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**IMAGES OF TOURISM AND COMMUNITY
IN THE ALASKA WILDERNESS**

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Biographical Note

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The growth of international tourism has made the industry the dominant force in the world economy and it is now promoted as a source of funding sustainable community development. Developing and marketing communities as tourist destinations rarely comes without human costs, however, including a transfiguration of the inhabitants' social history and the dynamics of their place. Yet, tourism proponents largely minimize such concerns, leaving important questions unanswered. Consequently, there exists a tremendous need for additional study and debate as to the long-term effects of tourism on emergent destination communities.

In response, this study presents the preliminary findings of research among residents and visitors to the twin Alaska "ghost" towns of Kennicott and McCarthy and the implications for a new direction in tourism studies, one that recognizes a socially-defined landscape often overlooked in the traditional literature. Through the values and meanings ascribed to them by visitors, residents, and the tourism industry--both those socially constructed and those taken for granted--communities become tourist destinations, interpreted and defined within a larger cultural and physiographic network (Agnew and Duncan 1989; Murphy 1992; Shaw and Williams 1994; Squire 1994).

Abandoned in 1938, Kennicott and McCarthy were "rediscovered" in 1989 by outdoor recreationists, and the mountains and the national park that once shielded them now beckon to ever-increasing numbers of tourists. Since 1989, the number of short-term visitors alone has increased by nearly 1,000% (from less than 3,000 to approximately 50,000 in 1995), a figure augmented by a swelling number of seasonal residents and small service providers. And the situation shows no signs of abating in the near future. By the year 2020, the U.S. National Park Service Regional Office in Anchorage estimates that recreational visits to the park and preserve will exceed 152,200 persons a year.

Because of the growth in tourists, and the disproportionate number who now opt to stay in town, rather than camp as was previously the norm, friction is growing among residents as they struggle to cope with the demand. Though the intensity of the conflict is relatively new to these communities, whose members have long prided themselves on their ability to govern by consensus, it is certainly not rare in

others throughout Alaska, where tourism and outdoor recreation-oriented retail trades and services now constitute the dominant element of the regional economy (Alaska Department of Labor 1994).

Anxious to ascertain the extent to which changing expectations were affecting individual perceptions and behavior, research was initiated in 1991. The preliminary objectives were 1) to collect demographic and cognitive data as a baseline for documenting future change, and 2) to encourage a proactive, community tourism plan by giving form to the experiential landscapes of those who come to Kennicott-McCarthy. More specifically, how do people perceive the two towns and the landscapes that envelope them: physical, social, and historic? Second, what place experiences are reflected in the mapped images of the different groups who used the area?

The desire was to ascertain whether environmental perception might assist park planners to cope with the increased tourism, while simultaneously preserving opportunities for community development and the rural lifestyle and identity that characterizes the Alaskan "Bush." Although the qualitative nature of cognitive mapping presents some difficulty for those who prefer the statistical "accuracy" of quantitative measurements, such maps excel in making obvious the emotional significance that residents and visitors attach to communities like Kennicott-McCarthy (Magi 1989). Through the collection of "place" images, the critical role that tourism development plays in shaping the morphology of travel destinations, through the influx of new ideas and changing patterns of social behavior, is more fully defined and explored (Gould and White 1986).

A total of 110 questionnaires were distributed during the 1991 summer season, when visitation is highest, to the 24 adults then in residence (representing 19 families), and a random, small-scale sampling of 86 visitors. Most questions were open-ended to elicit undirected perceptions. Base maps and reference points were absent as well, minimizing subjective biases and predetermined responses that might result from symbolic suggestions of omission or inclusion. Freehand maps also encouraged more definitive images of individualized behavior and perception (Greenbie 1975).

Though arrangements were made to retrieve the completed questionnaires, nearly 20% were returned by mail at the sender's expense, evidence of the high level of interest among respondents. In addition, though nearly every participant initially professed an inability to draw maps, 98% eventually did so, evidence that cognitive images are an integral component of place experience (Harvey 1981).

Both groups were evenly divided in gender and closely matched in age, though residents tend to be younger on average. Less than 5% of the visitors were employed in non-professional positions, consistent with Dickinson's (1991) study of tourism to Scotland's national parks. The majority also possessed some college education, though there was a disproportionately greater number of graduate degrees among residents. This unexpected finding astonishes those tourists who presume local people to be illiterate because of their subsistence lifestyles.

Nearly half of the visitors (40.7%) obtained their information--and motivation for the trip--through the recommendations of family and friends, and only secondarily from travel sources (35.2%) or the U.S. National Park Service (6.5%). This contradicts the assertions of some local people who hold the Park Service most responsible for the tourism growth though, certainly, the park itself serves as an attraction. Perhaps most significantly, nearly all (94%) arrived independently by automobile, an issue of considerable consequence for transportation plans now under design.

Both residents and tourists expressed a similar preference for selected landscape features, though considerable discrepancy exists in the functional role or attraction associated with each. While visitors described the physical landscape in terms of location and movement, it served to establish territory and express relationships between local people, creating a narrative of the community (Lowenthal 1975; Mansfeld 1992; Singh 1986). In general, tourists describe a landscape centered around the road into McCarthy, local guest facilities and accommodations, and the historic mining sites. Residents portray a more diverse, human landscape, including cemeteries and places of habitation in their depiction, evidence that "place" identification is contingent upon personal experience and familiarity (Lynch 1960). Even more

significantly, by overlaying the cognitive images onto topographic maps, it becomes clear that the experiential boundaries that define Kennicott-McCarthy for tourists and residents diverges from those areas designated as park and wilderness lands. This difference may present considerable challenge for tourism and park planning in the Wrangells.

Also of note were the revised perceptions that visitors held of the residents subsequent to their visit. While 24% identified Kennicott's mining history as the stimulus for the trip, little aware that people actually resided in town, 34% cited the presence of a "friendly community" practicing an authentic "Alaskan Bush lifestyle" as the dominant cultural image upon departure.

In conclusion, to review the preliminary data is to learn something about a landscape that is viewed 1) physically--the scenic grandeur of the surrounding mountains and glaciers, 2) historically--the vernacular architecture of the ghost towns and the scattered remnants and artifacts of their mining history, and 3) socially--a viably functioning Alaskan community. Separately and collectively, the results describe a postmodern environment delineated by institutional boundaries and the behavior of tourists and residents alike--reflecting an eclectic framework of ideas, experiences, and expectations derived both anecdotally and directly--with the evidence laid out in the historically-contingent, socially-constructed character of the emerging tourist destination (Ap 1992, 1993; Prentice 1992). As such, an understanding of perceptions, and their role in influencing personal behavior and judgements about place, may be the most critical component of an effective, sustainable tourism plan for a destination community.

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