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for

The Twenty-Fifth Inter-American Congress of Ministers & High Level Authorities of Tourism

Paraguay (Virtual)

Supporting Indigenous Tourism in the Americas in the Best and Worst of Times

Thank you, Madame Chair, for the introduction. Good afternoon and greetings to all the participants in the 25th Inter-American Congress of Ministers and High-Level Authorities of Tourism. Thank you to the Organization of American States Secretariat for Integral Development for inviting me to speak, and to the nation of Paraguay for hosting this event.

I am delighted to speak to you today on “Supporting Indigenous Tourism in the Best and Worsts of Times.”

As you well know, travel and tourism has been the hardest hit economic sector in the world during the global pandemic.

In the U.S., the decline in travel and tourism in 2020 due to COVID-19 was devastating to our economy. **The $500 billion loss in travel spending in 2020 alone cost the U.S. $1.1 trillion in economic output**. **Travel and tourism jobs accounted for 35% of the total jobs lost in the pandemic’s first year.**

In the best of times, tourism provides a promising approach to sustainable development—a way for Indigenous communities to enhance self-determination and self-sufficiency, alleviate poverty, increase access to healthcare and education, and conserve their cultural and natural resources.

Prior to the global pandemic, Indigenous communities—from northernmost Alaska to southernmost Chile—welcomed growing numbers of visitors. This provided opportunities to share their own narratives and traditions, and to generate economic development.

Indigenous tourism in the United States had experienced exponential growth in the years leading up to the pandemic, increasing 180% from 2007 to 2017. In 2019, 75% of surveyed tribal nations in the U.S. said they expected tourism to increase in 2020. Then, of course, COVID. As the country focused on the immediate health and safety concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic -- a pandemic that disproportionately impacted tribal nations -- tribal economies and, specifically, the Tribal tourism industry were hit hard.

Despite this setback, the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Office of Indian Economic Development has continued to support building Indigenous tourism capacity by investing in the creation of state and regional tourism alliances and in the growth of a national tribal tourism organization.

The Organization of American States, the George Washington University International Institute of Tourism Studies, and the Office of Indian Economic Development established a new initiative called the Indigenous Tourism Collaborative of the Americas.

The Collaborative grew out of an organizing event, the Indigenous Tourism of the Americas Forum.

That first-ever virtual Forum was held in October 12-16, 2020, with the participation of nearly 300 Indigenous tourism leaders and tourism industry leaders from all over the western hemisphere. The participants included the leaders of the largest tourism industry organizations in the Americas and several Ministers of Tourism including Mexico, Ecuador, Dominica, Panama and El Salvador.

The Forum inspired a new public/private Collaborative with a vision of creating an Indigenous, industry and policy leader network that would regularly discuss ideas, experiences and projects, and conduct a dialogue that would drive collaborative action in support of sustainable development and growth in Indigenous communities.

I cannot emphasize enough the significance of an Indigenous-led initiative reaching out to tourism industry leaders and having those industry leaders overwhelmingly respond positively.

The Collaborative structure is novel and completely voluntary. It’s composed of two groups of advisors, one made up of **Indigenous tourism** leaders and representatives from tourism communities, entrepreneurs, Indigenous tourism NGOs and associations.

**The other is a tourism Industry Advisory group of leaders** from the private sector, national tourism authorities and government entities, destination marketing organizations, academia, NGOs and others who pledge to support and advance Indigenous tourism.

These advisors have joined actions teams that were formed around three priorities chosen by the Collaborative. Their priorities are:

* Covid-19 Recovery
* Building Capacity, Sustainability and Technology, and
* Respect, Representation and Inclusion in Government and Industry Planning and Development

Each priority action team is led by an Indigenous Leader supported by an Industry champion.

The Collaborative is at work building an internet repository of resources, tools and initiatives and a platform for an ongoing dialogue between Indigenous and industry leaders.

The OAS Secretariat for Integral Development lends the Collaborative steering committee members who bring their expertise on OAS member countries and the OAS COVID recovery programs already in motion.

Through implementation of congressional legislation, the Office of Indian Economic Development supplies grants for Indigenous tourism capacity initiatives, including the Collaborative. We also serve on the Collaborative steering committee.

The George Washington University Institute of International Studies brings its expertise is creating networks and strategic tourism alliances in many parts of the worl,d and its graduate students help organize bilingual meetings of the Collaborative.

This unique collaboration of government, industry, academia and community provides avenues for each member to do what they do best to create opportunity, capacity, economic viability and sustainability in Indigenous tourism, advised by Indigenous leaders themselves.

Travelers are beginning to explore new places, revisit those they know well, and seek inspiration in new connections—with people, cultures, and in nature.

Join us on the ground floor of this evolution in travel, supporting your Indigenous communities and tourism industry leaders to create a new tourism network of strength, knowledge and vision.

I thank you sincerely for giving me to opportunity to officially launch the Indigenous Tourism Collaborative of the Americas today at this unique and influential Congress.

As Indigenous tourism continues to face one of its greatest challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic, let us work together to reconstruct and rebuild a prosperous and resilient Indigenous tourism economy.

Thank you.

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