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USTOA 2026 Sustainability is Responsibility (SIR) Summit in Anchorage, Alaska

Executive Summary

- **Background and Purpose**

The first USTOA SIR Summit in 2022 was designed in collaboration with Innovation Norway to bring together sustainability champions within our community while also showcasing a destination where real sustainable innovation is taking place, giving attendees first-hand experiences and knowledge to return to their organizations with. The SIR summits create unique opportunities for attendees to engage and collaborate with fellow sustainability leaders and staff members in the travel and tourism industry who find themselves facing similar obstacles. The SIR summit atmosphere provides a safe space for transparency and support to help each other advance in individual organizations' sustainability journeys while also establishing roadmaps to address our collective challenges as an industry. As the world of responsible tourism evolves, so do our goals for each summit, but the purpose remains the same.

- **The Host Destination: Anchorage, Alaska**

Norway, Singapore, and Valencia provided concrete case studies of what is possible in responsible tourism. Norway's deep cultural sustainability roots, Singapore's realistic approach to urban development, and Valencia's ability to demonstrate the value of overcoming challenges have inspired past SIR attendees to focus on collaboration and partnerships. Anchorage, Alaska was our first North American summit host, which opened the door to various conversations and opportunities that felt a little closer to home. Anchorage provided us with an incredible "jumping off point" to access incredible experiences within a short distance. Hosting the SIR Summit in Anchorage created an opportunity to bring together local voices living and working at the intersection of tourism, conservation, culture, and community every day. Tourism is a welcome commodity, but comes with many sacrifices by the state, many of which we were unaware of, but are eager to collaborate with Visit Anchorage to improve upon. From a sunny day mountain biking around Lake Eklutna, to a visit to the Alaska Native Heritage Center, to a boat ride amongst the glaciers in Prince William Sound, to a few surprises in-between thanks to

mother nature and excellent planning by Visit Anchorage, Anchorage provided with no shortage of awe-inspiring moments that were accompanied by emotional narratives that inspired us to improve tourism practices.



- **Educational Content and Summary of Findings and Learnings**

The SIR summits encourage attendees to foster collaborations, participate in cross-sector learning, and continue to set the path for a more responsible future for the travel industry by bringing member representatives from across the travel industry value chain together for interactive dialogue, educational content, and case study learnings. At the conclusion of our time together in Valencia in 2025, there was a consensus that we should utilize our time together at future summits focusing on four larger industry challenges that each attendee can learn from, instead of multiple smaller issues that may or may not relate to each audience member, as we have in the years past. With this feedback, the SIR Working Groups were established in January of 2026, giving them 5 full months to work together leading up to the SIR Summit in Anchorage, which turned out to be a very welcome addition to our curriculum. We are so grateful to the many local organizations and speakers who shared their time, knowledge, and lived experience, giving attendees a deeper understanding of Alaska through meaningful conversations and place-based learning.

- a. **Key themes from the 2026 SIR Summit:**

- i. Industry challenges such as aviation, carbon, overtourism, and climate risk were addressed by value chain organizations in working groups that worked together and collaborated leading up to the summit.
 - ii. How a successful model of community-based tourism can be repeated in other destinations and the challenges that come with it.

- iii. How expanding responsibly is possible with a sustainable value chain.

b. Learning Sessions

Day 1: The first two days of the SIR Summit in Alaska gave us a powerful lens into the complexity of sustainability in tourism, particularly in a destination where climate, community, economy and natural resources are so deeply connected. The SIR Summit began with a day exploring Lake Eklutna, where attendees were given an opportunity to explore the concept of connection to place through local ecology and horticulture. Discussions on foraging knowledge and “leave no trace” principles” were also had throughout mountain bike rides, campfire lunches, and hikes. Attendees then went to a welcome reception at the Bluewater Basecamp where attendees were able to mingle and gear up for three days of hands-on learning experiences in nature-centric Alaska, while simultaneously learning about how Alaska addresses accessibility for both locals and travelers in the wilderness.

Some key takeaways from day 1 were 1) building sustainability is cheaper in the long run 2) advertising sustainability and accessibility initiatives is our biggest asset that we are not taking advantage of, and 3) we need to focus on re-framing how visitors see us and where they are on their trip (travelers have different needs depending on if they are just starting or ending their trip).

Day 2: The first morning session kicked off with opening remarks from Kevin Berry, Professor of Economics at University of Alaska Anchorage, who served as the keynote speaker and delivered a presentation about the economic trends shaping Alaska’s tourism and sustainability. Professor Graham Miller, Rodrigo Guimarães Chair of Sustainable Business and Academic Director for the Westmont Institute for Tourism and Hospitality at Nova School of Business and Economics, Lisbon, Portugal, returned for the third year as facilitator of this year’s SIR Summit. His facilitation was a huge reason for the summit’s success. Professor Kevin Berry opened the summit by setting the wider context of sustainability and tourism in Alaska. One of the strongest themes was the idea of the “trilemma” and the triple bottom line: the challenge of balancing prosperity, equity and environmental impact. The key takeaway was not that these issues are unsolvable, but that incentives matter. If we can better align incentives across government, business, communities and travellers, many of the current challenges become more manageable. Alaska was a fitting place for this discussion because it brings many of these tensions into sharp focus. It is a resource extraction state, historically shaped by fishing, mining, oil and tourism. Its economy has moved through cycles of booms and busts, from fur and gold to salmon, military build-up, oil and now tourism. Tourism itself has become part of

that story, bringing economic opportunity but also pressure points such as crowding, infrastructure strain, dust from buses, cruise ship growth and

questions around who benefits from the use of shared natural resources. A recurring question was the concept of value. What is the value of a salmon? Is it the commercial fishing value, the Indigenous and community value, the ecosystem value, or the visitor experience value? The answer, of course, is that it is all of these things, which is why balance is so difficult and so important. The structural challenges facing Alaska were also clear. It is cold, distant, expensive and remote, with limited room for Anchorage to expand and a constrained workforce. The Port of Alaska is a critical supply-chain hub,

moving goods consumed by around 90% of Alaska's population, which highlights the vulnerability of supply chains. Climate change is also not a future issue here. Alaska is warming at around 2-3 times the global average, creating real and immediate consequences for communities, infrastructure and livelihoods. The impacts of Typhoon Halong in Western Alaska are a stark example of the difficult questions some communities face after climate-related disasters: repair, rebuild, relocate, or rethink entirely.

Next up was a panel discussion centered on the theme, "Tourism, Communities & Business: Creating Shared Value & Addressing Challenges," with panelists Shane McHale of Blueberry Tours, Carl Johnson of Alaska Photo Treks, Cady Lister of Renewable Energy Alaska Project, and Kevin Berry. The tourism panel helped ground these issues in practical examples. We heard about how Alaska's constitution, particularly Article 8 of the Alaska Constitution, covers natural resources and says resources are to be used, developed and conserved for the maximum benefit of the people. It also includes common-use principles for fish, wildlife and waters. Examples such as Kodiak's near-100% renewable energy use showed that solutions often come from unexpected places and can evolve over time. Juneau's hydro history is closely tied to the city's mining past, showing how infrastructure created for one purpose can support broader community resilience over time. A major theme across the sessions was measurement and standards. There is growing recognition that sustainability work needs clearer frameworks, but also that frameworks must be practical enough for the tourism industry to use. In our working group, we identified a key problem: there is currently no consistent industry guidance for applying climate risk frameworks to tourism. This creates inconsistent application, vague interpretation, geographic variation and low engagement across the industry. Government involvement is also essential, but not always easy to coordinate.

Some key takeaways from the morning session were 1) it's not tourism that is the problem, it is the type of tourism. A few attendees gave great case studies to prove this (changing/improving the type of cruising that exists here, native owned/built/operated and year round, etc.), 2) we need to be realistic about where the money is coming from (travel and tourism) and embrace it – an example about residents being upset about restaurants full.. it's not how much they spent, but how much they stay here (restaurants wouldn't be here without tourists), 3) we must work with the seasons (offering 3 hour sunset photo tours during non-peak hours), 4) we must listen to customers and be transparent about what they want and what you can offer (how much wildlife they will see, what roads can be taken at certain times, etc.), and 5) it is somewhat foreign to have tourism in remote/native communities, so it is still a struggle to merge those two worlds in a respectful/welcome way. Housing/lodging is also hard to find in those remote areas. Permitting process is very complicated, so bringing services to rural communities presents challenges for expanding tourism.

The afternoon brought off-site learning experiences along Turnagain Arm and Beluga point, and a stop at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center where attendees experienced wild animal encounters. Afternoon panel discussions about wildlife conservation and sustainable fisheries were presented by Nicole Schmitt of Alaska Wildlife Alliance and Elizabeth Dubovsky of Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association. The evening brought attendees together for dinner at Bison Hall, where they later were surprised by the Alaska Photo Treks team with a viewing of the evening "Bore Tide," a rare phenomenon that all SIR Summit attendees felt was a true once in a lifetime experience.

A key takeaway from the afternoon session was that Tour Operators can and should encourage customers to engage in citizen science.

- i. **Day 3:** The following day, participants convened for a morning panel discussion about how sustainability shows up in real-world tourism operations across Alaska, led by Jillian Simpson, President of Alaska Travel Industry Association and Adventure Green Alaska, Jennifer Woolworth of the National Parks Conservation Association, and Bonnie Westlund of Holland America Line. The afternoon brought attendees to the Alaska Native Heritage Center for an additional off-site educational program, featuring a guided village tour and a cultural briefing within an Athabascan Ceremonial House led by Kelsey Wallace, President of Alaska Native Heritage Center. The program delivered insights into Alaska Native heritage and ongoing cultural preservation initiatives, effectively aligning with the key themes of the summit – responsible tourism.

This was a very impactful afternoon for all SIR Summit attendees, as the storytelling, cultural connection, & honoring of lived experiences left us inspired and motivated to learn more. Some of the topics covered through a Native Alaskan lens were, cultural tourism, community impacts, climate & land stewardship, and mental health challenges facing youth.

- ii. **Day 4:** The final day of the summit featured an experiential learning program in Whittier, in partnership with Lazy Otters Boat Tours, where attendees toured Blackstone Glacier in Prince William Sound. While on the boat, local nature guides dove into many pressing discussions, including coastal communities and tourism impact, integrated, place-based conversation, cruise industry impacts, local community perspectives, and delicate glacial environments.

c. **Working Groups**

Below is an outline of steps all four working groups followed throughout their four days together. The work completed prior to the summit was critical to ensuring the working groups were ready for the following steps. For further information on how the SIR Working Groups are currently doing, you can visit the [webpage](#).

i. **Session 1:** Opening Presentations

- 1. What is going to happen?
 - a. Context – Why this issue matters now
 - b. Problem framing – What is broken, limited, or missing
 - c. Who is affected – Industry, users, stakeholders
 - d. Constraints – What cannot be ignored
 - e. What success would unlock – Not solutions
- 2. Outcome: Single sentence problem definition

ii. **Session 2:** Prioritized Action Areas

- 1. What is going to happen?
 - a. Individual idea generation
 - b. Sharing and Clustering ideas
 - c. Prioritise action area
- 2. Outcome:
 - a. 3-5 clearly articulated action areas
 - b. Poster explaining problem statement, long-list of ideas, prioritised list of actions

iii. **Session 3:** Pilot Project Design

- 1. What is going to happen?
 - a. Convert priorities into one realistic pilot project
 - b. What will be tested?
 - c. Who participates?
 - d. What does success look like?
 - e. What data will be collected?

2. Outcome: One small, testable pilot per group
- iv. **Session 4: Six-month Roadmap and Shared Commitment**
 1. What is going to happen?
 - a. Next steps for the next six months
 - b. Named owners
 - c. Agreed follow-up mechanism
 - d. One concrete deliverable
 2. Outcome:
 - a. A credible six-month roadmap
 - b. Commitments you will stand behind publicly
 - c. Final poster - Pilot description; Roadmap with ownership
- v. **Session 5: Final Presentations and Reflections**
 1. What is going to happen?
 - a. Final Presentations from each group (on the bus)
 - b. Reflections and Final Thoughts



- **Testimonials from Attendees**

- a. *"SIR transformed how I think about my company's role in this industry. We started asking 'What does sustainability mean to us?' After five summits, we're asking 'How do we embed these principles into everything we do?' That's the shift SIR creates—from awareness to action, from individual effort to collective movement."* Gina Bang, Avanti Destinations
- b. *"Sustainability is everyone's business. SIR is where ideas become action and people become changemakers. If there's one event you attend this year, make it SIR."* Arjun Sinsinwar, Antara Cruises

- c. *"As a first time SIR summit attendee, I can confidently say that the 2026 SIR summit was a pinnacle professional experience in my career to date. Working in small groups with brilliant, experienced minds at the niche intersection of travel and sustainability and reaching actionable outcomes towards solutions for some of the greatest community and environmental challenges we face as an industry, all while surrounded by the beauty of Alaska's Chugach mountains, was surreal."* Julia Cope, Backroads
- d. *"Attending my 5th USTOA Sustainability Is Responsibility (SIR) event was truly special. A heartfelt thank you to Alaska for hosting us and to Graham Miller for once again delivering such thought-provoking insights and education. There is something genuinely energizing about being in a room full of people who share a deep commitment to sustainability and the future of travel not because they have to be there, but because they believe in it. That passion is palpable, and it's contagious. Sustainability is not just important to our industry, it is essential to its future. What USTOA has built with SIR is remarkable: a platform that not only champions this cause but actively supports travel organizations at every stage of their sustainability journey. The leadership and dedication shown by USTOA continue to raise the bar for what our industry can and should aspire to."* Kelly P. Sahner, The Sahner Group
- e. *"Attending the USTOA SIR is always an inspiring experience. It brings together the right people for honest conversations and practical action on sustainability. There's so much value in helping build and extend the Globus family of brands vision to lighten our footprint and make even bigger positive contributions to the travel space. Each time, I leave with new ideas, stronger connections, and a renewed sense of responsibility for driving positive change in our industry."* Patrick Preiano, Globus Family of Brands
- f. *"The SIR Summit was truly an energizing experience. It was inspiring to see what a group of like-minded, passionate people can accomplish when they come together around a shared purpose. The world is an incredible place, and SIR is helping ensure that future generations will be able to experience and enjoy it for years to come. I left feeling motivated, optimistic, and grateful to be part of the conversation. Thank you to everyone who made the summit such a meaningful experience."* Kelly Forbes, Tauck
- g. *"The SIR Summit brought together a trifecta of elements that make it stand out in a crowded conference calendar. The atmosphere was welcoming, fun, and dynamic. The working groups were action-oriented and collaborative, including sessions prior to and post Summit. And the destination host, Visit Anchorage, imbued our entire experience with their deep passion for Alaska's precious natural and cultural treasures. Bravo to Molly and USTOA for making SIR a stand-out event!"* Jim Kane, Exitto Travel
- h. *"The SIR Summit in Alaska was an inspiring and energizing experience. The setting itself brought the themes of sustainability, community and climate into sharp focus, while the conversations were practical, honest and collaborative. What stood out most was the willingness of members to share openly, learn from one another and work together on meaningful solutions. The introduction of the SIR Working Groups felt like an important step forward, helping turn discussion into action."* Emma Cottis, Goway Travel

- i. *“The SIR mission is to incorporate sustainability into the core business plan of all tourism industry actors. This SIR community have taken that to heart and are actively working on topics that can help us drive positive change, build more sustainable value chains, and increase the positive impact for communities and destinations. If you want to compete in the future of this industry, you will have to adapt and find your own sustainability mission. SIR can help you with that.”* Hege V. Barnes, Innovation Norway