



AIANTA

American Indian Alaska Native
Tourism Association

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN AND INSULAR AFFAIRS
ON
“ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION TO CREATE PROSPEROUS TRIBAL ECONOMIES”
FEBRUARY 15, 2024**

Subcommittee Chair Hageman, Vice Chair González-Colón and members of the committee, thank you for receiving testimony on behalf of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, Inc. (“AIANTA”). We appreciate the opportunity to express our priorities to meet the needs of tourism and economic development across Native Nations and communities across the United States. We would particularly like to address the *Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience Act* (“NATIVE Act”).

TOP LINES

Revision to the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act is being requested to support a permanent role for cultural tourism to support economic diversification for American Indian Tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations.

AMERICAN INDIAN ALASKA NATIVE TOURISM ASSOCIATION

AIANTA is the only national organization specifically dedicated to advancing cultural tourism for American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. For over 25 years, AIANTA has provided technical assistance and training to American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians to support economic development and to ensure cultural perpetuation through the development and growth of cultural tourism. AIANTA works with American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians to develop, grow and sustain cultural tourism enterprises, businesses and organizations.

AIANTA, an all Native-led nonprofit, serves all 574 federally recognized tribes, tribal organizations and Native Hawaiian organizations to support cultural tourism development and growth nationwide. We are the only organization specifically dedicated to advancing Native cultural tourism as a tool to perpetuate and protect our cultural identity while providing economic opportunities within Native Nations and communities.

For many Native Nations and communities, tourism is a new and emerging industry and Native Nations and communities do not have a robust, fully trained workforce to meet the demand. Without inclusion in the existing, layered tourism support structures, each sovereign native nation, village and community is forced to develop tourism plans, programming and infrastructure from scratch. This process is happening in a world where tourism is already



occurring with ramifications both cultural, environmental and economic. Even for those tribes with casinos, the infrastructure and planning are not always in place to diversify funding and/or to fully develop tourism opportunities that reflect, protect and perpetuate culture and Native landscapes.

AIANTA's priorities are (1) to provide technical assistance and training, research, and publications to American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities engaged in tourism and hospitality; (2) to facilitate conversations with the Native communities, federal agencies, non-profit associations, and elected officials on the economic and cultural importance of a healthy hospitality industry; (3) to highlight the importance of visiting authentic Native destinations, including cultural, heritage, historic, and artistic sites; and (4) to generate awareness, interest and demand for these destinations with domestic and international travelers, the travel trade and the media.

BUILDING TOURISM IN NATIVE NATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

Native enterprises and businesses face layered challenges in building out their cultural tourism programming ranging from lack of access to financing to basic infrastructure needs. For the last 25 years, AIANTA has provided outreach, tailored trainings, marketing and resources alongside elevating cultural tourism to the national level and to the industry. This includes AIANTA's support and role as facilitator (2019) of the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act (Section 4d). From FY 2019-2022, AIANTA provided direct outreach and resources to 2,665 individual contacts, electronic outreach with 2,095,252 sent and 3,677 participants in training supporting economic development and cultural perpetuation. (AIANTA's Report to Congress as provided to the Office of Indian Economic Development).

Native Nations and communities also face inconsistent inclusion in the tourism infrastructure designed to support tourism development. Tourism marketing and support is funded in the United States through taxes, fees and general fund allocations. Due to the unique status of American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States, tourism systems are not fully and consistently in place to support cultural tourism destinations and product. Specifically, Native Nations are not supported by local, regional or national destination marketing organizations and/or the tourism industry because they often do not contribute to the fees and tax support systems that fund tourism development and growth. This is despite the significant economic impact of Native Nations and communities on the economy.

In 2021, AIANTA, in partnership with SMS Research, released a report on the economic impact of Indigenous tourism businesses in the United States based on analysis of 2017 Census Data. <https://www.aianta.org/research/economic-impact/>. This data points to the economic impact, with American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian hospitality businesses contributing nearly \$14 billion to the U.S. economy (2017 U.S. Census data) and based on preliminary review of 2019 Annual Business Survey, the economic impact grew:

- In 2019, the 120,869 recorded AIANNH firms in the tourism sector was three times more than in 2017.



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- Of the 120,869 AIANNH-owned tourism firms, most (94%) were self-employed individuals (113,200 firms without paid employees), while 7,669 (6%) were firms with paid employees.
- AIANNH-owned firms in the tourism sector directly provided 188,524 jobs across the U.S. in 2019.
- In 2019, annual sales of AIANNH-owned tourism firms contributed \$15.7B to the U.S. economy, a 13% increase from 2017.

As demonstrated by the above data, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was a leading opportunity for jobs and economic development in Native Nations and communities. In some rural and remote communities, it is one of the only viable opportunities for household income.

Although Census data is not yet available specifically detailing the impact of COVID-19, the international visitation data points to the decline in visitation. According to U.S. Department of Commerce, approximately 1.7 million overseas visitors (4.4% of total market share) traveled to an American Indian Community in 2019. International visitors are good for the Native Nations and communities they visit and for the entire tourism economy because they stay longer in the U.S. than the average overseas traveler and visit more destinations (2019 U.S. Travel and Tourism Statistics, National Travel and Tourism Office, U.S. Dept of Commerce). In 2020, the impact of COVID-19 was felt dramatically in Native Nations and communities with approximately 251,000 overseas visitors (3.3% of market share) – an 85% drop in visitors.

Significantly, the ramifications of lack of inclusion in U.S. Tourism systems became painfully clear when the EDA's 2021 non-competitive Travel, Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Recovery Act funding, designed to aid recovery from COVID-19 shutdowns, went to States and territories to support tourism marketing, infrastructure, workforce and projects to rejuvenate leisure, business and international travel ***with none of the \$510 million of the relief funding being set aside for Native Nations and communities*** ([TTOR Fact Sheet.pdf \(eda.gov\)](#)). While the rest of the tourism industry is in full recovery mode with the pandemic fully in the rear-view mirror, Native Nations and communities are left to rebuild on their own. Based on the U.S. Department of Commerce Visitation to American Indian Community data, recovery is slowly underway with 321,000 overseas visitors in 2021 (3.5% of market share) and 1,006,000 overseas visitors in 2022 (4.2% of market share).

By being consistently left out of the tourism support structures, including relief funding, Native Nations and communities are not on an even playing field with the entirety of the U.S. tourism infrastructure. Through educational forums and outreach, AIANTA is working to ensure the systems gap is addressed through industry access, capacity building and marketing support for full participation in tourism.

Tourism is not a go it alone endeavor – it is inherently reliant on connected, collaborative systems. AIANTA is working to fundamentally shift and improve the operating environment for underrepresented entrepreneurs - specifically Native-owned and Native-led cultural tourism operations and enterprises. AIANTA is the only organization specifically dedicated to advancing Native cultural tourism as a tool for cultural perpetuation. We work across the cultural tourism



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continuum - from product development and partnership building to marketing and promoting Native tourism destinations and product, domestically and internationally.

NATIVE AMERICAN TOURISM AND IMPROVING VISITOR EXPERIENCE (NATIVE) ACT

This committee is critical to helping build Native tourism economies.

Clarification on the intent of the NATIVE Act is needed to ensure that the Appropriations designated by Congress are being utilized for their intended purposes.

The purpose of the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act, Public Law 114-221, is “To enhance and integrate Native American tourism, empower Native American communities, increase coordination and collaboration between Federal tourism assets, and expand heritage and cultural tourism opportunities in the United States.” The NATIVE Act outlines how federal agencies engaged in recreation and tourism shall include Indian Tribes, tribal organizations and Native Hawaiian Organizations in management plans and tourism initiatives in Section 2:

The purposes of the Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience (NATIVE) Act, Public Law 114-221, as listed in Section 2, are as follows:

- (1) to enhance and integrate Native American tourism--
 - (A) to empower Native American communities; and
 - (B) to advance the National Travel and Tourism Strategy;
- (2) to increase coordination and collaboration between Federal tourism assets to support Native American tourism and bolster recreational travel and tourism;
- (3) to expand heritage and cultural tourism opportunities in the United States to spur economic development, create jobs, and increase tourism revenues;
- (4) to enhance and improve self-determination and self-governance capabilities in the Native American community and to promote greater self-sufficiency;
- (5) to encourage Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations to engage more fully in Native American tourism activities to increase visitation to rural and remote areas in the United States that are too difficult to access or are unknown to domestic travelers and international tourists;
- (6) <<NOTE: Grants. Loans.>> to provide grants, loans, and technical assistance to Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations that will--
 - (A) spur important infrastructure development;
 - (B) increase tourism capacity; and
 - (C) elevate living standards in Native American communities; and
- (7) to support the development of technologically innovative



projects that will incorporate recreational travel and tourism information and data from Federal assets to improve the visitor experience.

The NATIVE Act also identifies the role of “an entity or organization with a demonstrated record in tribal communities of defining, introducing, developing and sustaining American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian tourism and related activities in a manner that respects and honors native traditions and values” to enter into a memorandum of understanding or cooperative agreement with the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Commerce to identify areas where technical assistance is needed and to provide a means of delivery and coordinate delivery of the assistance. (130 STAT 849, Sec 4).

In September of 2018, AIANTA signed a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Interior and the Department of Commerce “to formalize a role for AIANTA, pursuant to section 4(d) of the [NATIVE] Act, and strengthen collaboration and coordination related to travel and tourism on Federal and Tribal Lands.” (See [MOU_final.pdf \(aianta.org\)](#))

In March of 2019, AIANTA entered into a five-year Cooperative Agreement A19AC00017 with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). A collaborative workplan was developed by the DOI, DOC and AIANTA in August of 2019 for implementation of the NATIVE Act specific to the following goals:

Goal 1: Identify areas where technical assistance is needed

Goal 2: Coordination and delivery of technical assistance

To support implementation of the NATIVE Act, Congress has appropriated \$19,500,000 through the BIA/Office of Indian Economic Development for the coordination of the identification and delivery of technical assistance to Indian Tribes, Tribal Organizations and Native Hawaiian Organizations and to provide grants (see NATIVE Act, Section 2(6) above).

Although listed as a grantee, AIANTA is the organization designated to facilitate the NATIVE Act and is not a grantee, but rather a partner in implementation efforts. AIANTA received FY2018 and FY2019 appropriation funding totaling \$4,400,000 for implementation of the goals set in support of the NATIVE Act and as outlined in the five-year Cooperative Agreement for the identification and delivery of technical assistance. From March 2019-July 2022, AIANTA has distributed over 2.45 million electronic messages/outreach and resources; provided direct outreach and resources to 2,665 cultural tourism partners; and developed and provided 139 tailored, responsive cultural tourism trainings to 1,418 cultural tourism partners. (AIANTA’s Report to Congress provided to OIED).

The breakdown of how the appropriated funds were spent as detailed in the Report to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and the Committee on Natural Resources of the House of Representatives FY 2020-2022 provides insight on how the funds have gone beyond the intent of the NATIVE Act. Including Administration Costs utilized internally by the BIA/OIED totaling \$4,624,000 – ***more funding than was dedicated to the non-profit agency identified by the Department of Interior and the Department of Commerce to act to identify and provide technical assistance and training as required in the NATIVE Act.***

Additional BIA/OIED funding went to Pilot Projects totaling \$3,928,002 with \$1,725,011 going to an academic institution for projects in North Dakota, South Dakota and for an International Forum for Indigenous tourism (North and South America); \$818,022 went to an additional academic institution for projects in Virginia and Montana; \$500,000 went to a tribal organization to provide technical assistance (duplicating efforts of AIANTA); with the remaining \$884,000 going to other tribal entities. BIA/OIED also provided \$7,088,553 for their Tribal Tourism Grant Program.

AIANTA recommends a full and consistent commitment to equity and inclusion of American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians in the United States tourism system. AIANTA encourages equitable distribution of tourism funding through direct investments in the identification and delivery of technical assistance and training specific to cultural tourism facilitated by “an entity or organization with a demonstrated record in tribal communities of defining, introducing, developing, and sustaining American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian tourism and related activities in a manner that respects and honors native traditions and values” (Public Law 114-221, Sec. 4(d)(1)).

Revision/clarification to the NATIVE Act is being requested. AIANTA is requesting that additional language be added to support the implementation of the NATIVE Act to be added modeled after NAHASDA to support consistent support of the growth of economic opportunities in Native Nations and communities through engagement in the cultural tourism/hospitality/recreation sector. ***It is also critical that both the Department of Interior and the Department of Commerce are actively involved in implementation of the NATIVE Act.***

Further, it was known that the federal government does not have expertise in the tourism industry, but it does however have expertise in giving out grants. The NATIVE Act was intended to ensure that a Native non-profit with experience and the expertise in cultural tourism collaborate with Tribes, Tribal Organizations and Native Hawaiian Organizations across the country so they could determine themselves what they would be willing to share. That non-profit would be better positioned in the industry and within the Native communities to do this work; adept at navigating the intricate and complex systems and relationships that make up the tourism industry. This model was to play a critical role in ensuring Native voices are included in the economic opportunities created by one of the largest service sectors in the world.

Replacement language for Section 4(d) as noted in Section (d)(3):

d) TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE. —

(1) IN GENERAL.—The Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Secretary of Commerce, shall enter into a memorandum of understanding or cooperative agreement with an entity or organization with a demonstrated record in tribal communities of defining, introducing, developing, and sustaining American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian tourism and related activities in a manner that respects and honors native traditions and values.

(2) COORDINATION. —The memorandum of understanding or cooperative agreement described in paragraph (1) shall formalize a role for the organization or entity to serve as a



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facilitator between the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Commerce and the Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations—

(A) to identify areas where technical assistance is needed through consultations with Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations to empower the Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations to participate fully in the tourism industry; and

(B) to provide a means for the delivery of technical assistance and coordinate the delivery of the assistance to Indian tribes, tribal organizations, and Native Hawaiian organizations in collaboration with the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Commerce, and other entities with distinctive experience, as appropriate.

(3) FUNDING. — **There are authorized to be appropriated through each of the named agencies, including but not limited to, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Commerce, for assistance for the organization or entity in paragraph (1) such sums as may be necessary for each of the fiscal years of allocation.** In addition, subject to the availability of appropriations, the head of each Federal agency, including the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Transportation, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the Secretary of Labor shall obligate any funds made available to the head of the agency to cover implementation incurred by the organization or entity described in paragraph (1) in carrying out programs or activities of the agency.

CONCLUSION

When done well, tourism and related economic development provide social and economic stability to the most remote rural communities and mainstream city neighborhoods, complementing the effort of American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian enterprises, businesses, organizations, and agencies working to build economies and contribute to the growth of the U.S. tourism industry. Tourism, including agritourism, outdoor recreation, eco-tourism, astro-tourism and more brings revenue to Native Nations and communities providing jobs, localized investments and the perpetuation of cultural practices; all of which contributes to the resiliency of Native Nations and communities. AIANTA stands ready to help rebuild Native Nations and communities and supports full implementation of the NATIVE Act to build a brighter future.