

# Bald Eagles and the Tourist Industry in Alaska

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Tourism is a complex industry that encompasses a broad spectrum of large and small businesses. In Alaska, tourism is a family home with a few spare bedrooms used for bed and breakfast guests and it is an international cruise line with ships carrying thousands of passengers north every summer. It is a wilderness guide service with a handful of employees leading small groups of adventurers and it's a commercial bus line with hundreds of employees transporting thousands of people.

Tourism ranks third among Alaska's industries in gross dollar volume, following oil production and commercial fishing. It is Alaska's largest private sector employer, creating the equivalent of more than 10,000 year-around jobs to serve more than one million visitors a year from all over the world.

Whether they come by cruise ship or state ferry, in motor homes or by airliner, most Alaskan visitors come for essentially the same reasons. They come to experience the wilderness mystique that surrounds Alaska. They come for a spiritual bonding with nature, in whatever terms they choose to define that experience. And they come to see wildlife.

How visitors feel about their Alaskan experience may be colored by the weather, the mood of the traveler or the way the traveler is treated by the bus driver or the hotel clerk. It will include expectations versus reality. Did they catch the fish they thought they would? Were bears actually fishing along the salmon stream, as they had expected? Did a humpback whale breach right next to the boat, as they had hoped?

Much, too, will depend on the travelers' own interest in their surroundings, their capacity for observation and their attention span. Some may be like the tourist I met at the Auke Bay ferry terminal near Juneau. It was a pleasant summer day, midway between brilliant sun and gray rain. Eagles were manning their usual tree-top look-out posts across the road from the terminal. Several travelers watched in awe, but this man was not impressed. On his entire north-bound cruise, he said, he had seen nothing but mountains, trees and snow. His assessment of Alaska: "This is the most boring place I've ever been." Fortunately, this man is not typical of Alaskan visitors.

The fastest-growing segment of the travel industry is that portion called "soft adventure." That includes outdoor experiences sometimes described as having "active days and comfortable nights." People who travel this way might cheerfully hike all day in chilling rain, but come evening, they want a hot shower and a soft bed. Guides for these outdoor

activities are avid naturalists, accomplished birders, professional outdoor photographers. Soft adventure travelers expect in-depth information from knowledgeable guides.

In these kinds of travel experiences, where encountering nature is the primary goal, Bald Eagles and other wildlife become the focus.

The fall gathering of Bald Eagles in the Chilkat Valley, with its unique opportunities for photographing Bald Eagles and observing their behavior, is a prime example of soft adventure.

It is difficult to estimate how many visitors come especially to see Bald Eagles in the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve and impossible to guess what part eagles play in attracting visitors to other parts of coastal Alaska. But even part-time counts of visitors to the Chilkat Valley number in the hundreds every year and the Haines Visitor Bureau reports it received.

Virtually every major professional wildlife photographer in the country has stopped along the banks of the Chilkat during the eagle concentration. And through their lenses, the Chilkat phenomenon has been viewed by thousands of people through calendars, magazines and books.

My first journey to the Valley of the Eagles came on a field trip with the Juneau Audubon Society perhaps 10 years ago. Although we were all local residents of Southeast Alaska, it was for most of us the first visit to the annual gathering of eagles. We spotted our first eagle in the semi-darkness of an early November morning, perhaps halfway to the heart of the great concentration. We leaped from the bus in great excitement. Hands fumbled as we raced to set up tripods and attach telephoto lenses. Our guide graciously concealed what must have been great amusement and assured us there would be more eagles ahead. There were many hundreds.

I would like every Alaska visitor to share some of the excitement we felt in seeing the Bald Eagles and I think tour guides would find great satisfaction in leading their guests in that sense of discovery.

In a survey I took at the 1990 Alaska Visitor Association convention, all the tour operators who filled out the questionnaire reported seeing eagles daily on their tours. Half said visitors were very excited upon seeing a Bald Eagle and half said visitor response ranged between very excited and interested.

Respondents were also asked if they would like more information about Bald Eagles to share with visitors. All but one said "yes."

This leads into what I believe is an important role for the tourism industry. Its member businesses and associations, large and small alike, can speak out on behalf of protection of habitat for the Bald Eagle and other wildlife.

Representatives of Alaska's other resource-based industries-timber, commercial fishing, mining, petroleum-have become strong advocates for policies that favor and strengthen their use of resources. Their activism will only accelerate in the days ahead.

What if members of the tourism industry, currently Alaska's third largest industry in gross dollar revenues, realized they have a vested interest in protecting the natural resources that are crucial to the product they market? Enhancing tourism may depend on better docks, more camper parks, more hotels. But all these amenities will be incidental if Alaska loses its ability to provide the wildlife and scenic values that attract visitors in the first place.

We need to educate the travel industry about their need to become advocates for the environment. People within tourism have a tremendous opportunity to share with visitors the need to care for the natural environment, both here and in their home communities around the world.

Is the Bald Eagle important in Alaska tourism? Absolutely. But tourism can be important to the eagle, too. It is up to us to nurture that synergism.



Tourism and timber harvest both impact wildlife, but clear cuts are much more obvious, as seen in Hobart Bay, Southeast, Alaska. Photo by Phil Schempf, USFWS.