- » Akwesasne (St. Regis Mohawk Tribe)
- » Four Directions Development Corporation
- » Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs
- » Seneca Nation
- » United Houma Nation
- » Wampanaog Tribe

## Midwest

- » Ho-Chunk Nation
- » Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians
- » Native American Tourism of Wisconsin
- » Oneida Nation
- » Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
- » Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan
- » Soaring Eagle Casino Resort

## Pacific

- » Benton Paiute Reservation
- » Hawai'i Visitors & Convention Bureau
- » Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association
- » Spokane Tribe
- » Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians
- » Yurok Tribe

## Plains

- » Chickasaw Nation
- » Cherokee Nation Businesses
- » Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail
- » Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation
- » Pine Ridge Area Chamber of Commerce

## Southwest

- » Duck Valley Shoshone Paiute Tribe
- » The Hopi Tribe
- » Grand Canyon Resort Corporation
- » Navajo Nation
- » Pueblo of Acoma



An aerial photograph of a lush green forested landscape. A river flows through the center of the forest, eventually emptying into a large, calm lake in the foreground. The forest is dense and vibrant green, with some areas showing slight variations in color, possibly due to different tree species or lighting. The lake's surface is smooth, reflecting the surrounding greenery. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

## Themes

- Sustainability
- Tribal Collaboration
- Infrastructure
- Marketing
- Tourism Grants
- Leadership Education
- Mentorship
- Other



# Sustainability

## Preserving the Environment and Cultural Heritage

- Participants spoke at length about the importance of sustainability in all its contexts.
- According to the Native American Rights Fund, “Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and other Indigenous peoples have a long tradition of living sustainably with the natural world by understanding the importance of preserving natural resources and respecting the interdependence of all living things.”
- As Tribal members are justifiably proud of their generations-long commitment to stewardship of the lands they inhabit, they also worry that bringing tourism to the lands could have a detrimental impact on the environment.
- Preservation of culture is also a top concern. In particular, some attendees worried that opening tourism up to partnership relationships would pave the way for partners to tell stories “on behalf” of the tribes, leading to a diminished cultural experience.

### Sample Comments

“How do we ensure that we’re protecting Mother Earth but at the same time we’re growing economically?”

“We [preserved] our cultural inventory and built it up.”

“A great part of our success [is] cultural -- cultural integrity is really key.”

“You can’t convey our story the way we convey our story.”

“We’re going to tell our story, [that’s] a big part [of] standing up for [our] rights.”

“One of the biggest strengths that we have is that we are on [our] traditional homelands, and we’ve never been moved from where we started. We’ve been there since time immemorial.

Having that is kind of a double-edged sword, though, as our people are still trying to decide whether they want to let people and tourism in.”



# Collaboration

SHARING  
THE  
MOHAWK SPIRIT

## Partnering with Other Tribes

- While attendees expressed concerns over effectively forming partnerships with outside agencies, they also universally agreed that there was strength in numbers and that Tribes need to partner together wherever and whenever they can.
- One such success story is the formation of the North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance in 2016, which represents the tourism interests of the five nations of North Dakota.
- Since the alliance was established, it has received the support of tribal leadership from all five tribes, as well as the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission and North Dakota Tourism and has increased awareness for all indigenous tourism assets within the state.



### Sample Comments

"If we do things [the way] we've always done it, one tribe at a time, then it doesn't get everybody involved."

"Do not be afraid to talk about yourselves as a whole, because together, each of your tribes -- they'll be a part of [a larger] asset."

"Alaska always has been and always will be a Native place and so what we decided to do [is] come together and answer these technical questions around cultural tourism and [have] many tribes in this conversation."

"How do we, reach across the land and find a way to **work** together so that both Tribes benefit?"

"We need to work together collectively, so we can learn how to tell parks 'we want to tell our story our way.'"



# Infrastructure

## Upgrading Facilities and Technology

- Universally, attendees agreed that to drive tourism to Indian Country, new and updated infrastructure is desperately needed.
- According to a 2017 report by the National Congress of American Indians, “The infrastructure crisis facing Indian Country is not a recent phenomenon. For generations, the federal government [has] substantially under-invested in Indian Country’s infrastructure, evident in the breadth and severity of its unmet infrastructure needs as compared to the rest of the nation. In 2009, as one indication, a contingent of U.S. Senators penned a letter to the Administration citing a \$50 billion unmet need for infrastructure on Indian reservations. The number of ‘shovel ready’ infrastructure projects in Indian Country remains too many to count, and many of those have been that way for years if not decades.
- More than 140,000 miles of roadway make up the Indian Country road network, making connectivity in and out of Tribal lands an important issue when addressing tourism.
- There are also significant needs with tribal facilities, such as buildings, restrooms, dams and housing, as well as cell phone networks and electric grids, any of which have a detrimental impact on successfully developing a tourism program on tribal lands.

## Sample Comments

“We cannot grow tourism without infrastructure in place.”

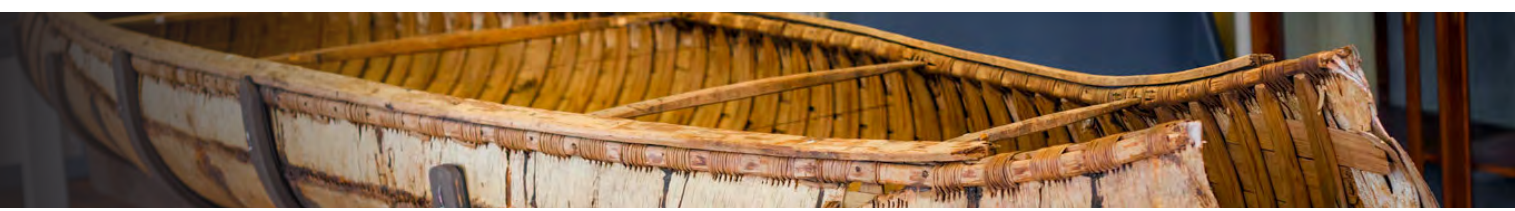
“It is not just roads. I’m talking about cellphones and all of that. How can we grow tourism in these rural areas where infrastructure is needed?”

“If you’re a traveler and your family is stopping and you lose your phone service, it’s a really big bummer, no matter where you’re at.”

“It’s a public area but there [are] no restrooms [there]. To put restrooms in that area, based on the tribal structure, we’d have to get on a CIP list and they’ve been working on that for 10 years.”



# Marketing



## Sample Comments

“Marketing budgets are always a challenge for travel tourism and cultural tourism because tribes [building] the tourism program, they don’t know where to start.”

“What we found [is] there’s a real interest by the State of Maine’s Office of Tourism to really look at what they can do to help us [recognize] that Native culture in Maine is something that’s very attractive.”

“We have a lot of great destinations but we’re not capturing the dollars because tourists want [to be able to drink] alcohol.”

“In terms of packaging, locally we’re there, regionally we’re there. Nationally, we’re kind of getting there, but our next [goal] is international. “

## Tribal Tourism Marketing

- Tribes face numerous and varied challenges when it comes to tourism marketing, including a lack of budget to fully fund any marketing campaign.
- According to AIANTA’s own “State of Indian Country Tourism” survey, 46 percent of respondents cited “inadequate/ underfunded marketing” as the most significant challenge facing tribal tourism enterprises.
- In addition to overcoming centuries of misinformed stereotypes, Tribes must use their marketing dollars also to communicate that being “Native American” does not mean just one thing.
- Within the boundaries of the United States, visitors can find 574 sovereign nations and more than 150 indigenous languages. Each nation preserves unique arts, culture, heritage and practices. While exploring these distinctions are at the very core of what makes tourism to Indian Country so special, it can also be costly to market the finer details of these differences.
- When it comes to marketing, there are many channels and many audiences, and especially for tribes getting started in tourism marketing, the process can be confusing and expensive.



# Tourism Grants

## Funding for Tourism Projects

- As Tribes look towards tourism as a source for economic development, there are significant start up challenges--starting a business can be costly.
- In 2018, 50 tribes applied for nearly \$2.5 million in funding from the Native American Business Development Institute Program, administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Ultimately, the BIA awarded \$400,000 in funding to just 12 Tribes, with a significant portion of that money being directed towards Tribes interested in studying the expansion or development of their tourism industry.
- The implementation of the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act in 2016 has led to confusion with Tribes, who think the act presents direct access to new funding for tourism projects.
- Additionally, AIANTA, as the leader in growing and promoting Indian Country Tourism, is increasingly being called upon to provide grants to businesses with shovel-ready tourism projects.

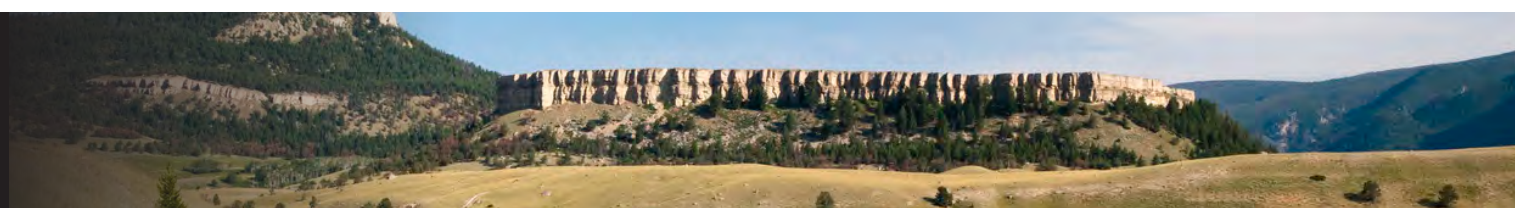
## Sample Comments

"I would like to see AIANTA set up that way, [so we can] apply for a grant. [So] my tribe can apply [for] technical assistance [or a] down payment on infrastructure or whatever [else] is needed."

"What we're looking for, with the help of AIANTA, is how to access funding for infrastructure. [Some Tribes} are so remote, I know they need funding."



# Mentorship



## Sample Comments

"I know that would be beneficial [for] me, to get me to the next level, to get the heritage center [to the next level], to have somebody come along [and] take us under their wing. It's pretty daunting getting to this point, we're pretty excited and happy but now it's kind of scary, what do we do? Do we diversify? Do we need to work with a cruise line? Go deeper with that?"

"I think it would be awesome for AIANTA to create a program but we can already fulfill some of the need."

"I think the mentor program would be very important because we're just starting this journey and I [believe] timing is everything."

## Finding Success in the Footsteps of Others


- In 2018, nearly 2 million overseas travelers visited an American Indian community, according to research from the National Travel and Tourism Office.
- This number, a new record, is just one of the markers indicating an increased demand for authentic tourism industry experiences in Indian Country.
- In Canada, which is experiencing similar challenges, the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada CEO Keith Henry was recently quoted as saying, "The industry's main challenge is building capacity to meet demand."
- "Not having enough Indigenous-led companies has, in some cases, led to cultural appropriation and misrepresentation when large tour operators try to meet demand without enough Indigenous contribution," said Henry.
- To help Tribes effectively manage their tourism capacity growth, numerous participants commented on their desire to participate in some form of mentorship program that could help with real-world decision making.
- Participants indicated they felt AIANTA would be a natural fit to lead such a program.



# Leadership Education

## Sharing the Importance of Tourism

- While attendees at the American Indian Tourism Conference were committed to the economic benefits of tourism, some of them felt more could be done to inform tribal leadership of those benefits.
- While the economic benefits of tourism are proven, the industry can bring challenges, including disrespect, cultural appropriation, vandalism, cultural clashes and environmental degradation. Carefully managed, these challenges are not insurmountable, but from a leadership level they can appear all consuming, making tourism seem “not worth the while.”
- In addition to requesting more information on educating tribal leadership about tourism, several attendees also felt more should be done to encourage leadership (and all of Indian Country tourism employees) to apply for and participate on National Boards of Directors, in order to get Indian Country’s “voices heard.”



“I don’t think [our Tribal Council] understands how important tourism is.”

Sometimes tribal council hold up business because they don’t agree with what the plan is or [with] the CEO running the operation. The CEO needs to have the space and the authority to run the operation.”

“I’m encouraged that going back home [to have a] conversation with our administrator [and] with our community about what [tourism] means for us. [It’s] also really comforting to know that there are individuals and communities that are having similar occurrences.”

In addition to hosting these conversations, [I’d like to work with our] communities to get our people on boards. We need people on national boards. We need our voices [heard] so we can have a seat at the table.”



# Other Themes




## Data Collection

- According to the NCAI Policy Research Center, “There is a critical need for accurate, meaningful, and timely data collection in American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. Accurate data collection ... captures true needs, and thus can drive larger programmatic investments resulting in a cost-effective use of tribal, federal, and private resources. Without quality data, policymakers and community planners cannot set policy goals, monitor implementation, measure impact, or plan for demographic shifts in an effective way.”

## Working with Banks and Other Lending Institutions

- Indian Country tourism expansion is often challenged by what the Indian Loan Guarantee Program calls “a market imbalance preventing Indian-owned businesses from securing commercial financing as easily as non-Indian businesses.”
- Additionally, outside of handful of Native-owned financial institutions, most American banks do not understand the realities of working with Tribal sovereign nations and Indigenous Entrepreneurs.
- AITC attendees suggested creating stronger partnerships with lending institutions could pave the way for deeper investment in the tourism economy.



## Sample Comments

“The data piece is going to be very important to us because we want to measure our economic impact.”

“Some of [our] challenges are working with institutions and having them understand what it means to work with a sovereign nation, what it means to work with indigenous entrepreneurs...”

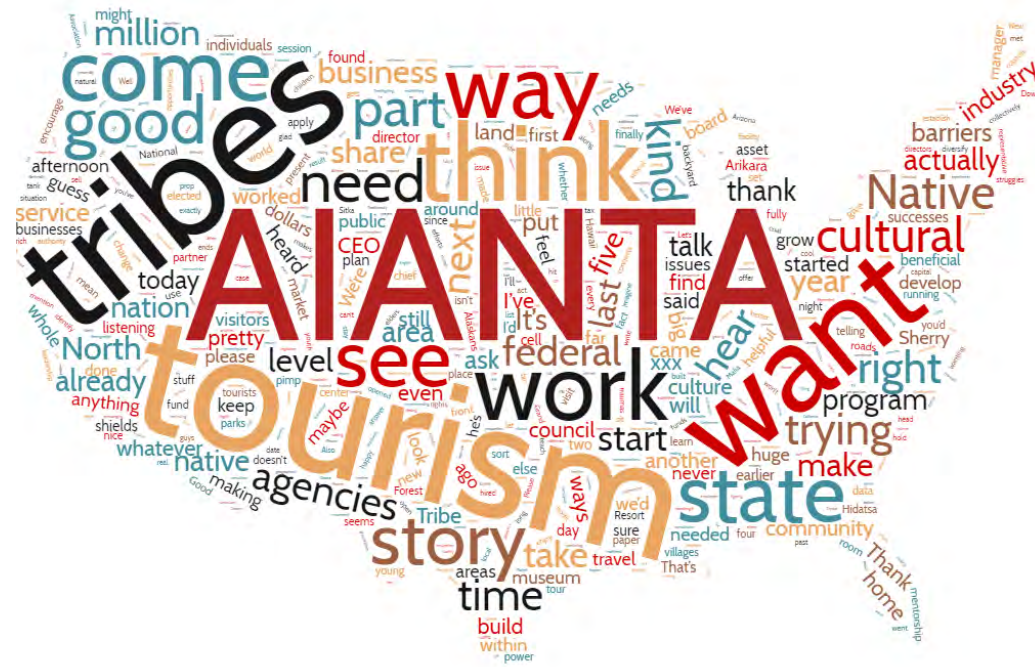
Having that knowledge from larger financial institutions [can help] better break down barriers.”



## Next Steps

## Join Aianta

- AIANTA does its best work when it is supported by its members, partners and other constituents. Be sure to get involved, join us in our programming, or just communicate your successes and challenges with us.
- During FY2020, AIANTA is planning on holding numerous information gathering sessions throughout the country. Specific dates and locations will be released soon, but written and emailed comments are always welcome and Tribes will be encouraged to participate in all sessions, whether it is in person or remotely.
- Subscribe to AIANTA's monthly newsletter at [aianta.org/newsletter](https://aianta.org/newsletter) to stay informed about our activities.
- Join us at the American Indian Tourism Conference (September 14-17, 2020 at Fort McDowell, Arizona), the nation's largest gathering of tribal tourism professionals. Share your expertise, learn from others and be part of the national conversation on how to authentically, sustainably grow tourism for maximum economic impact.



**American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association**

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