



Paloma Ruiz of Parshall, North Dakota, dances during the United Tribes Technical College International Powwow in Bismarck, North Dakota, on Sept. 6, 2024. Les Thomas, president of the Native Tourism Alliance, said the annual powwow in Bismarck has a \$10 million economic impact.

North Dakota tribes become a model for promoting Native tourism

BY JEFF BEACH
North Dakota Monitor

HANKINSON, N.D.

North Dakota tribes say their first-in-the-nation effort to band together to promote tourism is paying off.

“We want to tell our stories with our voices,” said Stacey LaCompte, director of the North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance.

She said the group has had success catering to tour groups from Europe. She said the European groups are often in North Dakota for about three weeks and are interested in visiting all five tribal nations that share geography with North Dakota. They often want to take in South Dakota sites, too, she said.

“They’re paying for the tour. They’re paying for the hotels, the gas, the food,” LaCompte said. “They’re buying souvenirs. They’re buying from our artisans.”

LaCompte and others from the tourism group briefed North Dakota lawmakers on their efforts recently.

The presentation was to the North Dakota Legislature’s Tribal and State Relations Committee that met at the Dakota Magic Casino near Hankinson on the Lake Traverse Indian Reservation. The reservation lies mostly in South Dakota with a small portion in southeast North Dakota.

The reservation is the home of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate tribe.



North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance members Tamara St. John, left, and director Stacey LaCompte speak to a legislative committee on Aug. 19 near Hankinson, North Dakota.

Tamara St. John is a historian for the tribe who called North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance “precedent setting,” with similar groups forming in other states after hearing of the success in North Dakota.

The North Dakota Native Tourism Alliance was formed in 2016. The group began offering cultural tours in 2021.

St. John, a board member for the group, said international travelers are often interested in an “authentic” travel experience to learn about Native American culture.

“And who better to share that than us,” St. John said.

Some tour groups from countries such as Norway

and Germany are interested in learning about immigrant families that settled in Dakota Territory.

“They want to understand the cultural differences and relationships” with Native Americans, St. John said.

Fred Walker is global marketing manager for the North Dakota Department of Commerce’s tourism and marketing team. He said in an interview that Europeans do have strong interest in Native American culture and when they visit, will take their time to visit multiple attractions.

“They spend more time, they spend more money, and they really try to engage into wherever

they’re at,” Walker said. “They immerse themselves.”

He said the groups are usually families of four to eight people instead of large tour groups.

European tourists may visit the reservations but tours often include visits to other sites, such as Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the National Buffalo Museum at Jamestown and other museums.

LaCompte said the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, which is scheduled to open in Medora next year, has already reached out to the Native Tourism Alliance so the group can be a resource for library visitors.

Walker said other states,



Jeff Beach / North Dakota Monitor
Les Thomas, president of the Native Tourism Alliance, speaks to a legislative committee on Aug. 19 near Hankinson, North Dakota.

including South Dakota and Montana, have followed North Dakota’s example in forming Native tourism groups.

North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho also have formed a tourism partnership called the Great American West. Each year, it hosts an event called the International Roundup that helps tour promoters learn about attractions and events, including with Native Americans, in the five-state region.

The 2026 International Roundup will be in Medora from April 28 to May 1.

In addition to international tours, Les Thomas, president of the Native Tourism Alliance, said tribes have been building themselves up as tourist destinations beyond casinos. The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, where he is a citizen, has added a

water park and trampoline park.

Thomas emphasized the economic impact of tourism for the tribes and North Dakota.

He said the United Tribes Technical College annual powwow in Bismarck, from Sept. 5 to 7, has a \$10 million economic impact.

He said the tribes also have been participating in more non-tribal events, such as being a sponsor of the Norsk Hostfest in Minot and having dancers perform at Country Fest near New Salem.

St. John invited North Dakotans to stop at a new visitor center for the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate.

“There’s so much to be gained by building bridges and building relationships and that’s really what North Dakota tribal tourism is all about,” St. John said.

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