

## **Sustainability in Juneau Tourism: Preserving our Past to Protect the Future**

Tourism contributes significantly to the Juneau community, providing both seasonal and year-round income and employment opportunities. However, many Juneau residents are increasingly alarmed that our tourism industry is growing at an unchecked rate, without due consideration of its impact to our culture, environment, and quality of life. As we receive nearly 1.3 million visitors this summer, many wonder if we are pushing the limits of our capacity to reasonably accommodate these visitors. At what volume of traffic (people, ships, planes, and buses) do we begin to erode the last remnants of Juneau's natural beauty including incredible sounds of songbirds, eagles, even whales and seals as well as the simple quiet evenings we used to know? How can we knowingly tolerate the loss of our healthy ecosystems and small-town amenities, which—ironically—is the very essence of what attracts visitors to Juneau in the first place?

What are we doing to avoid this tipping point and to preserve Juneau's unparalleled environment, diversity and quality of life for this and future generations?

It is with these questions in mind we submit the following discussion paper, along with several proposed guiding principles for sustainability in Juneau's tourism industry. This paper is intended to stimulate discussion amongst residents of all ages, business leaders, biologists, and industry members; and encourages the formation of a coalition to set standards for tourism operators. In this regard, we appreciate the efforts of the industry-led group, Tourism Best Management Practices, to address day-to-day concerns. However, the proposed coalition must deal with the broader questions raised above and should include local residents, elected officials, small business owners, and tourism industry representatives, and should solicit public input in the creation of clear and enforceable guidelines that allow tourism to thrive in a way that benefits the community.

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## Overview (draft 7)

Nestled in the Tongass National Forest and on the ancestral homelands of the Aak'w Kwaan and T'aaku Kwáan peoples, Juneau (*Dzánti K'ihéeni*) is a modern oasis that offers a close-knit community, vibrant indigenous cultures, world-class outdoor recreational opportunities, and a thriving arts scene, all surrounded by astounding natural beauty. Juneau residents enjoy living in a small community with good jobs, quality education and access to bountiful natural resources, including clean air and water. Many live here because of the character of our city and the quality of our environmental surroundings, and strive to preserve those qualities while supporting economic growth through tourism.

Juneau's unique mix of cosmopolitan amenities and small town comforts appeals to residents and tourists alike. Our surrounding temperate rainforest and marine ecosystem are home to an exquisite abundance of flora and fauna, including bears, wolves, sea otters, seals, humpback whales, orca, and more than 280 species of birds. The history and culture of this area are equally rich, having been shaped by the indigenous peoples who have lived here for millennia. We are fortunate to share their lands and to have access to employment, business and educational opportunities that make it possible to live here.

Tourists who visit Juneau for a day or a short trip don't get to experience the priceless benefits of living here, but they are willing to pay for a glimpse of it. In 2016, 1.1 million out-of-state visitors spent \$183.6 million in Juneau, not including the \$26.4 million spent on local tours sold through cruise ship packages and \$8.2 million spent by cruise ship crew<sup>1</sup>. In total, the tourism industry in Juneau generated approximately 2,800 full- and part-time jobs in 2016 and resulted in \$319 million in economic output, about 10 percent of Juneau's total economic output. In 2019, Alaska is expected to receive an estimated 1,310,000 cruise ship passengers, a record high and 12 percent increase from 2018. In 2019, total cruise ship passenger spending in Juneau's summer season is projected to be \$212 million.<sup>2</sup>

Tourism is a critical component of Juneau's economy, and continues to be a much-needed source of employment opportunity and labor income. Concerned residents do not deny the

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<sup>1</sup> Juneau Visitor Profile and Economic Impact Analysis, 2016. McDowell Group. Accessed 28 May 2019

<sup>2</sup> Forecast: More growth ahead. Cruise Lines International Association Alaska. Cruise News. March 2018. Accessed 28 May 2019.

need for a healthy visitor industry, but they do wonder if Juneau is sacrificing its authenticity and disrupting its ecological balance in the hopes of extracting more profit from a growing deluge of tourist traffic. There are limits to how many visitors we can squeeze into our shops and restaurants, how much extra trash we can collect during the summer, how many buses we can fit on our narrow roads, and how many boats we can have on the water without disturbing our marine life, yet we do not hear of any efforts to keep the wave of tourism from growing into a tsunami. Who is thinking about these limits, and what are they doing to ensure that we preserve the qualities of Juneau that make it appealing to tourists in the first place? How many ships, planes, buses, or tourists are “too many”, and what are we doing to avoid a tipping point that will have irreversible impacts on our ecosystem? From boat engines zipping past whales to emissions-spewing buses shuttling visitors to a receding glacier, at what point does the commodification of the “last frontier” take away from the environment and culture that we aim to preserve?

The recent public forum hosted by Tourism Best Management Practices (TBMP) and the Juneau Economic Development Council was an important first step towards answering these questions. Without a shared acknowledgement and definition of our sustainable limits for tourism, opposing interests will work against each other until the issue reaches a boiling point. By creating a coalition of businesses, residents, and local leaders, we can create shared goals for a future of tourism that respects and enhances the community’s character, environment, culture and economy.

Preserving Juneau’s unique cultural and environmental amenities so that they may serve future generations of residents and visitors will require visionary leadership, difficult choices, and a willingness to compromise. This effort should be jointly led by dedicated citizens and a tourism industry that is sincerely committed to a sustainable Juneau, and should be guided by the following principles.

## *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Juneau Tourism:*

1. We must publicly recognize Juneau as a unique community with incredible people, rich history and world-renowned ecosystems, and we must work together to preserve our character, culture, environment and economy.
2. We can support tourism as a pillar of the Juneau economy and continue to create jobs and small business opportunities while also ensuring that tourism growth does not diminish Juneau's quality of life.
3. We must acknowledge the ways in which tourism stresses our delicate ecosystems and exacerbates the negative effects of climate change; and we work towards regulations and limits that mitigate the environmental impacts of tourism and seek sustainable tourism.

*To meet these goals, a Task Force of Juneau residents and small businesses committed to the principles of sustainability and precautionary approach (not stacked with tourism promoters of status quo) should be appointed to work with tourism industry representatives to develop limits and standards:*

4. Juneau visitor and cruise ship numbers should be limited to a sustainable level and tourism activities should be carried out with consideration for the natural environment, local culture and facilities, and the continued opportunity for good jobs. This includes working with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to identify sustainable levels of fish charters to maintain healthy ecosystem and opportunities for local personal use. [Should we put the whale watching here as well?]
5. Noise and pollution regulations should be strictly enforced by tourism industry members to reduce impact on neighborhoods and the surrounding environment. When we no longer hear the songbirds and eagles, we have lost our soul.
6. Tourists and industry operators should "leave no trace", including small items like cigarette butts, plastic wrappers and other trash. Signs should be installed to remind visitors to not engrave on trees, rocks or buildings; and to not step on flora and vegetation including flowers and plant beds.

7. The Task Force and Tourism industry with other concerned citizens should work with the Assembly to develop an action plan to phase out single-use plastic, plastic bags and Styrofoam containers.
8. The tourism industry should educate visitors to leave Juneau's nature and naturally-occurring objects, such as stones, bones, antlers, feathers, and driftwood as they are. Above all, any cultural remains or artifacts should be protected and left alone.
9. Tourism impacts to ecosystems and wildlife should be minimized as much as reasonably possible; aside from fishing, hunting, and proper respectful observation, wildlife should not be disturbed. Industry guidelines and regulations should be implemented to avoid stress to wildlife, including noise and habitat disturbance. This should include an immediate moratorium on Charter Fishing Boat and Whale Watching permits; and limit the number of whale watch boats in proximity to whales.
10. The City & Borough of Juneau Planning Commission and the Juneau Commission on Sustainability should hold public meetings at least once a year to discuss the impacts of tourism. It is possible that a separate Tourism Commission may be required to address the unique and growing challenges and opportunities of tourism.
11. The City & Borough of Juneau should refrain from using public shore lands and access, including viewing access, to establish commercial properties for private use.
12. Tourism industry representatives should commit to having an annual community forum to hear ideas and concerns from community members.
13. The City & Borough of Juneau Assembly should establish an independent "Tourism Ombudsman" to serve as representative of the community and neighborhoods in identifying concerns and recommendations to maintain a sustainable, eco-friendly and considerate tourism industry in Juneau.
14. Juneau should work with other Southeast Alaska communities to create a set of principles and values shared throughout the region. Juneau and other Southeast communities should consider creating a Southeast Tourism Alliance including biological expertise geared towards protecting the region's exquisite unique ecosystems.