Northern Lights Episode 11
The Year the Tourists Didn’t Come

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Interviewees: Sarah Leonard, President & CEO, Alaska Travel Industry Association
Andrew J. Mew, Cruise Line Agencies of Alaska

Introduced by: Sarah Mackie

Sarah Mackie
Hello everyone and welcome to Northern Lights, the Harvard Arctic Initiative Student Podcast. Covid-19 has turned all of our lives upside down. In Alaska, where many people rely on tourism, the impact of lockdowns was particularly problematic, with almost no tourists visiting in 2020. In this episode, Yu Cao investigates how the Alaskan tourist industry has been coping.

Yu Cao is a PhD student at Northern Arizona University, studying Political Science.

This is Yu Cao with: The Year the Tourists Didn’t Come

Yu Cao
Hello, everyone. We have two speakers today who will discuss about: how have the pandemic impacted the tourism industry in Alaska and what are some challenges facing the industry in the post pandemic era? Our first speaker, Sarah Leonard, is the president and CEO of the Alaska Travel Industry Association, which is the leading industry organization aiming at promoting the Alaskan tourism industry. Our conversation starts with my first question: What are some impacts to the tourism industry overall and especially with the decline of international travelers?

[Music]
Sarah Leonard
Well, throughout this pandemic, Alaska overall and our tourism businesses and industry has been really hit hard, I would say devastated, back when it started, “started”, quote and quote, in about March, April of 2020.

Because, and I'll just give a bigger picture, every pathway for travelers, international and domestic, to arrive in Alaska was impacted. From the cruise industry where the government of Canada and the Port of Seattle, Washington, paused a cruise ship travel, to the airlines obviously were impacted, where they didn't cutoff airline. It just decreased a lot of the, right away, a lot of the volume of visitors coming on an airplane. So, we do see some visitors in a normal year come and drive up to Alaska through Canada. And that has also been paused to non-essential travels. So, every pathway where a long haul destination was impacted.

Where we were projecting a record number of visitors, again, primarily driven by our cruise visitation and we were seeing more and more interest and market share with international travelers and from China interested in cruising. So, our cruise partners, you know, had been obviously marketing to all travelers, but we were seeing and hearing from them more and more interest from international travelers who were becoming cruisers, let's say.

So, you know, the short answer is, it really impacted all of our industry and businesses and continues to do so. What I was going to say is that, in… what we were projecting was over 2.4 million visitors before the pandemic. And obviously that was completely, that projection completely went out the window with the pandemic. And we were grateful to see some volume of visitors still arrive by air and then also, we marketed to in-state Alaska residents this past summer and winter to visit places in Alaska, maybe they hadn't visited before.

Yu Cao
Yeah, so I see there are a lot of challenges regarding the recovery of the whole tourism industry in the state, so like, what are some challenges (like) targeting at the tourists, (like) regarding, do we need to shift marketing directions with the travel restrictions, things like that?
Sarah Leonard
Yeah, you know, there are challenges and also pathways to recovery, I think so. In July-ish, I'll say July-ish, the state of Alaska really rolled out the testing processes for all travelers at the airports. And that allowed and as that process smoothed out, that allowed travelers to arrive. We do welcome travelers that follow the testing requirements and come to Alaska. And that happened throughout the summer and winter. So potentially international travelers, I think, moving forward, the challenge and then pathway becomes providing the right information to travelers with the safety information for them, so that they can if they choose to come to Alaska, we make it as easy as possible for them to know how to get here with the safety information in mind.

Yu Cao
Yeah right. So I think...I'm wondering like, what are some ways to help local industries, especially like small business owners, to recover?

Sarah Leonard
Yeah, I know, that's a really good question. So along with the industry protocols, which we try to encourage, we don't require, it's not like a certification program currently, but to encourage businesses to try to adapt, if they haven't already to some of the safety protocols. And some of them are... are pretty reasonable, I think, even for small businesses with a little lower, with not a lot of investment. So, things like, digital...digital information. Use your online information more than maybe you have in the past, and it is such a digital world that that can sometimes be a lower investment. So, whether it's payment systems or marketing materials, try to go online more. So, reduce that in person transaction as much as possible due to mitigating the virus as much as possible.

So things like that, to at a statewide and national level, we're advocating continually for small businesses to receive, continue to receive financial support. So the number one thing we still hear from small businesses is to have that cash liquidity to get through this season and into the high-volume summer season, just to get through another year. Because I think what we're learning is that we're not gonna be able to flip a switch and go back to normal. It's gonna take a slower
recovery and that we're in 2021, we should be slowly recovering and adapting and then 2022, 2023, even more steps towards that pathway to recovery.

[Music]

Yu Cao
Having learnt about the overall impact, our second speaker, Andrew Mew, who is from the Cruise Line Agencies of Alaska, shares with us his experience regarding the changes and obstacles that the cruise industry has experienced this year, because of the pandemic.

Andrew Mew
I mean, part of the change that we experienced was a wholesale cancellation of all cruise activity in Alaska. What we noticed sort of in general was that as each community sort of withdrew, put their own isolation protocols in place and in the state of Alaska anyway, the… the governor encouraged each individual community to take it upon themselves, to come up with the plan that worked for them. So, one of the challenges that we had was obviously what works for Nome is different than what works for Dutch Harbor, which is different than what works for Barrow. And so, what we saw was, there wasn't too much of a cessation or slowdown in moving goods to the communities, the air cargo outfits that were served at least by Alaska Airlines. You know, we're still continue to receive good air service. The big problem was sort of concurrent with the beginning of the pandemic was, Ravn Airlines’ closed. So they were serving a lot of the… the much smaller communities, both for air cargo service and for passenger service. So I know that we were here to talk about cruise tourism, but the air linkage is very important. So, it's getting people to and from the hub points for…for cruise. It's getting material to and from those points.

So really, it is very closely affected by how the air world works. What we found, particularly in Nome, was that the community did a good job of putting a lot of local protections in place. So, we were working with the Nome health folks to, when crew members were moving or not moving, or our agents were going on site on the occasions that we were able to make it to the
field, you know. They had a very robust, formalized system for bringing people into and out of the community. And that was one of the issues that, that they really saw, particularly in these isolated Arctic communities was, they really did not want outsiders coming in. Fortunately for that particular opinion, the loss of the cruise ships meant that at least for Nome, Dutch Harbor, some of the other coastal communities, that the large short-term influx of people that they would normally see didn't occur because of the cancellation of the cruise season, which was largely tied to Canada's decision to… to close its ports for the, for at least 2020. And we'll see how things proceed from there.

Yu Cao

Yeah, that's right. How to build a fast emergency response system? Or like are there any obstacles to the current response system that could be changed?

Andrew Mew

So, so right now, obviously, that's one of the big questions. It was a question that was dealt with very formally when the Crystal Serenity was planning her trip over the Northwest Passage a few years back. I attended some formal tabletop exercises that were put on by the US Coast Guard and the Canadian Coast Guard, as well as other response actors in the region like North Slope Search and Rescue and others. And, the question at that time was framed, what happens if there's an emergency onboard a large cruise ship and how are they gonna solve it? And what we found was that the… the infrastructure that would be brought to bear by the federal government, the Coast Guard, the Air National Guard was very air centric, which was good at taking a problem once it arrived at the coast and moving it out to some other location where you could get medical supplies or support or that kind of thing. But in terms of what was gonna go on out the water, when you're talking about a ship with thousand or more people on it, the helicopter capacity is pretty limited to deal with that. So the focus was largely based on ensuring self-sufficiency, which is why the Serenity brought along the Ernest Shackleton to be her escort, and why they had to go through the requirements within the Polar Code for preparation, operating in those regions and paying attention to how the environment works and being familiar with operating in Arctic environment.
Because if something goes wrong, the first person that's going to be there to save you, is you. We also looked at patterns, traffic patterns of other vessels, we called vessels of opportunity, which means who else was playing within, or not playing excuse me, operating within the region. That might also come to help. So during the same months, the cruise ships are traveling through the Northwest Passage. We also see a spike in research activity, which is good in two different ways, because in an emergency, the rules of operating on the high seas is if somebody needs help, you're going to render it. And if there's more parties out there, particularly more capable, trained parties, there is the opportunity to help each other. Now, that does not mean that you should go into that environment expecting that someone will save you as something goes wrong. But having the extra assets in theater and the extra vessels operating in the region does have, does suggest sort of a safety net that is developing if there's more activity there.

Yu Cao
Yeah right, I agree with the safety net. So, what are some (like) limitations you may think of the industry in the future?

Andrew Mew
Well, I think, there will be a greater focus, obviously, on sanitation and medical screening of personnel, although screening was going on, on the vessels prior to, to the start of this whole pandemic. But, I think we'll expect to see that it becomes a little bit more rigorous, though it was formalized before, perhaps a greater emphasis put on it.

The issue that I worry about is that if the new regulations that come into place require a significant level of local infrastructure, that may cause a problem. I'll use the example of Nome. And I love working at Nome, Nome has an outstanding port. What it is, it's sort of the last vestige of infrastructure in as you move west into the… into the North Bering Sea, in that region. And they have a passenger count of maybe 1,200 passengers a year. That's climbing maybe 2,000 passengers a year. But if the CDC were to mandate screening that required buildings and power and that sort of thing, what I would be worried about is that the infrastructure that's required to house and meet the standards that are designed to protect...ports that are moving 20,000
passengers a day will overwhelm the ability of any small port to be able to… to pay for, to build this big structure or put in place this, this large, expensive, modern system when you just don't have the passenger accounts that are gonna… that are gonna be able to pay for that.

[Music]

**Yu Cao**

Our two speakers indicate that the Alaska tourism industry has been affected by the pandemic in various ways and is moving into a new direction in the post pandemic era, with the cooperation among government officials, business sectors and community members. Tourism is important for economy recovery across Arctic states. The Alaska's case we discussed today will shed light on the recovery and future development of the Arctic tourism industry overall.

**Sarah Mackie**

Today’s episode was written and produced by Yu Cao.

We would like to thank Sarah Leonard, President & CEO of the Alaska Travel Industry Association and Andrew Mew from Cruise Line Agencies of Alaska.

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