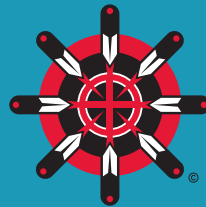




American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association



American Indian Tourism Conference 2020
Regional Meetings



Introduction

American Indian Tourism Conference 2020 Regional Meetings

During the 22nd Annual American Indian Tourism Conference (AITC), on September 14, 2020, the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA) hosted regional breakout sessions for our six regions. The focus of this year's gatherings included the impact of COVID-19 on cultural tourism and the priorities as we emerge from the pandemic. The regional breakout sessions were hosted virtually by members of AIANTA's Board of Directors and supported by staff.

All conference delegates were encouraged to participate in their regional breakout session and were encouraged to speak to their personal experiences.

Participation by region (number by session, state and tribal affiliation if captured):

- Alaska** – 21 Participants
- Eastern** – 22 Participants
- Midwest** – 15 Participants
- Pacific** – 39 Participants
- Plains** – 34 Participants
- Southwest Region** – 47 Participants



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Themes

Uncertainty

- Closures and cancelled tourism seasons
- Change in workflows and priorities
- Costs and risks of partial reopening

Challenges

- Damage caused by new visitors to outdoor spaces
- Visitors' lack of awareness of their potential health impact
- Inconsistent policies for COVID-19 safety measures—masks, social distancing, etc.
- Even when tribal operations are shut-down, people continue to travel onto their lands with little ability by the tribe to monitor/guide behavior putting residents at risk
- Work stoppage has jeopardized funding/grants in process
- Lack of digital infrastructure and access

Adaptation

- Pivot to technology
- Focus on building local/regional travel
- Working collaboratively
- Expanding outdoor offerings
- Creating new product
- Working with media to encourage travel to outdoor spaces

Uncertainty

- Borders, states and tribal nations have closed due to COVID-19 with tourism businesses and enterprises shuttered or at reduced capacity.
- Partial openings present health and economic challenges.
- According to the U.S. Travel Association, the pandemic has resulted in over \$424 billion in cumulative losses for the U.S. travel economy.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued a no-sail order for cruise ships resulting in the devastating loss of a projected \$793 million in visitor spending in Alaska.
- In addition to COVID-19, there are record-setting fires in California affecting the health and economies of tribes along the fire corridors in California, alongside the economic impact of closures due to fire.



Sample Comments

"I've heard a lot of talk about going back to the small cruise lines . . . we realized in Alaska how much we are dependent on tourism. I mean, it's been crazy."

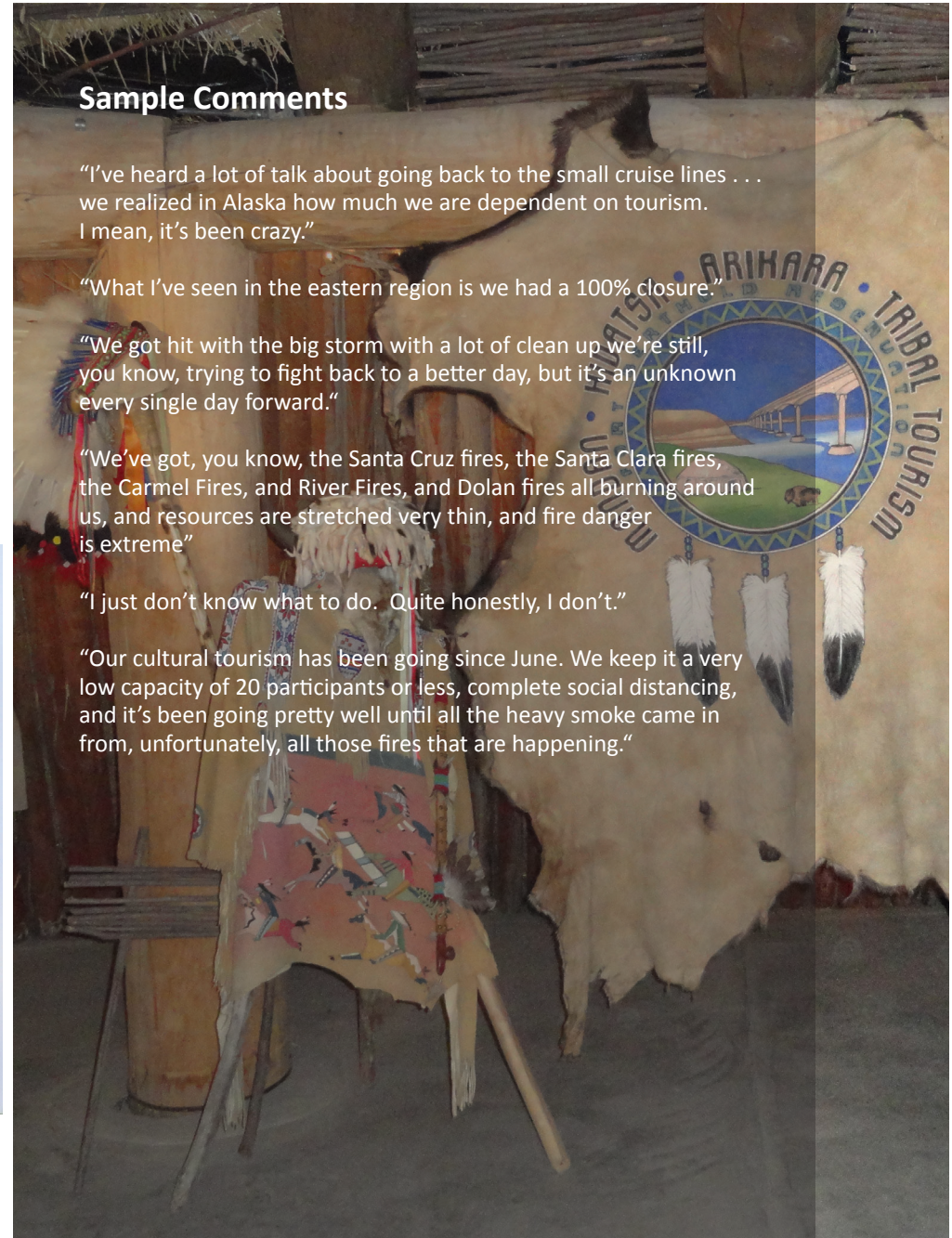
"What I've seen in the eastern region is we had a 100% closure."

"We got hit with the big storm with a lot of clean up we're still, you know, trying to fight back to a better day, but it's an unknown every single day forward."

"We've got, you know, the Santa Cruz fires, the Santa Clara fires, the Carmel Fires, and River Fires, and Dolan fires all burning around us, and resources are stretched very thin, and fire danger is extreme"

"I just don't know what to do. Quite honestly, I don't."

"Our cultural tourism has been going since June. We keep it a very low capacity of 20 participants or less, complete social distancing, and it's been going pretty well until all the heavy smoke came in from, unfortunately, all those fires that are happening."



Challenges

- According to the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease Anthony S. Fauci, MD, at a November 2020 presentation to the American Heart Association, the United States has been hit harder than other countries with 9.4 million confirmed cases and 231,000 deaths with cases continuing to rise across the United States and higher and higher numbers. The cause according to Dr. Fauci for the higher cases and impact of COVID-19 in the United States include inconsistent lockdown and social distancing policies among different states.
- As shared at AITC by Keynote Speaker Chairman Amber Torres of the Walker River Paiute Tribe, access to tribal lands including for tourism and recreation access to non-residents has been restricted by some tribes to protect their members. “People did not respect our decision as a sovereign nation to close the reservation, especially the Weber Reservoir. They wanted to get into our ancestral homelands as if it is their right to fish and use our resources for recreation, when ultimately it is a privilege,” said Torres.
- Despite efforts to limit exposure, travelers continue to pass through tribal lands as they head to outdoor recreation and vacation areas. With inconsistent policies and practices for limiting the spread of COVID-19 nationally, visitors are entering tribal lands with varying understanding and practices putting tribal members at risk.
- Tourism and recreation opportunities on public lands adjacent to tribal lands that have re-opened and/or remained open during the pandemic have seen upticks in new visitations from campers and vacationers. Although these visitors bring much needed revenue, some have failed to respect the land and/or have left trash and debris in tribal gateway communities and on public lands.
- Although not a new issue, the lack of digital infrastructure has significantly impacted everything from emergency services to access to education. Tribal and native-owned businesses and enterprises are also struggling with lack of digital infrastructure and access to engage with potential customers to continue to encourage visitation to destinations once COVID-19 restrictions have lifted.

Sample Comments

“Unfortunately, we’re still closed. And that has been . . . a debate that is ongoing when we will be reopened. For us, our museum is very small, so based on the square footage recommendations, we will only be able to have five people in the building at a time. And operationally, that’s a bit of a challenge too, because, our admission is very low. So, we want to have the public come back, but when it comes to local exposure and also to just the operational reality of whether or not we can afford it.”

“But as far as just general travel and road travel, there’s obviously not been restrictions in our area, so people are coming and going freely in and out of the state from other states. Some communities have passed mask ordinances while you’re in their communities. But again, there’s no overall state mandate.”

“Look at all of the national park areas. That’s where people want to go, but the communities around them are just in danger from that. I think it’s really hard for the little guy to stand up and say, well, you know, this isn’t safe, because there’s so many pressures. There are financial pressures.”

“You know, just looking at the Navajo Tribal Parks on Navajo Nation, a lot of them don’t have Wi-Fi, and I think it’s something that was very hard to do as far as a virtual tour. Maybe just using previous photos, or videos, or media that they might have had, and packaging it into one central place, maybe through Navajo tourism office or through the Navajo Tribal Parks website, that might be one way to offer a virtual tour. But I really think Indian country wasn’t ready for COVID, obviously, because a lot of these things probably should have been intact and somehow put together to have that virtual tour happening.”

“And so, there’s yet this other divide, so to speak, of digital and virtual of just where you can access the internet.”

Adaptation

- Virtual Travel has allowed destinations to continue to engage visitors during the pause in travel due to COVID-19 restrictions.
- According to U.S. Travel Association, consumer road travel within 50 miles from their home has outperformed air travel during the pandemic, although remains lower than 2019 car travel data.
- According to a November 2020 Harris Poll, 69% of Americans polled indicated they “have developed a renewed appreciation for the outdoors since the start of the pandemic.”
- In response to the continued growth in RV sales for September 2020, the RV Industry Association’s President Craig Kirby noted, “The demand for RVs continues to be strong heading into the fall and the industry is on track to surpass last year’s numbers, despite the six to eight week closures earlier this spring.”
- According to MediaPost.com’s interviews with travel and trade publications, COVID-19 travel impacts have resulted in a shift in content to reflect the travel environment as we move through the pandemic including providing tips for travel close to home, outdoor travel and inspiration for future travel.

Sample Comments

“One more thing, I would just say that the one blessing that we see in COVID is that we’re all learning how to bring interpretive programming digitally to a wider audience, so that’s really what we’re looking to do right now.”

“We’re just in the process of kind of rethinking and repackaging some of this work that we’ve done in culture heritage tourism, but the use of virtualization technologies is really fantastic and accelerating and becoming more accessible.”

“... but it’s given us the opportunity to work collaboratively in ways that we hadn’t previously found an entrée. And so, we certainly welcome opportunities like virtual meetings and conferences, particularly where the topics provide discussions across disciplines and areas of expertise and bridging both traditional indigenous knowledge with western ...”

“And recently, in the past year, we started an entity to kind of help address some of these concerns with artists and getting and promoting their work out there, so we launched an e-consignment/ e-commerce platform called triia.com.”

“My business is a little bit different. It’s 100% held outside, so what I had to do this summer, instead of shutting down - what I offer is a cultural emergent program, and I have a tepee village set up, and that’s the lodging.”

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