



EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES: THE ROLE OF NATIVE TOURISM IN MONTANA'S ECONOMY

SUBMITTED BY: MONTANA INDIGENOUS TOURISM ALLIANCE (MITA)

RESEARCH PURPOSE & FUNDING SOURCE

Montana's vibrant Indigenous cultures, rich histories, and unique experiences continue to attract visitors from across the country and around the world. However, the true economic impact of Native American tourism within the state remains unmeasured. To address this gap, the Montana Indigenous Tourism Alliance submitted a proposal during the Fall 2025 annual project call, requesting the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) to lead a comprehensive study, **funded through Montana's Lodging Tax**, to better understand and quantify the value of Native tourism in Montana.

COST TO TRIBES: \$0

INVESTMENT OF TRIBES: TIME AND INPUT

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: TRIBAL MEETING INVITES TO SHARE RESEARCH AND GAIN FEEDBACK

PROJECT GOALS

This research aims to measure the economic impact of Native tourism in Montana by focusing on visitor spending at 4 to 5 unique Native-hosted events across the state. These events will be selected through input from key stakeholders and tribal partners. The primary goal is to generate meaningful data that highlights the value Native tourism brings to the state's economy and provides insights into visitor behavior, who attends, why they come, how much they spend, and what they value in these cultural experiences.

HOW THE STUDY IS CONDUCTED

The study will be led by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) and follows a standardized, proven survey method. Each selected event will have an on-site visitor survey, designed with a consistent five-section format that includes:

1. VISITOR ORIGIN & TRIP PURPOSE

Identifies where visitors come from, why they are attending, and the length of their stay.

2. SPENDING PATTERNS

Captures how much non-local visitors spend in the host community, covering categories like lodging, food, fuel, and shopping.

3. DEMOGRAPHICS

Gathers information on age, gender, income, and other basic characteristics of event attendees.

4. TRIP PLANNING & SATISFACTION

Explores how visitors learned about the event, what influenced their decision to attend, and their satisfaction with various aspects of the experience.

5. OPEN-ENDED FEEDBACK

Provides space for visitors to share comments and suggestions in their own words.

DELIVERABLES

After data collection, ITRR will analyze the results and produce a report for each event. The final outcomes will offer valuable insights for tribal leaders, community planners, and policymakers to support and grow Native tourism in a sustainable, culturally respectful way.

TIMELINE

Phase	Duration	Target Dates
Literature Review & Planning	1 month	July 2025
Stakeholder Engagement & IRB	4 months	Aug-Nov 2025
Data Collection	12 months	Dec 2025-Aug 2026
Data Analysis	1.5 months	September 2026
Report Drafting & Review	1 month	October 2026
Final Report Submission	—	December 2026

Who is ITRR? We are the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, otherwise known as ITRR. Established in 1987 at the University of Montana's W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation, serving as Montana's trusted research arm for the tourism and recreation industries. Our mission is to conduct rigorous and impartial research that empowers the tourism and recreation industries in Montana to make informed decisions in planning, marketing, policy, and management.

Carter Bermingham

Social Scientist and Research Associate
(406) 243-2872 |
carter.bermingham@umt.edu

Glenna Hartman

Program Assistant and Qualitative Specialist
(406) 243-2425
glenna.hartman@mso.umt.edu

Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research | 32 Campus Drive | The University of Montana
Missoula, Montana 59812-1234



📍 BLACKFEET INDIAN RESERVATION

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE OFFICE OF INDIAN COUNTRY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Indian Equity Fund Small Business Grant

The Indian Equity Fund Small Business Grant assists startup or expanding Native American businesses in Montana. This money can be used for a variety of activities, such as the purchase of equipment or the development of a new product line. Up to \$14,000 per award is available.

Tribal Tourism Grant

The Tribal Tourism Program, under the direction of the Montana Department of Commerce Business MT Division's Office of Indian Country Economic Development, the State Tribal Economic Development Commission and the Tourism Advisory Council, administers tourism development and promotion activities on behalf of the Indian Tourism Region.



Tribal Tourism Small Business Grant

The Tribal Tourism Small Business Grant helps startup or expanding Native American-owned tourism businesses in Montana. Up to \$10,000 per award is available with no match requirement.

Production Assistant Training Scholarship Program

The Production Assistant Training Scholarship Program, now in its third cycle, will award a total of 80 scholarships. The training course is offered online or in-person, with an in-person curriculum taught over two days. There is no cost to awardees; the \$500 tuition is prepaid by the OICED Tribal Tourism Program.

Native American Business Advisor

The Native American Business Advisor Grant supports native organizations that offer business and credit counseling. It also delivers application support to Native American businesses in Montana. The NABAs are a key community asset in the development and success of Native American businesses.

Tribal Business Development

The Tribal Business Development Grant is a competitive program to connect participating tribes of Montana with the resources necessary to advance shovel-ready projects that will provide a measurable, beneficial economic impact for the community. Up to \$240,000 is available per grant cycle.

Native American Collateral Support

The Native American Collateral Support Program addresses issues with access to capital by providing collateral support security for lenders making loans to Native American-owned businesses that only lack sufficient collateral/equity for a business loan according to their loan risk profiles.

Images courtesy of Montana Department of Commerce.



This document is printed at state expense. Information on the cost of producing this publication may be obtained by contacting the Montana Department of Administration.