

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF CAMILLE L. FERGUSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
AMERICAN INDIAN ALASKA NATIVE TOURISM ASSOCIATION**

**BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE INTERIOR APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE**

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Introduction

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum and Members of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. I am here to request Fiscal Year 2018 Department of the Interior appropriations to kick start the implementation of the Native American Tourism Improving Visitor Experience Act, the NATIVE Act signed into law last year.

As Executive Director of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA), I have the honor of leading the Nation's only nonprofit solely devoted to developing and sustaining tourism in Indian Country, one of the fastest growing segments of tourism in the world.

Currently, tourism is among the foremost opportunities for economic development in Indian Country. In rural and remote communities, it is one of the only viable opportunities for household income growth.

Indian Country tourism's bright future lies in the more than one billion leisure travelers in the world, and the interest of international visitors in American Indians and what their communities offer—memorable experiences, warm hospitality and unusual landscapes.

Several members of this subcommittee co-sponsored the NATIVE Act, and all members voted for it, endorsing its potential to create jobs, encourage business start-ups, collect and analyze vital economic data to attract infrastructure capital, support the protection of cultural and natural resources, reinforce sovereignty and bolster self-reliance in Indian Country.

You designed the NATIVE Act to bring federal resources to bear on Nation's economic goals in tourism, including tribal tourism. We have designed AIANTA to help facilitate tribal and federal agency collaboration, organize tribal resources and build capacity to attract and satisfy travelers to Indian Country destinations.

So together we are prepared and ready to accelerate economic progress in Indian Country, and so are tribes.

More than 200 U.S. tribes are eager to create or improve visitor destinations on their lands. There are also a number of tribes already successful in tourism eager to attract more visitors by working more closely with their public land neighbors and cross-educating travel markets to minimize marketing costs. Tribes eager to get going include villages in Alaska, pueblos in New Mexico, reservations in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and North and South Dakotas, tribes in the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest, Minnesota and Wisconsin, Louisiana and Oklahoma, just to point out a few.

Indian Country Tourism Contributes Billions to the U.S. Economy

International visitation to Indian Country contributed an estimated **\$8.6 billion to the U.S. economy in 2015**, according to U.S. Commerce Department estimates. AIANTA is requesting a relatively small investment given these returns.

Since AIANTA began working on international marketing and outreach, visitation to Native American communities from overseas has grown by from 700,000 in 2007 to 2 million in 2015, an increase of 181%.

That's an amazing increase in eight years, and the data gets better: when overseas travelers visit tribal lands, **they stay longer in the U.S.—an average of 12 additional days**. Which means they spend about twice as much money as the average overseas traveler while they are here. They visit more states and cities, use more rental cars, and take more domestic flights. They visit more National Parks, small towns, art galleries and museums, fine restaurants, and cultural heritage sites compared to all overseas visitors. (See U.S. Department of Commerce National Travel and Tourism Office Inbound International Visitor Survey)

With the targeted assistance and support of the NATIVE Act, AIANTA believes tribes can attract 3 million overseas visitors to Indian Country by 2020. Using the formula developed by the U.S. Travel Association for spending per overseas visitor, that translates into more than \$13 billion in revenue.

Foundation of the NATIVE Act

For a decade, through its cooperative agreement with BIA Division of Transportation, AIANTA has nurtured a network of federal agency, university, and tourism industry partners and engaged national Indian and non-Indian nonprofits to leverage those federal resources into an effective tribal tourism network. With our partners, AIANTA and BIA have:

- Delivered technical assistance and created certificate training in cultural tourism
- Established a national tribal destinations web site, NativeAmerica.Travel, for tribes to market their destinations directly to the world's travelers
- Established a presence for tribes and tribal businesses in international travel markets—participating in world travel marketplaces in Europe as well as IPW, run by the U.S. Travel Association, and venturing into the United Kingdom and Chinese markets.
- Expanded into new areas including project partnerships between national parks and tribes, agri-tourism, improved data collection, creating a tribal tourism consultation network, discussing the next steps in collaboration with the federal agencies, and encouraging new partnership projects between national parks and tribes.

AIANTA has provided these services to tribes as well as facilitation in federal agencies and tribal projects through a Bureau of Indian Affairs Division of Transportation cooperative agreement that is paid for with Transportation Administrative turn-back funds. If you take the total revenues from overseas visitors to Indian Country in 2015—\$8.6 billion—and divide it by the average of the funds AIANTA has received from BIA since 2011—\$800,000—the return on investment to the American economy is more than \$10,000 for each dollar spent on BIA tribal tourism programs. This does not take into consideration domestic visitors' spending in Indian Country, for which we do not yet have adequate data.

Accelerating Tribal Tourism Development by Implementing the NATIVE Act

AIANTA is making appropriations requests in four categories in the Department of the Interior for FY2018. Our first priority incorporates cooperative agreement work previously mentioned and provides funds to begin implementing the following NATIVE Act provisions:

- Improving visitor data collection and analysis. Decision-making, business planning, applying for loans, attracting capital, all require data collection and analysis. AIANTA cannot site domestic visitation because there is no adequate data. The data collection and analysis provision of the NATIVE Act will change that.
- Designing and initiating the consultation process that brings federal agencies and tribes into collaboration and cooperation on tribal tourism priorities.
- Identifying federal programs that can be used to support tourism capacity building and tourism infrastructure.
- Increasing integration or alignment of publications and websites maintained by tribes and federal agencies.
- Defining and creating a better user experience for visitors.
- Begin the discussions to create innovative visitor portals between tribes and parks, landmarks, heritage and cultural sites and showcasing diversity of indigenous people on federal lands.
- Improving access to transportation programs that assist tribal community capacity building for tourism and trade including planning for visitor enhancement and safety.

In this first priority, AIANTA is requesting \$2.4 million for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Division of Transportation to continue its existing cooperative agreement with AIANTA for nation-wide tourism training and technical assistance, build-out of the tribal destination web site, international tour operator outreach, public lands partnership outreach and implementation of key provisions of the NATIVE act listed above.

AIANTA is requesting \$1 million be appropriated to the BIA Energy and Economic Development Division for NATIVE Act model projects in destination development.

We also request \$1 million for the National Park Service and \$1 million for the Bureau of Land Management so those agencies can begin consultations with tribes on revising management plans and collaborating on the specific needs and opportunities of tribes, as outlined in the NATIVE Act. Our total request is \$4.9 million.

We are supported in this funding request by the U.S. Travel Association, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Alaska Federation of Natives, All Pueblo Council of Governors, Nevada Inter-Tribal Council, Intertribal Transportation Association, Sitka Tribes of Alaska and many other organizations and tribes. The Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Association is voting on a support resolution this month.

Within BIA's Division of Energy and Economic Development, we have requested funds to begin or complete nine NATIVE Act tribal tourism model development projects. Some of the regions indicating readiness to participate are in Louisiana, Nevada, Alaska, Montana, North Dakota and the Pacific Northwest.

Each project has three components: 1) working with the tribes of a specified state or region, we will guide a destination assessment of the region that identifies priorities and best strategies for the development of cultural tourism; 2) assist tribes in establishing a sustainable

tourism management organization with a shared vision, action agenda, business plan and training, and 3) develop tourism products and enterprises leading to job creation, convene tour operators to get real-world advice, and supply seed funding for 2-3 entrepreneurs to attract additional funding and additional strategic partners.

In all projects, AIANTA and its partners will supply training and technical assistance to develop and market tourism products and itineraries, facilitate working with state tourism offices, National Parks, other federal lands and non-profits, help find resources for community-based enterprises and connect tribes to regional, national and international tour operators.

Alaska's Far North region has an unemployment rate of 22% and is committed to establishing a unifying strategic tourism initiative, the North Slope Visitor's Bureau, a destination management organization. A project in Alaska's Far North could encompass the North Slope and the Northwest Arctic, two national parks and a national preserve and the Porcupine Caribou Herd migration.

In Nevada, tourism accounts for 13% of GDP and generates \$64.4 billion. Yet tribes are not organized to reap the benefits of millions of visitors annually. As an example, if the six reservations or colonies in the Reno-Tahoe area organized into a destination management organization they could take advantage of the 3 million annual visitors to Lake Tahoe. Phase 1 and 2 of this multi-phase model project can be implemented in FY18.

A Pacific Northwest project could include ten tribes in the Columbia River basin who want to create a destination management organization and work together to attract more visitors from Asia. Every project region has yet to be defined but Minnesota, New Mexico, South Dakota, Idaho, Montana, Washington, Oklahoma and Massachusetts are good candidates.

All of the model projects would begin in FY18 except North Dakota, which has already completed the first year of destination development. First year results created a five-reservation non-profit North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance that received the endorsement of all five tribal governments and tribal colleges, established a Tourism Department within Spirit Lake Nation, and gained the support of North Dakota state agencies including North Dakota Tourism. The project also identified products to develop. The next phase will convene private sector partners including tour operators, support new product development and create micro-enterprises and jobs. The model projects mentioned previously will follow a similar pattern in their second year.

Conclusion

The election and transition have delayed federal agency analysis and commitment of resources to NATIVE Act implementation for FY18, but as AIANTA fully engages all of the agencies directed to action in the NATIVE Act, resources within current agency budgets will be identified that can be used to implement the Act's provisions. Through AIANTA's many partnerships, we will also attract foundation and private funds to support tribal/federal agency collaborations, as we have done at the Grand Canyon National Park Desert Watchtower project. In the meantime, to kick start the gains that are possible in the near term, we ask that this Subcommittee to appropriate seed funds.

On behalf of all tribes in tourism, AIANTA thanks Congress for its exceptional, ongoing support of Indian Country tourism and economic development. We look forward to working with this Subcommittee and the Department of Interior agencies this year to bring back impressive results to you and all our Congressional supporters in the first year of NATIVE Act implementation.