

Balance between traditional activities, tourism key to sustaining coastal Alaska communities

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When Lee Cerveny arrived in coastal southeast Alaska in 1999, she intended to interview local women about their relationship with the natural environment. She soon found, however, that women she met were more interested in talking about tourism and making sense of the changes that were taking place within their communities. Cerveny adapted her research focus on the fly, ultimately conducting more than 200 hour-long interviews as part of a two-year-long ethnographic study on coastal Alaskans' perceptions of tourism. The findings of her work were recently published as a book titled "Nature and Tourists in the Last Frontier: Local Encounters with Global Tourism in Coastal Alaska."

"I really came at the right time to witness a variety of important changes occurring in southeast Alaska, such as a sharp increase in cruise travel to the region and a resulting explosion in nature-based tourism activity," said Cerveny, a research social scientist. "This study represents the first comprehensive investigation of the social and cultural effects of tourism in this region."

Cerveny's book begins by discussing tourism and its implications for rural communities in general and then specifically examines three coastal towns—Haines, Hoonah, and Craig—and the perspectives of their residents. Among the book's key findings:

-- Tourism plays a vital role in the southeast Alaska economy, and its

presence shapes the lives of residents and their relations with their natural and social environment;

-- Nature-based tourism has resulted in expanded access to undeveloped areas, where companies have built recreation infrastructure and provided recreation opportunities that allow up-close experiences with natural and cultural attractions;

-- Tourism can alter host communities as citizens transform to meet the expectations of visitors and the tourism industry. Catering to industry standards and consumer preferences results in visible changes to communities and natural places;

-- Changes may be more deeply felt in places like Alaska, where residents have close connections to their natural resources;

-- Formal, interest-based organizations have used public processes to mitigate tourism effects and to resolve access issues.

Ultimately, Cervený's work suggests that by reaching out to stakeholders and social groups and understanding their relation to tourism and the natural environment, public officials may mitigate future challenges associated with rapid tourism growth.

"Finding a balance between traditional livelihoods and cultural practices and tourism is critical," Cervený said. "With careful planning, tourism can coexist alongside other local uses of natural resources."

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