

**TESTIMONY
OF
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ON
“EXAMING THE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES: NATIVE
TOURISM ECONOMIES ONE YEAR LATER”**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE**

MAY 12, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to appear on behalf of Indian Affairs at the Department of Interior. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss COVID-19 impacts on Native tourism.

COVID-19 has rattled the foundations of Tribal economies over the past year – and one of the hardest hit sectors has been the Tribal tourism industry. While the extent of the economic damage is still being quantified, every tourism project funded by Indian Affairs has reported significant challenges over the past year. Many Reservations were closed to visitors, travel stopped, and tribal offices were shut down for extended periods of time. As the country focused on the immediate health and safety concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic -- a pandemic with a disproportionate impact in Indian Country -- Tribal economies and, specifically, the Tribal tourism industry were hit hard.

Tribal tourism is a multi-billion dollar industry and a prime space for Tribal economic development that has steadily increased over the last decade. In 2012, Tribal businesses reported over \$38.8 billion dollars in receipts.¹ In 2016, approximately 1.96 million overseas travelers visited Indian Country, which resulted in 41,000 new U.S. jobs.² While the pandemic has significantly slowed this economic momentum, Native American, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian tourism entities and Indian Affairs are striving to quickly recharge the Tribal tourism sector.

In planning for the return of increased tourism, Indian Affairs has worked with awardees of cooperative agreements and contracts to pivot and focus on opportunities for virtual tourism and distance training for Tribal staff, capacity building for Tribes’ tourism departments and offices, and alliance building among industry organizations, state, and local tourism departments. George Washington University International Institute of Tourism Studies and the Pamplin College of Business at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University have led trainings with Native cultural entrepreneurs from South Dakota, North Dakota, and Montana to develop and launch

¹ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2016/08/american-indian-and-alaska-native-owned-businesses-move-past-the-quarter-million-mark.html>

² <https://www.aianta.org/resources/economic-impact/>

live online tourism experiences on platforms such as Airbnb and Eventbrite. Some of these Native entrepreneurs have then hosted online virtual classes with paying participants to learn about cultural activities like Native fashion and star quilt making.³

Indian Affairs is prepared to leverage the resources provided by the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act to support indigenous tourism. This will include a focus on inter-agency coordination to ensure strategic and culturally appropriate federal investments for Tribal tourism.

Indian Affairs NATIVE Act Implementation

Since the passage of the NATIVE Act in 2016, the subsequent appropriations starting in FY 2018, and every fiscal year since, Indian Affairs has sought to build tribal tourism capacity through a national, regional, and local approach.⁴ This includes cooperative agreements, grants, and contracts with universities and non-profit organizations.

The Office of Indian Economic Development – Indian Affairs (OIED-IA) received \$3.4M in appropriations for FY 2018, FY 2019, and FY 2020, and \$500,000 in FY 2021. The Division of Transportation (DOT) in the Office of Indian Services (OIS) – Indian Affairs received \$1M for FY 2018, FY 2019, FY 2020, and FY 2021. Through these combined appropriations, Indian Affairs has provided technical assistance, promoted capacity-building, strategic development, and fostered inter-tribal, agricultural, and cultural tourism opportunities.

Technical Assistance: Technical assistance for Tribes, Tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiians to promote full participation in the tourism industry is provided pursuant to a performance-based cooperative agreement with the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA). This work focuses on identifying and accessing federal programs that support tribal capacity building.

Capacity-Building and Strategic Development: Capacity-building, strategic development and planning are promoted, and subject-matter expertise on tourism are strengthened with tribes in South Dakota and North Dakota pursuant to a contract with George Washington University. These activities have focused on strengthening the North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance (NDNTA) as a regional tourism organization; developing tourism products and experiences around main events at several Tribal locations in North Dakota; establishing the South Dakota Native Tourism Network (SDNTN), which includes all nine of the state’s federally recognized tribes; and developing a regional native tourism plan for South Dakota.

³ https://tribalbusinessnews.com/sections/arts-and-culture/13337-indigenous-entrepreneurs-experiment-with-airbnb-online-experiences?fbclid=IwAR0NtzSvaJN5RXP8plceYmRbMOIkKP3tcuXUlwz_pyD6acQ-GzJJO-_Fmo

⁴ <https://www.bia.gov/information-detail/current-indigenous-tourism-projects>

Inter-Tribal Tourism: Inter-tribal tourism in Montana and Virginia is fostered through a cooperative agreement with Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). These activities support the Montana Tribal Tourism Development Project, which is working to promote strategic, culturally appropriate, sustainable tourism development in Montana's eight tribal communities, and the Virginia Tribal Tourism Development Project which is assessing tourism potential with respect to the Virginia Tribes that have recently been federally recognized. These projects will identify the Tribes' tourism assets, provide guidance on their best use, and build human capital to increase visitation.

Agricultural-Tourism: Agricultural-tourism and food-based visitation is promoted through a cooperative agreement with the Taos Community Economic Development Corporation (TCEDC). Through this agreement Tribal staff are trained on how farmers' markets, restaurants and catering companies operated by Native growers and entrepreneurs can attract and serve visitors and boost Tribal employment; in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, classes on produce farming, commercial kitchen and food pantry operation, and use of portable slaughter facilities are offered to Tribal members from Virginia, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota; and Virginia Tribal members are trained on leasing farms and operating farm stands and farmers' markets as part of the tourism experience.

Cultural-Tourism: Tourism centered on the Navajo Nation's sheep and woolen culture is developed through a cooperative agreement with a Native vendor in Navajo Nation.

Indian Affairs Native Tourism Priorities Moving Forward

In addition to continuing the projects described above, Indian Affairs is committed to implementing its plans to focus on Tribal economic recovery through a number of efforts. First, through the new Tribal Tourism Grant Program, a competitive grant for Native American and Alaska Native Tribes, Indian Affairs will fund 20-30 feasibility studies and business plans for Tribal tourism proposals. Feasibility studies and business can be a gateway to accessing capital for projects.

Second, Indian Affairs will enter into an agreement with the Office of Native Hawaiian Relations at the Department of Interior to award grants to Native Hawaiian Organizations to conduct feasibility studies and business plans for tourism projects benefiting the Native Hawaiian community.

Third, Indian Affairs will announce a new round of competitive grants for Tribes to perform infrastructure and/or workforce development needs assessments for tourism-related economic development. These studies will help identify gaps in infrastructure or workforce capacity helping to determine priorities, allocate resources and make organizational improvements in support of tourism and economic development. This will help inform the Federal Government on

how to better support tourism development in Indigenous communities in coordination with other transportation and economic development programs.

Fourth, Indian Affairs will leverage the newly reformed White House Council on Native American Affairs to improve inter-agency coordination to support Tribal tourism between the Department of Transportation, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Small Business Administration to focuses on economic development, energy, and infrastructure.

Finally, Indian Affairs will make the Office of Indian Economic Development the center of its efforts to support Tribal tourism to ensure greater efficiencies and to give Tribes one place to go for NATIVE Act and tourism questions.

Conclusion

Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian cultures cannot be replicated. They are unique and dynamic, full of life and complexity. The NATIVE Act recognizes, as does Indian Affairs, the need for Tribes to tell their stories and share their cultures on their own terms. Tribal tourism continues to face one of its greatest challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic. The team at Indian Affairs and the whole of the Department of Interior is committed to working with Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian organizations on achieving a prosperous and resilient Indigenous tourism economy once again.

Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for the invitation to appear today. I look forward to answering your questions and our continued partnership strengthening the Indigenous tourism industry for Tribes, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiians organizations. Thank you again for your leadership.