



2022 Community Assessment on the Impacts of Increased Tourism in Sitka: Brief Report

Pardee RAND Graduate School | Santa Monica, CA

Project Leaders: Samantha Matthews and Priya Gandhi

Contributors: Sabrina Lee and Peggy Wilcox



87% of survey respondents reported being impacted by increased tourism during summer 2022.³

63% of survey respondents felt the uptick in tourism made Sitka a less desirable place to live.⁴

As Sitka, AK, experienced one of its busiest visitor seasons ever—about 380,000 cruise ship passengers in addition to independent travelers during summer 2022¹—the impacts of increased tourism on the well-being of residents and the community, overall, were unclear. By conducting a survey of adult residents and interviews of select community leaders, this community assessment investigated perceptions of increased tourism, potential impacts, and related solutions.

The assessment was organized around five domains drawn from the City of Santa Monica's Well-being Index²: community, opportunity, place and planet, health, and learning. Within each domain, the assessment focused on key measure areas elevated by community leaders in Sitka as likely to be impacted by increased tourism. The assessment specifically sought to answer:

- What are the community's perspectives on the impacts of tourism in Sitka?
- How does the community perceive tourism to be affecting aspects of their well-being?
- What are the community's perspectives around the benefits and consequences of increased tourism on their individual lives and the community, overall?

439 survey responses were received between August 10-31, 2022, yielding a 6.5% response rate among Sitka's adult population. Survey respondents were comparable to the greater population of Sitka with regard to race and ethnicity, but respondents were generally older, more educated, and more likely to be homeowners. **11** interviews were conducted with community leaders across the public and private sectors.

Findings: General Impacts

When asked to describe general impacts of increased tourism, 356 individuals responded and often discussed the following:

- traffic, transportation, and infrastructure (n=245)
- the economy (n=208)
- the environment and pollution, particularly air pollution from busses (n=89)
- pedestrian congestion (n=85) and pedestrian safety (n=55)
- telecommunications, including cell and internet connection (n=32)

Perceived Benefits

When asked to report perspectives on the benefits of tourism, 427 individuals responded, of whom a majority mentioned economic benefits (n=301) and a little more than a fourth, city tax revenue (n=125). However, a small portion (n=40) of respondents reported equity concerns related to the economic benefits of tourism. One respondent reflected on this dichotomy:

"I believe there are economic benefits for our community due to increased tourism, but it's still unclear if that means all residents will feel some financial relief, such as decreased utility rates over time, or if only the residents who work in tourism will feel the financial rewards of increased tourism."

A small portion (n=38) of respondents also discussed benefits of hospitality and sharing Sitka with others, with one respondent describing their vision for tourism:

"I love that people connect with nature when they are in Sitka, and I hope that the connections they make here permeate throughout their lives. That said, I would love to see tourism become more regenerative and less extractive."

¹ *Creating a City for Wellbeing: Key Findings about Wellbeing Perspectives and Assets in Santa Monica*, City of Santa Monica (2015)

² *Tour Season Recap Sets Stage for 2023*, Daily Sitka Sentinel (2022)

³ 434 respondents to this question

⁴ 436 respondents to this question

Perceived Consequences

When asked to report perspectives on the consequences of tourism, 422 individuals responded, and most commonly discussed traffic, congestion, and transportation (n=152) and strains on infrastructure (n=144). Respondents often wrote about pollution, trash, and the environment (n=112) and consequences to the sense of community (n=84). Some individuals (n=82) discussed impacts to the economy and a shift to a seasonal economy, with a small portion (n=33) of them worried about businesses shifting to those not owned by or catered to locals.

Findings: Well-Being Domains

The assessment inquired about the specific impacts of increased tourism on several key measures that align with the five domains of the City of Santa Monica's Well-Being Framework. The measures of housing availability and costs, access to recreational and cultural sites, and access to local businesses, including grocery stores and restaurants, were perceived to be most impacted. Access to health care services and the availability of youth summer programs were perceived as being less impacted by increased tourism, and are not further discussed in this summary report.

Housing Availability and Costs

When asked about housing availability, 78% of 438 survey respondents reported being impacted to a moderate, large, or very large extent. When asked about impacts of increased tourism on housing costs, 65% of 436 survey respondents reported being impacted to a moderate, large, or very large extent. Respondents most commonly referenced the impact of short-term rentals, like Airbnb and Vrbo, on housing costs and availability (n=76). Small portions of respondents shared personal struggles and barriers to finding housing (n=54), as well as finding housing for employees (n=20). Comments and suggestions from survey respondents and interviewees include:

- Consider higher density housing
- Improve zoning and permitting policies, including around short-term rentals
- Consider new funding sources (e.g., revolving loan fund, Build Back Better grants, public financing)
- Increase coordination between BIHA, USFS, CBS, and Mental Health Trust to open new areas for development (e.g., land exchanges)
- Develop new areas like the 150 acres owned by the STA near the Indian River
- Open land for trailer or RV parks, or encouraging trailer courts as tiny-home neighborhoods through zoning and tax incentives
- Require major employers to consider building staff housing, potentially incentivizing such behavior through tax deductions
- Use university housing as summer housing for seasonal workers

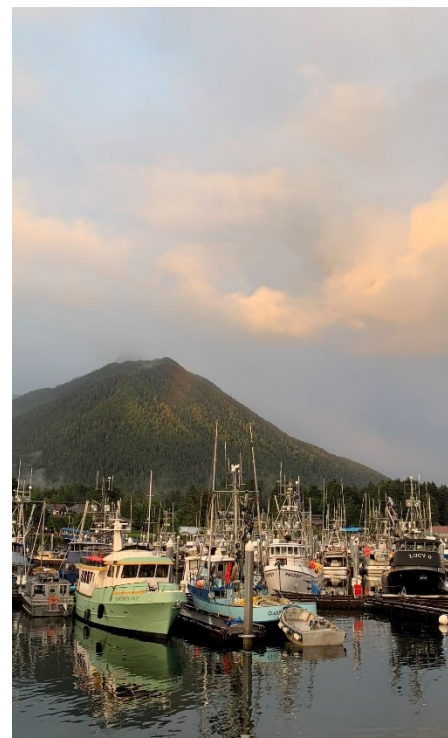
Recreational and Cultural Sites

With respect to the availability or potential to use recreational sites in Sitka (e.g., hiking trails), about half (53%) of 430 survey respondents reported being impacted to a moderate, large, or very large extent. Of those who described impacts to accessing recreational sites (N=202), a majority (n=140) of respondents noted congestion on trails, roads, and/or waterways. Similarly, of those describing impacts to accessing cultural sites (N=121), about half (n=57) mentioned congestion and overcrowding.

“Crowding, especially on busy days. People standing around, preventing movement and access. Parking issues. Tour guides who are not well informed or prepared to ‘usher’ visitors through the sites.”

Key areas reported to be impacted by tourism:

- housing availability & costs
- recreational & cultural sites
- local businesses





81% of survey respondents reported noticing a change in ability to access local businesses due to increased tourism in summer 2022.⁵

Respondent and interviewee suggestions related to such sites include:

- Implement permitting, ticketing, or lottery process to limit the number of individuals at a recreation area, cultural site, fishing grounds, etc.
- Nudge visitors to places like Totem Park to keep them concentrated
- Limit use of ATVs or e-bikes
- Use tourist dollars to improve access: ramps, toilets, curb cuts
- Support and renovate St. Michael's Cathedral with tourism dollars
- Preserve frequented historical sites including Sitka National Historic Park, Castle Hill, and Russian Bishop's House
- Educate visitors through improved signage in English and Tlingit and historically accurate storyboards with efforts led by local Alaskan native interpreters
- Create a committee composed of local tribes to address these issues
- Limit or ban charter fishing in local bays with shellfish for subsistence harvest

Local Businesses

When asked about impacts to purchasing food from grocery stores, 46% of 423 respondents indicated being impacted to a moderate, large, or very large extent. A majority (n=179) shared that accessing businesses was impacted by crowds and congestion. 52 respondents discussed street closures, primarily as a barrier to accessing businesses, however, some respondents shared positive opportunities of the closures. A small portion of respondents shared that tourism had helped local businesses (n=10) or created new businesses, including new food options (n=16). One respondent shared,

“Quality, service, and availability are all negatively impacted by the drastic increase in tourists. An opportunity is that there are more food trucks/carts/stands so this positively impacts small scale entrepreneurs.”

Interviewee suggestions included:

- Have “local hours” to promote more engagement among local residents
- Address the local business labor shortage by having self-checkout systems
- Expand local business and housing offerings by converting the Katlian Street Clan House to mixed-use properties if they will not be renovated

Conclusion and Future Priorities

Findings from this assessment demonstrate that perceptions around individual well-being may be highly dependent on the context and factors that drive a particular individual's experience. There is limited evidence to say that perceptions of community well-being have been significantly altered by increased tourism, but there are findings from this assessment that demonstrate certain aspects, like access to recreational and cultural sites, are perceived to be affected in a potentially consequential manner.

Residents highlighted critical issues and potential solutions that could be addressed. Determining the feasibility of residents' suggested solutions is something the community may investigate as a next step. There also exists an opportunity to learn from other communities. One program in many Alaskan communities is a Tourism Best Management Practices (TBMP) program, a voluntary, cooperative effort between government, cruise lines, transportation providers, and tour operators to set guidelines on how to best serve both visitors and residents.

This assessment is intended to provide a snapshot of community perspectives that leaders, local government, and other policymakers might use to kickstart discussions on how to best mitigate the negative impacts and maximize the benefits of tourism.

⁵ 437 respondents to this question



**This project was conducted as part of the Pardee RAND Graduate School's
Community-Partnered Policy and Action summer externships.**

Questions can be directed to the project leaders:

Samantha Matthews | smatthew@pardeerand.edu

Priya Gandhi | pgandhi@pardeerand.edu